

## **Insurgency Leaves U.S. Forces Baffled; Soldiers Share Tales of Hostility and Kindness on a Shifting Battlefield**

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During more than a year in Iraq, Sgt. David Taylor saw perhaps as many Iraqis through the primary sight of his M1 Abrams tank as he did face to face. But who exactly he saw still baffles him.

The salty tank commander from the 1st Armored Division worked on the edge of Baghdad's desperately poor Sadr City for much of the past year. Then, in late April, he was rushed to this city 60 miles southwest of Baghdad to help put down an armed uprising in what developed into the most difficult fighting of his time here.

One day a few months ago, his men hauled tons of topsoil into the Baghdad slum to refurbish a rundown soccer field, a children's project in the midst of a grown-up war, and something well outside a tank commander's job description. When they returned the next morning to finish the task, the soil had disappeared.

"They stole dirt, their own dirt," said Taylor, 37, a Persian Gulf War veteran from Copperas Cove, Tex. Shaking his head and staring into his lunch at a post cafeteria here, he added, "I still haven't figured them out."

Throughout the 15-month U.S. occupation of Iraq, soldiers from the 1st Armored Division worked to pacify a country recovering from decades of dictatorship and a traumatic invasion. Just as relentlessly, the war worked on them.

They faced a shifting insurgency that culminated in a 60-day fight for the Shiite Muslim south as intense as any since the war began. And over their 15 months, during which 97 division soldiers died in combat and more than 1,000 were wounded, they struggled to clarify their perception of the everyday Iraqis they believed they had come to help.

Their time here has left many soldiers, from veteran tank drivers to young company commanders, with a confused picture of the Iraqis who never took up arms against them. Many share tales of intimate kindnesses by individual Iraqis. But they also acknowledge that the tactics they used against an elusive insurgency, while killing many enemy fighters, created new adversaries among civilians caught in the crossfire.

The soldiers express uneasiness about the country's course as they prepare to depart after the June 30 handover of limited authority to an Iraqi government. It will be charted, say many street-level soldiers, by ordinary Iraqis who often appeared less determined to influence the country's future than did the insurgents who mingled among them.

"Not to be cynical about it, but we just don't know whether to trust them," said Lt. Tim Hogan, a 25-year-old military police officer from Dubuque, Iowa.

In late April 2003, the division arrived in Baghdad to carry out a "stability operation" in the aftermath of a swift war. In the first few weeks there was some shooting, mostly in neighborhoods sympathetic to the collapsed government. Soon, nation-building duties, such as Taylor's soccer stadium, consumed the soldiers. If the Iraqis were not entirely friendly partners, they were not overtly hostile, either.

But just as the everyday frustrations of military checkpoints, road closures and arrests wore down the Iraqis, roadside bombs afflicted the soldiers. Capt. Jon Dunn, 31, a company commander from Woodbridge, Va., ran into five during his time in Baghdad and became known as the "metal detector" among his soldiers. As a new year began, the battlefield was treacherous. But the insurgency had yet to fully show itself.

"Until April, it was unthinkable to come after coalition forces with an RPG," said Capt. Ty Wilson, 31, a company commander from Fairfax, Va. "Then suddenly they were everywhere."

The uprising overwhelmed perceptions formed over the previous year of nation-building, leaving the trauma of combat to define the soldiers' understanding of the Iraqis.

After weeks of fighting under cover of darkness, Lt. Jon Silk found himself in a running gun battle lit by daylight. In late May, Silk's platoon pushed into Kufa, a stronghold of the anti-American militia led by the young cleric Moqtada Sadr. The troops' mission was to test a truce declared a few days earlier, using themselves as targets.

The blazing rooftop ambushes that greeted his men were an unequivocal sign that the cease-fire had not taken hold. Searching for a way to get above the fire, Silk and his men charged into a private home, apologized briefly to the flustered owners, and headed to the roof to set up gun positions.

"I thought they'd be angry, upset," said Silk, an amiable 35-year-old from Boston who had spent his career in the enlisted ranks until commissioned before the war. "The next thing I know, they're serving us food and tea while we were fighting."

In the streets below Silk's position, the battle worsened. He and his men left the surprising hospitality and joined the fight, at times engaging insurgents in hand-to-hand combat. But Silk was also receiving a shocking new daylight perspective on the kind of combat that had been hidden in darkness for weeks.

"When we returned to camp that afternoon, me and my gunners were all shaking," Silk said. "It was the first time we'd ever seen what our guns were doing to them."

Capt. Geoff Wright, who commands a tank company, was in the fight with Silk that day in Kufa. And he, too, was taken aback after seeing the faces of his enemy, much younger than he had imagined, up close.

To Wright, known for his wry sense of humor, the daylight fighting also clarified in a disappointing way the halting progress the Americans had made with Iraqis during the occupation.

In this case, it seemed to Wright, the Shiite Muslim majority that had largely welcomed the U.S. invasion after suffering under ousted president Saddam Hussein's Sunni-led government had turned.

"It was interesting to think about," said Wright, 31, of Emmaus, Pa. "These were the same people that all year you have been trying to cultivate, and now they are either sitting on the fence and quietly hoping you succeed or working against you."

Many division soldiers suggested that the tactics employed by the insurgency shaped, unfairly or not, their view of Iraqis who were not technically part of it. The distinction was often a challenging one to make on the urban battlefields they encountered.

Soldiers were attacked during the spring campaign in the south from the roofs of hospitals and the classrooms of schools. Mosques became weapons stockpiles and staging areas for ambushes. Snipers hid in the tops of date palm trees.

"They had good ideas about where they wanted us to fight," said Staff Sgt. Robert McBride, 35, from Roscoe, Tex., and a veteran of the Persian Gulf War.

But rarely, particularly as the uprising developed, did Iraqi civilians step forward with information to save soldiers from an ambush or point out a weapons depot. Part of the reason for that was fear, soldiers said they believed, but also a reluctance to take sides.

After weeks of intense fighting near Kufa's Salah mosque, Capt. John Moore, a tank company commander, said people emerged from their homes to greet the soldiers. No help had been forthcoming in the previous weeks, but to Moore it appeared that a new popularity flowed from their apparent victory.

"Maybe they were just happy we weren't shooting off heavy weaponry in their neighborhood anymore," said Moore, 33, of Chesapeake, Va. "But it also seemed like they were happy the SOBs were gone."

For most of the division's three-month extension, Col. Rob Baker's 2nd Brigade Combat Team was responsible for a stretch of towns south of Baghdad that are among the most hostile to the occupation. Over that time, 12 of his soldiers were killed, more than twice the number who died over the previous year.

Foreigners are routinely attacked along the road through Mahmudiyah and Latifiyah, where disaffected Sunni tribes once loyal to Hussein, as well as foreign militants and Shiite rebels, have taken refuge. U.S. troops face ambushes and roadside bombs.

To Baker, building an intelligence network among the different groups -- sometimes working in concert and other times at odds -- has been a revealing challenge. He has given his informants cameras, GPS equipment and espionage training.

"In some cases, they do it out of patriotism," Baker said of the few Iraqis who have worked with him. "Others we put on the payroll."

Community outreach efforts by Baker and his men have been tailored to local sensibilities. In addition to spending \$13.5 million on development projects since mid-April, Baker has adopted new, softer rules in dealing with a mostly suspicious community.

He ordered soldiers not to place bags over the heads of detained Iraqis and whenever possible to arrest suspected insurgents outside the view of their wives. Baker also wrote a letter of apology to every detainee wrongly arrested, handed to them upon release.

"Even if one of the people in a house killed one of our soldiers, we'd be back to fix the door we broke down in arresting him the next day," said Baker, 44, of Aberdeen, Md., who bears a passing resemblance to his high-school classmate, former Baltimore Orioles star Cal Ripken Jr.

The outreach, Baker contends, has had some success. His men are defusing more roadside bombs than are exploding, and in recent weeks they have captured a number of important local leaders of the insurgency. But the nature of the resistance often means that new enemies are made as fast as friends.

After a car bomb exploded in Yusifiyah in May, killing eight soldiers, Baker ordered a sweep through the neighborhood. His soldiers searched more than 700 houses over the next 12 hours, leaving, in his words, "a lot of disgruntled citizens."

"We have a big challenge to improve our image," Baker said. "What we are trying to instill in Iraqis is trust and confidence. But it doesn't mean we will win their friendship."

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