A Gulf Commander Sees a Longer Road

By JIM DWYER

WHAT THE 101ST AIRBORNE, in central Iraq, March 27 — The removal of the Iraqi government is likely to take longer than originally thought, Lt. Gen. William Wallace, the commander of the Army forces in the Persian Gulf, said today.

"The enemy we're fighting is a bit different than the one we war-gamed against, because of these paramilitary forces," General Wallace said. "We knew they were here, but we did not know how they would fight."

The general said the bad weather and the obstinate resilience of the Iraqi forces had caused the delay, but did not say how much more time would be required. Before the war, the possibility that Saddam Hussein's government might collapse as soon as it was attacked was frequently aired in Washington, at the Pentagon but also elsewhere in the administration. Since the war started, President Bush has been careful to emphasize that it will not end soon, and will not be easy.

In discussing a war that would move at a deliberate, rather than a lightning pace, General Wallace was stating aloud what many soldiers have been saying privately. He is the commander of V Corps, which controls all the Army units taking part in the invasion, and he spoke while visiting the base here, known as Forward Operating Base Shell.

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"Technical vehicles with .50-caliber weapons — any kind of weapon — leading the charge," the general said, incredulous. "They were charging tanks and Bradleys." He termed such behavior "bizarre."

No matter how politically appealing a quick, decisive victory would be, the simple physics of the battlefield are making that less likely. Not only are weather and fierce fighting slowing the attack, but the supply train has yet to catch up with American forces that advanced quickly to within 100 miles of Baghdad.

Those convoys must move food, water, and fuel 400 miles from Kuwait across the Iraqi desert.

Some of them took five days to travel 300 of those miles, even with no opposition. Traffic jammed. Sand crept between the rims and tires of Humvees, causing flat tires. Dust storms brought visibility to a few feet.

Soldiers have become separated from their convoys, and some have fallen into enemy hands. Four soldiers from another unit were found on the road by troops from the 101st Airborne Division and brought to this camp on Monday.

Smudge-faced, exhausted, one of the group explained to an officer that their vehicle had broken down along the way, and that a spiral of missed signals with other members of the convoy left him and his companions alone on the road.

The supply of meals ready to eat, the staple diet for troops in the field, has been a concern for at least a week. Fuel has been in short supply. The Third Infantry Division, which has led the drive toward Baghdad, had been running low on water — a vital resource in any environment, most of all in the desert.

The security of supply convoys is no longer taken for granted: the persistence of fighting in southern Iraq has made travel riskier.

General Wallace said many of those taking up arms against the American troops had been coerced. "I'm appalled by the inhumanity of the Sadaamists — Baath Party militia or officials — have shown," general said, by "giving out weapons and forcing people to fight and threatening their families.
"It's very disturbing to understand that someone could be that brutal. It's also very disturbing that the people have put up with this for 25 years. I think the people are numb."

While battles continue every night, many of the American forces have not engaged in combat yet, in large part because of the heavy winds and sandstorms this week.

"We knew we would have to pause at some point to build our logistics," General Wallace said. "What we didn't calculate was three days" of sandstorms.

Over the weekend, surveys of public opinion on the war changed dramatically when the American forces experienced setbacks. General Wallace was asked about the tension between the politically desirable goal of a quick victory in Baghdad and the military's desire to move methodically through the country.

"I've got to give my best military judgment, given the weather, the long lines of communication, and given that we have to pull up our long line of logistics," General Wallace said. "We've got to take this pause. We're still fighting the enemy every night. We're doing things to keep him operating a higher tempo than the one we're operating at."

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