

Allied damage statements disagree

WASHINGTON (AP) — Round-the-clock bombing has seriously afflicted Iraq's key Republican Guard, but it remains an "effective fighting force," Pentagon analysts said Wednesday. Congress was told a precise damage assessment is hampered by the limits of satellite reconnaissance.

Only the most general damage estimates were available, leaving room for differences between Persian Gulf officers tending toward the more optimistic and Pentagon officials taking a more cautious view.

"We've not annihilated any of their primary war-fighting capabilities," one senior military officer says. "It's going to be a tough nut to crack."

In military parlance, the 150,000-member Guard constitutes Saddam Hussein's "theater reserve," a strong force located well behind front-line troops, to be swung into action as needed as a ground battle progresses.

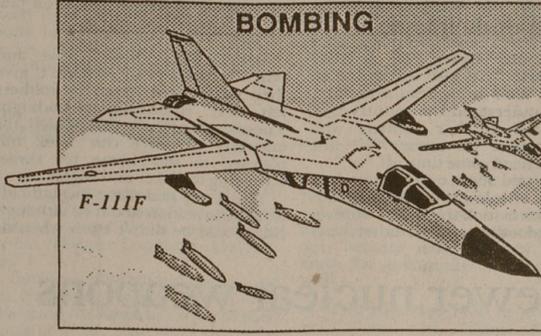
And since Guard units make up Iraq's best-trained and best-equipped force, they are a crucial target before any ground campaign is launched.

But assessments of the damage done by the air campaign to the units have been conflicting.

In Saudi Arabia, Gen. Michel Roquejeoffre, commander of the French forces in Operation Desert Storm, was quoted as saying he believed allied air strikes had reduced Republican Guard effectiveness overall by about 30 percent.

Another French official had said earlier he thought the Guard remained about 95 percent intact, but Roquejeoffre said his assessment relied not simply to casualties among the Guard but to the overall impact on its supplies, weapons and command structure.

BOMBING



F-111F
Wingspan: 70 ft.
Length: 73 ft. 6 in.
Max. speed: 1,320 mph
Range: 2,925 miles

U.S. bombers in the Gulf include: F-111F, F-117A stealth fighter-bomber, B-52G, F-15E, A-6

Military officers at the Pentagon said that while hundreds of the force's tanks and artillery pieces had been hit during the past three weeks, the force was well dispersed over hundreds of square miles. The Guard has had six months to beef up its supplies and remained dug in in a complex system of concrete bunkers.

"The Guard has been seriously affected, but they remain an effective fighting force," said one senior military officer with access to intelligence reports of the progress of the war.

Air Force officers have stated they hope to destroy 50 percent of Iraq's forces before a ground offensive is launched.

But officers from the Army and Marine Corps have rejected as over-optimistic any assessments that

bombing is forcing Iraq's top-line forces to wilt.

"A pilot may claim to have put a hole in a tank, but it's hard to assess exactly what damage has been done" by photos, said an Army officer familiar with such reports. "An anti-tank bullet of depleted uranium puts only a tiny hole in a tank, but it zooms around inside and cuts everybody up. On the other hand, damage could be done to the engine so that it looks like hell, but that can be easily replaced."

Last week, Desert Storm commander Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf gave reporters precise figures for a 15-hour period in which 178 trucks, 55 artillery pieces and 52 tanks were destroyed or damaged.

Less-senior military commanders have been much more reluctant since that time to offer such detail, saying only that "significant" damage has been inflicted by the round-the-clock pounding by allied warplanes and B-52 bombers.

At the U.S. military briefing in Riyadh on Wednesday, Marine Brig. Gen. Richard I. Neal said, "We're dropping a lot of ordnance on the Republican Guard, not just to lower their morale but also to destroy their tanks, their artillery, their logistical sustainment capability, their built-up areas. We're out there to destroy the Republican Guard."

But he declined to quantify the damage, saying only "I think we're experiencing good success."

Passengers recount stories of heroism, confusion

LOS ANGELES (AP) — Tales of panic joined stories of heroics Wednesday from survivors of the flaming runway collision at Los Angeles International Airport that killed 34 people, investigators said Wednesday.

One passenger failed to open an emergency door and later two men scuffled over who would exit first as fire enveloped a USAir jetliner that hit a commuter plane, skidded down the runway and hit a building, said James Burnett of the National Transportation Safety Board.

Investigators also reported that the co-pilot landing the USAir jet said he didn't see the Skywest commuter plane on the runway until the jet had touched down.

Thirty-four people died in Friday's collision between the USAir Boeing 737 and a Skywest Metroliner turboprop commuter plane preparing for takeoff. Eight of the 67 survivors from the USAir jet remained hospitalized.

Federal investigators had completed interviews with 41 USAir passengers, Burnett said. Before Wednesday's disclosures, interviews revealed heroics by passengers and flight attendants.

"We've learned that at the right front door, the flight attendant there, who has fairly serious injuries, was able to open the door, (and) two other people went out that door followed by the flight attendant," Burnett said Tuesday.

Burnett said Wednesday the controller who directed both planes onto Runway 24 Left had to deal with two other aircraft on the ground in the moments before the crash.

After the crash, a woman seated next to the right wing exit failed to open the emergency door and crucial moments were lost as the man seated behind her intervened to open it, he said.

Burnett also said two men frantic to escape ran over another woman, then scuffled over who would get out of the burning jetliner first. At that point, a third man came over and stuffed one of the men out the door, he said.

At least 21 passengers escaped through that exit, Burnett said. He didn't know how much of a delay the scuffle may have caused. He didn't identify any of the passengers.

Hospitalized co-pilot David Kelly, who was flying the USAir jet carrying 89 people, told investigators he didn't see the Skywest plane until a moment after the nose of his jet touched down.

"As the aircraft's nose came down, he saw a red light, the tail of the airplane and his landing lights shining through the propellers," Burnett said. "There was an explosion, a flash and then everything went dark."



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