

The scope of U.S. special operations in the Iraq War was the largest in American military history. The precedent-setting use of Army Green Berets and Rangers, Navy SEALs and Air Force commandos heralded the future of U.S. war-fighting doctrine.

By Tim Dyhouse

'Black Ops' Shine in Iraq War

From headline-grabbing missions like Saddam Hussein's capture and Jessica Lynch's rescue to critically strategic operations that will never be revealed, some 10,000 U.S. special ops forces have been involved in nearly every phase of the Iraq War.

Their contribution to the fight—an example of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld's vision of a lighter, more efficiently lethal military—was bigger and more closely integrated with conventional forces than in any war in U.S. history.

"I have characterized it as the largest since World War II," Brig. Gen. Gary L. Harrell, special operations commander in Iraq, told the *New York Times*. "In actuality, I suspect it's probably the largest one we've ever done."

Special ops troops seemingly have been everywhere in Iraq. They were there months before the war and are still there nearly a year later. Green Berets waged the famous "hearts and minds" campaigns with locals in the north and south while garnering valuable intelligence.

Rangers searched towns for arms caches, SEALs cleared mines from rivers and harbors and Air Force combat controllers parachuted into hostile territory to call in air strikes. In Baghdad, super-secret Delta teams and CIA operatives hunted Hussein regime officials.

The mission to capture Saddam himself, called *Operation Red Dawn*, was planned and carried out by Task Force 121—a team of CIA paramilitary forces and "black," or unacknowledged, special

ops troops—and about 600 GIs from the 1st Bde., 4th Inf. Div.

The special ops troops probably numbered around 40. Much of the publicity and credit for the capture went to the 4th's soldiers, but the special operators were involved in the actual raid as "trigger pullers" and "door kickers." Most of their work came weeks before the capture with a series of arrests that offered increasingly specific tips to the dictator's location.

"Task Force 121 were actually the ones who pulled Saddam out of the hole," said Robert Andrews, former principal deputy assistant secretary of Defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict. "They can't be denied a role anymore."

'We Called that Spot the Alamo'

In northern Iraq, special ops troops sowed the seeds of victory months before the war officially started on March 19. Special ops veterans of the 1991 Gulf War—88 according to *Time* magazine—dropped into Iraq to link up with and coordinate Kurdish fighters. The Americans blended in with the locals while providing military strategy and training. The Kurds, in turn, gave on-the-ground intelligence.

"A lot of communication goes on over pita bread, *chai* and rice," said an Army captain involved. "We ate what they ate."

Some 18 days into the war, Special Forces troops found themselves in one of the most celebrated firefights of the war, the Battle of Debecka Pass.

Two Special Forces A-teams (Operational Detachment Alpha 391 and ODA

392), comprising 26 Green Berets, three Air Force combat controllers and two other soldiers, took on a reinforced Iraqi motorized rifle company numbering in the hundreds.

Defending a plateau they dubbed "the Alamo" that overlooks Highway 2 crossroads between the towns of Irbil and Makhmur, the GIs killed between 40-50 Iraqis with .50-caliber machine guns, grenades, shoulder-fired Javelin missiles and air support.

Miraculously, the Americans suffered no casualties. An errant bomb, however, dropped by a Navy fighter killed 17 Kurd militiamen in the worst "friendly fire" accident of the war.

Staff Sgt. Jeffrey M. Adamec and Staff Sgt. Jason D. Brown earned Silver Stars for gallantry in the battle.

"We all made a mental promise," Adamec told the *New York Times*. "Nobody had to yell out commands. Everybody just knew. We were not going to move back from that point. We were not going to give up that ground. We called that spot 'the Alamo.'"

'They Didn't Know We Were There'

In southern Iraq, a major objective for special ops troops was to prevent Saddam loyalists from destroying some 1,000 oil wells that could have wrought environmental and economic catastrophe.

On the first night of the war, specially equipped Pave Low helicopters inserted five teams of 20 Navy SEALs each at strategic sites around the Faw oil refinery on Iraq's southeast coast. The entire mission, which included 20 different types of supporting aircraft, took six

hours to successfully complete. Half-hearted Iraqi resistance left 40 enemy dead, but no U.S. casualties.

“They didn’t know we were there until we were on top of them,” according to a Navy commander. “Many of them were very happy for us to arrive.”

Special ops troops also provided quick reaction forces early in the war when Iraqi guerrillas attacked U.S. convoys in Nasiriyah and Najaf. Nasiriyah, of course, was the site where six soldiers from the 507th Maintenance Company were captured on March 23. An interservice special ops team retrieved Pfc. Jessica Lynch at Saddam Hussein Hospital in Nasiriyah on April 1. Team members also recovered the bodies of nine GIs.

The mission was a model of special operations choreography. While Marine Corps artillery created a diversion, Army Rangers covered the perimeter of the hospital. Navy SEALs stormed in and carried out Lynch on a stretcher while Air Force AC-130s circled above ready to eliminate any enemy resistance.

After the rescue, Harrell said the special ops units in Iraq were “doing things that have never been done on such a large scale.”

The flexibility of Special Forces A-teams and their members was illustrated near the southern town of Basra in the early days of the war when progress toward Baghdad bogged down.

“Seventy-five percent of my teams ended up where I planned for them to end up,” a Special Forces major told *U.S. News and World Report* last May. “What they did was different than what we planned, but that’s normal. You have a bunch of smart guys reacting to the situation with some forethought as to

what might happen.”

‘Black’ and White Together in West

In western Iraq, special ops troops seized two airfields, dubbed H2 and H3, and launched nightly missions searching for Scud missile launchers. H2, some 100 miles from the Jordanian border, and H3, about 45 miles east of the border, would have been perfect sites for Saddam to launch missiles at Israel. The area also contains a crucial highway linking Baghdad and Jordan.

But unlike the Gulf War, Saddam’s forces did not fire any missiles. Through the use of unmanned Predator surveillance aircraft, special ops recon teams were able to monitor the vast, empty wasteland of western Iraq. They also had Navy and Air Force fighters and AC-130s on call, another example of the integration between conventional and “black,” or unacknowledged, forces.

“You find they’ve got ‘white’ world Predators helping them out,” a senior military officer told the *New York Times* during the war. “They’ve got other intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance assets helping them out—even conventional fighters standing by to help them if they need it.”

Though not widely reported by the media, some of the heaviest fighting early in the war occurred in the west. For nearly a month, Green Berets and British Special Air Service (SAS) troops fought Iraqi Special Republican Guard and Special Security Service soldiers near Qaim on the Syrian border, some 200 miles northwest of Baghdad.

The Iraqis were fiercely guarding a compound that included phosphate fertilizer and water treatment plants

and was a nuclear weapons development site in the 1980s. Commanders also suspected it might have been a safe house for Baath Party officials trying to sneak into Syria.

In the end, special ops personnel effectively cut off and denied access to western Iraq with the help of conventional U.S.—as well as British and Australian SAS—forces. It’s an integration that one U.S. military commander said has improved “extremely” since operations in Kosovo.

And all indications point to larger roles—and bigger budgets—for special operations in the future. Of course, these highly trained, elite troops relish the challenge. As a Green Beret captain said after the Battle for Debecka Pass, “You won’t find a conventional commander in the world who’d take five-to-one odds against him. It’s a testament to the Special Forces NCO.”

Special operators in Iraq have proven to be formidable fighters. From the war’s beginning on March 19, 2003, through the end of the year, at least 10 special ops troops had been killed there, according to official Pentagon statements. All deaths were caused by hostile action.

That tally includes five soldiers from the 3rd Bn., 75th Ranger Regt.; two Green Berets from the 3rd Bn., 5th Special Forces Group; two Air Force special ops troops; and a soldier from the Army’s Special Operations Command element based in El Paso, Texas. All of the men died relatively early in the war, with the last KIA occurring on June 26. ★

© February 2004 *VFW Magazine*
www.vfw.org