

U.S. LAUNCHES OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM By MPAW

Air raid sirens blared as anti-aircraft fire lit up the sky over the Iraqi capital of Baghdad two and a half hours after President Bush's 48 hour ultimatum of exile or war to Saddam Hussein and his sons ran out. At about 10:30 ET (5:30 in Baghdad) on Wednesday, March 19, President Bush ordered a decapitation strike on a bunker in the Iraqi capital based on intelligence that the hide-out was holding Saddam Hussein and four other leaders in the Iraqi regime, possibly including his sons. The strike was meant to bring down the regime from the top down, hoping to cause the Iraqi forces to be leaderless and frenzied. Subsequent air strikes sought to cause confusion by making them "blind, deaf, and dumb," cutting off their communications centers.

The initial air strikes were not the much anticipated "Shock and Awe" campaign much hoped for by the cable news networks. Instead these attacks were to soften up targets for the invading ground forces coming into the country from the south, north, and west on March 20. After rumors of Saddam's demise began to surface, the regime was quick to release a video of the dictator, which officials have said to be pre-recorded. March 20 also brought the first Coalition casualties of the war with a Marine helicopter crash in Kuwait.

Despite worry of an environmental disaster resulting from hundreds of oil wells being lit ablaze by Iraqi forces, the oil fields were secured by Allied forces by Friday, March 21, clearing the way for what was dubbed A-Day by military officials and "Shock and Awe" by the news media. As over 8,000 Iraqi regulars began surrendering, the full might of American air superiority was unleashed as massive explosions rocked places of strategic importance throughout the country, leaving many cities, including Baghdad, in flames.

Operation Iraqi Freedom was successful to a surprising degree even to military analysts, launching hope of a very quick resolution. Saturday, March 22 however, brought the first major resistance to the Allied forces as Iraqi soldiers were able to capture several American POWs and kill several Coalition troops after pretending to surrender. The atrocities performed on the captured soldiers were broadcasted on al Jazeera.

Firefights intensified as Coalition forces drew within 50 miles of Baghdad. British Prime Minister Tony Blair declared on Monday, March 24 that the mission had reached a "crucial moment." Air strikes continued to pummel the Iraqi Republican Guard who were being quickly approached by Allied ground forces under the threat of an impending chemical attack. Meanwhile, the decision was made to postpone the Battle of Baghdad to secure cities in the south that had produced intense firefights, despite a rebellion of Shiites against Saddam in the city of Basra on Tuesday, March 25. Allied forces also experienced difficulties in the city of Nasiriyah which lies on the Euphrates River in the south.

As of the time of this writing, Allied forces had encircled Najaf, and were fighting to secure the southern cities of Iraq. Meanwhile, despite historically fast advances towards Baghdad, the actual invasion of the city had been stalled as Coalition air strikes continued to soften targets inside the city.