

Republican Guard divisions looked pretty bold—until they got sliced and diced by coalition airpower.

# Saddam's Elite In the

By Rebecca Grant

**I**'LL TELL you up front that our sensors show that the preponderance of the Republican Guard divisions that were outside of Baghdad are now dead." That announcement, made on April 5 by Lt. Gen. T. Michael Moseley, the head of air operations for Operation Iraqi Freedom, was a significant moment.

It was barely two weeks into Gulf War II and airpower already had effectively neutralized Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard forces—the cream of the crop of Iraq's Army and the main military obstacle to the capture of Baghdad.

Guard forces outnumbered coalition forces at the start of the war. These elite, experienced, professional soldiers were willing and able to put up an organized fight. They had helped to keep Saddam in power for two decades. Destroying them signaled that Saddam's control over Iraq was about to collapse for good.

Early in their existence, Republican Guard units accepted only men from Saddam's hometown area of Tikrit and did not demand special military experience. That changed with the 1980-88 Iran-Iraq War, which was also the event that established Iraq as a menacing regional military power. The enemy was led by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, Iran's supreme Islamic authority.

In 1986, Iraqi forces captured the Iranian town of Mehran only to lose it again in a humiliating defeat. That prompted Saddam to replace the political hacks from Tikrit that infested his Republican Guard. In their place,



*Boss Hogs. USAF A-10s, such as these lined up at Tallil Air Base in Iraq, were key to the coalition air strikes that shredded Saddam's Republican Guard units.*

he put battle-experienced commanders.

"The people at the top were military professionals, albeit with loyalty to Saddam," said Col. Charles M. Westenhoff, chief of the Air Staff's Checkmate operational assessment office. Soon, the most capable of Iraq's military forces were installed in the Republican Guards. This "accelerated Darwinian process," as Westenhoff called it, quickly delivered results in battle. Newly formed Republican Guard units sent to meet Iranian attacks in 1987 and early 1988 turned the tide.

"In a series of four major battles

# the Meat Grinder



USAF photo by MSgt. Terry L. Blevins

in 1988, the Iraqis took the offensive,” said Westenhoff, “and Khomeini threw in the towel.”

The success of the revitalized Republican Guard gave it considerable stature in Iraq. Its soldiers were volunteers who got better military training and pay than the rest of the Iraqi Army. The elite force also got Soviet military assistance, including thousands of tanks, armored personnel carriers, and artillery pieces.

All that made the Republican Guard, in 1990, the leading force in Saddam’s invasion of Kuwait. And the first tip-off of the impending invasion came in mid-July 1990

when a brigade of the Republican Guard’s Hammurabi division marched south.

When Iraq invaded Kuwait on Aug. 2, 1990, Republican Guard forces spearheaded the main offensive. The Hammurabi and Nebuchadnezzar divisions attacked from the north. The Medina and Tawakalna divisions struck from the west. Once Kuwait fell, regular Iraqi Army divisions stocked with conscript troops moved forward to the Saudi border, while the Republican Guard divisions pulled back to consolidate a strategic line of defense farther north.

As the US and its coalition part-

ners drew up plans to free Kuwait and reduce Iraq’s offensive military power, the effectiveness of Saddam’s key force was a prime concern.

Operation Desert Storm in 1991 called for intense air strikes on the Republican Guard. The Tawakalna division was hit hardest, and it quickly fell to the advancing US Army VII Corps.

However, elements of the Medina and Hammurabi divisions used short, sharp engagements with coalition ground forces to screen the retreat of the main body. Losses of high-quality T-72 tanks and other equipment were great, but significant elements

of the Republican Guard made it safely back to Iraq.

### After the Storm

Military analyst Anthony H. Cordesman, in a 1998 Center for Strategic and International Studies report, said the Republican Guard after Gulf War I had as many as 600 T-72s and 300 T-62s, for a total of about 900 top-of-the-line tanks. Soviet T-55s also remained in the arsenal. There was no doubt the Republican Guard remained a cohesive and comparatively well-equipped fighting force.

In fact, Westenhoff said before the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom that the Guard had more than twice as many tanks as coalition forces and probably about twice as many artillery pieces in the theater.

Military planners knew that Saddam's ability to preserve his regime rested with the Republican Guard. They alone had the means to organize and conduct counterattacks against coalition forces.

Lt. Gen. Daniel P. Leaf—the Air Force point man who worked directly with Army Lt. Gen. David D. McKiernan, the coalition forces land component commander—said that did not mean the coalition could dismiss the other Iraqi forces. However, Leaf explained, “It was clear that the main effort was going to be the defeat of the Republican Guard.”

Before the coalition launched OIF, Republican Guard forces left their garrisons and took up positions



USAF photo by SSgt. Cherie A. Thurby

**On Target.** Joint Direct Attack Munitions, such as this one being prepped for a B-1B bomber, provided the precision needed for B-1s and B-52s to fly close air support missions in Gulf War II.

roughly 30 miles outside the city of Baghdad. “They were put in blocking positions around Baghdad, essentially to the north, south, and west,” said Westenhoff. All the Republican Guard units were combat ready. The strength of these divisions was at least 80 percent in all cases and as high as 90 percent in some units.

The coalition battle plan called for swift ground force advances toward Baghdad, from the north and south. Turkey's last-minute decision to prohibit ground operations from its soil left only a southern thrust,

greatly simplifying the Republican Guard's job. And, while speed and lethality were bred-in-the-bone advantages for US and allied forces, the strategy of moving ahead fast with relatively few forces carried some risk—namely that the ground forces would move beyond their supply lines and expose their flanks. The Republican Guard might easily exploit such a vulnerability.

The Republican Guard “had the capability to counterattack, which I would not have credited to the other Iraqi forces,” said Westenhoff. “One of the things I observed was that our forces, as they went into Iraq, were equipped for offense. They weren't as well-equipped for defense.”

The US and its allies had a ground force smaller than that assembled for Desert Storm. In Gulf War II, US Army's V Corps and 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, along with British forces, were to lead ground operations. In Gulf War I, there were two Army corps, an MEF, and another corps of multinational Arab forces under Saudi and Egyptian leadership.

At the start of Gulf War II ground operations, V Corps was at less than full strength. The full V Corps would have had four artillery brigades; instead, said Westenhoff, “We had one and a bit of those artillery brigades.” If V Corps had possessed its four artillery brigades, he said, they, along with available attack helicopters, would have been able to fight off a Guard assault.



USAF photo by MSgt. Dave Ahlschwede

**No Time to Hide.** USAF F-16s, such as these deployed from Spangdahlem AB, Germany, flew hundreds of strike sorties that helped destroy the unit cohesion of Republican Guard divisions.

To counter that shortfall, coalition air attacks on Republican Guard units began on the first night of the war. On March 19 (Baghdad time), two USAF F-117 stealth fighters struck a Baghdad site where Saddam Hussein was thought to be hiding; at the same time, 40 carrier-launched Tomahawk Land Attack Missiles struck a Republican Guard facility and an intelligence headquarters in another part of Baghdad. The next night, 10 TLAMs hit several Republican Guard targets in Kirkuk.

Soon, hundreds of sorties were being flown daily against Republican Guard positions throughout Iraq. "The first area of concern was the Medina division because of their deployment south of Baghdad on a major avenue of approach" for V Corps, said Leaf. The Hammurabi division was tucked in behind Medina, he noted.

Some Republican Guard forces also were moving south—cautiously, and in small formations—ostensibly to meet the coalition advance. Leaf said that "some significant pieces" of the southern-deployed Republican Guard units were part of the initial element that met coalition forces around An Nasiriyah and Basra early in the war. At the land component headquarters, Leaf said, he also saw signs that some of the Republican Guard forces were moving into new positions to reinforce the defense of Baghdad.

Although air strikes had taken a toll, said Leaf, it was clear that the Republican Guard was still functioning.

### Costly Mistake

It was at this point that the Army blundered. It decided to use some 30 of its AH-64 Apache helicopters to attack the Republican Guard. It didn't work. Instead, the Apaches "came under intense enemy fire," said Lt. Gen. William S. Wallace, V Corps commander, and had to retreat. Many of the aircraft were severely damaged.

The helicopter attack also had a limiting effect on other airpower operations. Sorties by fixed-wing aircraft were reduced to make way for the Apache action, and the fire support coordination line in the sector was moved dozens of miles farther out in front of coalition forces.

The decision to move the FSCL

"cost us, basically, a full night of fixed-target strikes inside the FSCL," said Leaf. "We—the entire coalition team—had not hit our stride in achieving the command and control required to operate in volume effectively inside the fire support coordination line."

It became clear that fixed-wing attack aircraft—USAF bombers and Air Force, Navy, Marine Corps, and allied fighters—were the weapon of choice for destroying the Republican Guard. Leaf noted, too, that "FSCL placement became somewhat less of an issue," because the air-ground team got better at coordinating actions within the various kill boxes.

The weight of the airpower effort was such that it became hard to tell which Republican Guard units were taking the brunt of the coalition's attacks. Joint Chiefs of Staff spokesman Army Maj. Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal said on March 31 that coalition air had flown 1,000 sorties over Iraq that day—a typical day.

Fixed-wing air strikes simply shredded Republican Guard unit cohesion. And that became a problem in itself, according to Leaf.

"I think that one of the real challenges in doing our targeting of [Guard] units was their loss of unit identity," said Leaf. "We had a hodgepodge." He went on, "We couldn't really tell you we were attacking the Medina division; we could say we were attacking forces which were in traditional Medina division deploy-

ment locations, and in the vicinity, and therefore presumed to be dispersal or tactical sites, for the Medina division."

However, Pentagon officials noted that Republican Guard divisions were not sitting ducks. In an ABC TV interview on March 30, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld warned that, as coalition ground forces moved forward to deal with the Republican Guard, "that very likely will be the most difficult fighting days that the coalition will face."

As in Gulf War I, the Republican Guard always had a plan. Guard divisions were adept at small-unit defensive fights and demonstrated their prowess near Najaf, where they engaged US Army troops. Leaf noted that one American unit, C Troop of the 7th Cavalry's 3rd Squadron, suddenly found itself "surrounded and taking fire from three sides." So close was the fighting that Iraqi soldiers were being killed by ricochets of their own rocket-propelled grenades. Some US soldiers ran out of ammunition and left their vehicles to pick up AK-47s from dead Iraqi soldiers "so they had something to shoot back," said Leaf.

At the time, he continued, "I think it would have been reasonable for some Iraqi tactical leaders to think they were seizing an opportunity" to turn around the war.

### Bombers Fly CAS

The action around Najaf contin-



*The Remains. A field near Najaf—the site of a three-day battle—is littered with the carcasses of Iraqi T-55 tanks. Coalition fixed-wing aircraft decimated Iraqi forces.*

USMC photo by MSgt. Buzz Farrell



**BUFF on Call. One B-52, working with information supplied by an E-8 Joint STARS, “summarily destroyed” Iraqi forces attempting to flank a US Army unit during the action around Najaf.**

ued for three days, during which two USAF bombers played a key role in turning the battle into a coalition victory. Leaf argued that one B-1B and one B-52 ensured “the Iraqi attacks were defeated in detail.”

The air controller with C Troop called for assistance and relayed coordinates to the bombers, which were already airborne and on call to provide close air support. The B-1B crew targeted the Republican Guard forces with precision guided munitions, which were devastating in their effect. Then, a Joint STARS battle management aircraft picked up a second element of Iraqi forces moving down the highway from Al Hillah. They were engaged by the B-52 and “summarily destroyed,” said Leaf.

The weight of the continuous air strikes was having a clear effect.

At the land component headquarters, Leaf and his staff officers were able to review and update Republican Guard targets using data collected by Joint STARS and Global Hawk unmanned aerial vehicle sensors. Leaf’s staff displayed, on a three-dimensional map of the battlefield, the coordinates of each air weapon dropped.

“It wasn’t full-blown [battle damage assessment],” Leaf said, but, within 24 hours, he could display for McKiernan’s staff an “operational-level portrayal of the effects” of the air strikes. The rough BDA helped show the cumulative impact of the air strikes and demonstrated how

responsive airpower had been against priority targets for the ground forces.

“The Republican Guard has been taking a pounding for some days now,” Rumsfeld said in an April 1 press briefing, “and some of the Republican Guard units from up north have been brought down south to try and reinforce Republican Guard units in the south that have been badly weakened. That process goes on. They’re being attacked from the air. They’re being pressured from the ground. And, in good time, they won’t be there.”

On April 2, McChrystal announced, “I would say that the Medina and Baghdad divisions are no longer credible forces.”

Leaf’s reviews of aircrew mission reports confirmed those statements. “They [coalition crews] were finding so much to kill” that “there was a sense of both opportunity and effect coming across the wires.” Leaf believed that most of the Republican Guards forces “were being ... decimated, to the point that the land advance could accelerate to Baghdad.” He added, “And then it did.”

Coalition ground forces picked up their pace and, by the evening of April 2, were within about 30 miles of Baghdad. Three days later, on

April 5, the 3rd Infantry Division made its show-of-force “thunder run” into Baghdad.

### “We’re Killing Them”

Moseley, the air component commander, said of the airpower contribution: “I find it interesting when folks say we’re softening them up. We’re not softening them up. We’re killing them.”

Moseley went on, “I would not tell you the Republican Guard is 100 percent gone. I believe they are gone in organized division strength, corps strength, brigade strength, but I believe there are still some survivors out there that are still willing to fight.” He added that the dispersed survivors would “continue to cause a problem for us.”

His comments, however, left no doubt that the Republican Guard had come to the end of the road as an organized fighting force. No longer would Saddam’s regime enjoy their protection. Small units might still resist, but the road to Baghdad was open, and coalition forces took control of the city on April 9.

Air commanders, in particular, were quick to credit all forces for the smashing coalition victory. Unlike in the 1991 war, Republican Guard forces did not escape destruction because of poor coordination between air and land forces. No such problem occurred this time.

Leaf pointed out that the effect of closely integrated airpower and land power was, at times, “absolutely devastating.” He emphasized, though, that it was airpower that removed from the Republican Guard the ability to choose the “time and place” of engagement. “So the engagement came on our terms.”

Airpower, because it was precise and persistent, wreaked maximum destruction on the Republican Guard units, breaking their military cohesion, and, ultimately, dissolving the divisions into knots of abandoned equipment. “In essence, in the last week of March and first week of April, the Republican Guard was neutralized,” said Westenhoff. ■

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