

Iraqi guerrillas shoot down US helicopter, killing 16 soldiers

Rumsfeld says more such “bad days” to come

By Patrick Martin
3 November 2003

The shooting down on Sunday of a CH-47 transport helicopter, in which sixteen US soldiers died and 20 others were wounded, many of them horribly burned, was a stark demonstration of the mounting cost of the US occupation of Iraq. It was the single bloodiest incident, in terms of US casualties, since Bush began the war against Iraq last March 20.

The ten-ton Chinook helicopter, fully loaded with soldiers going on leave, was en route from the town of Fallujah, a center of Iraqi resistance to the US occupation, to Baghdad International Airport. According to eyewitness accounts, two missiles were fired at it around 9 AM local time. One missed, but the other struck the helicopter’s engine, sparking an explosion and fire.

The helicopter crashed to the ground with such force that it scattered pieces of fuselage and body parts over a wide area. Every soldier on board was either killed or injured. Many of those injured face a lingering death from burns and internal injuries, or even permanent disability.

The three other deaths that took place Sunday among American soldiers in Iraq brought the day’s US death toll to 19, the second largest one-day total of the war. The only day that saw more US military deaths came during the early stages of the invasion, when 29 American soldiers died, most in bloody fighting around the southern city of Nasiriya.

Thousands of Iraqi soldiers were killed during the war, most of them incinerated by bombers, helicopter gunships, tanks and artillery before they ever came in contact with US ground troops.

US military officials said the missile that destroyed the helicopter was a Russian-made SA-7, a shoulder-fired, heat-seeking weapon that apparently locked onto the Chinook’s engines. The Iraqi military had hundreds of such missiles in its inventory before the war, and many of them were looted from stockpiles after the collapse of the Saddam Hussein regime.

Television footage from Fallujah showed crowds of Iraqi youth dancing in the streets in celebration over the downing of the helicopter, and press accounts quoted Iraqi workers and farmers near the crash site supporting the actions of the armed resistance. One Fallujah resident said on camera, “This was a new lesson from the resistance, a lesson to the greedy aggressors. They’ll never be safe until they get out of our country.”

Nafia Fahed Hamoud, a construction worker, said the fighter who fired the missile was “an honest man who does not like to be

occupied by foreigners.” A wheat farmer, Saadoun Jaralla, said. “The Americans are pigs. We will hold a celebration because this helicopter went down—a big celebration. The Americans are enemies of mankind.”

Fallujah, about 40 miles west of Baghdad, has been a focal point of Iraqi resistance to the US occupation since American troops opened fire on a crowd of demonstrators in mid-April, killing 14 people, many of them youth. The American forces have faced daily armed attacks in the city and the surrounding agricultural area, and have responded with an increasingly brutal campaign of indiscriminate violence against the local population.

One week ago, after a US convoy was hit by a roadside bomb, wounding several soldiers, American troops jumped out of their Humvees and began firing wildly at every nearby vehicle. Six Iraqis were killed, including four oil workers in an oil company van who were on their way to work. Two American civilians working under contract for the US Army Corps of Engineers were killed Sunday in Fallujah by another roadside bomb.

The political response in Washington to the downing of the helicopter was a declaration from the Pentagon that the American people could expect more such days of death and destruction. Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, appearing on a series of Sunday morning television interview programs, reiterated that message. “In a long, hard war, we’re going to have tragic days, as this is,” he said on the ABC News program *This Week*. “But they’re necessary. They’re part of a war that’s difficult and complicated.”

He dismissed television footage of Iraqis celebrating the destruction of the helicopter, reiterating the by now shopworn claim, “We know that the overwhelming majority of the population of Iraq favors the coalition,” i.e., the occupation of their country by foreign troops.

He continued to mouth the Bush administration line that the war in Iraq was a response to the September 11 terrorist attacks, despite Bush’s admission last month that there was no evidence connecting Saddam Hussein’s regime to the attacks on New York City and Washington. “I think the American people have a good center of gravity,” Rumsfeld said. “I think they get it. They would rather have us fighting terrorists outside the United States of America than inside.”

The downing of the helicopter was the culmination of an

unprecedented week of violence in Iraq, beginning Sunday, October 26 when Iraqi guerrillas fired mortars into the Al Rasheed Hotel, narrowly missing the room of visiting Deputy Secretary of Defense Paul Wolfowitz and shattering the pretense of “success” in Iraq which his tour was supposed to highlight.

This was followed by suicide bomb attacks the next day on the offices of the International Red Cross and three police stations, in which 35 people died. Last Friday, leaflets circulated throughout the capital city warning of a new offensive against the occupation forces and their Iraqi collaborators, and most parents kept their children home from school on Saturday, the first day of the Iraqi work and school week. Many workplaces were deserted.

In an effort to reassert an image of US control, the American military commander in Iraq, Lt. Gen. Richard S. Sanchez, held a press conference Saturday in which he dismissed the significance of the bloody incidents of the week, which brought the US death toll for October to 33, twice the number killed in September.

Declaring that the US occupation force would face “more obstacles, more setbacks and more tragedies in the future,” he added that, nonetheless, “The coalition has maintained its offensive focus in the face of what we regard as a strategically and operationally insignificant surge of attacks.”

The helicopter shoot-down the following day was the most technologically sophisticated and successful attack by the insurgent forces. It suggests a high degree of military intelligence as well, since those who fired the missile may have had advance knowledge of the flight of the huge, slow-moving Chinook.

US authorities in Iraq continue to maintain that the insurgency is being fueled from outside the country. Chief Iraq administrator Paul Bremer repeated demands that Syria and Iran prevent outside fighters from crossing into Iraq. “They could do a much better job of helping us seal that border and keeping terrorists out of Iraq,” he said in an interview with CNN.

A White House spokesman declared from President Bush’s Texas ranch, “Our will and resolve are unshakable.” But Bush himself did not speak to reporters and made no public comment on the deaths. This continues a pattern in which the president declines to make any appearance in which he would be associated with the casualties of the war.

Bush was eager to pose with returning sailors on the aircraft carrier John F. Kennedy—as Republican Party cameras recorded the event for future campaign commercials. But he has not attended any funerals of the more than 300 soldiers, sailors and airmen killed in Iraq, nor has he met coffins of the dead returning from the battlefield.

An article published in Sunday’s *New York Times*, profiling the 22 US soldiers killed over the two weeks before the helicopter disaster, described mounting bitterness among families of the deceased over the hands-off policy of the White House. The family of Aubrey Bell, an Alabama National Guardsman killed last month in Iraq, was “furious,” the newspaper reported. A cousin of Bell’s told the *Times*, “The president don’t care. You see him on TV. He says this, he says that. But show me one tear, one tear.”

Brian Hart, father of John Hart, a 20-year-old paratrooper killed last month in combat, told the *Times*, “The Army hasn’t given us

any more information than a three-sentence press release. It’s awful.” The Harts learned from their son’s fellow soldiers that many lack protective gear, ride in vehicles that are not armored, and camp out in water treatment facilities and other premises they are protecting, sleeping on pipes. The soldier’s mother said, “It breaks your heart that these kids are living in real deprivation out there and we don’t know about it.”

There is a large measure of personal cowardice in Bush’s refusal to appear at the funerals and other ceremonies commemorating the American victims of his war. The president and his handlers and spin doctors clearly want to avoid the spectacle of bereaved relatives denouncing his administration for destroying the lives of their sons and daughters.

But there is a more important consideration: Bush wishes to avoid drawing attention to US casualties because there are far more of them to come. As Rumsfeld maintained in his television appearances, such days of mass casualties are both inevitable and necessary, if the Bush administration is to accomplish its purposes in Iraq. Far from being deterred by the events of the past week, the American government is pushing ahead with plans for new and more aggressive military tactics.

These are likely to include use of greater firepower, removing all restrictions on the rules of engagement and turning the occupation openly into a war against the Iraqi people as a whole, through such tactics as mass roundups and the clearing of entire areas—like Fallujah—of their hostile population.

American imperialism is prepared to sacrifice the lives of hundreds of Americans—and tens of thousands of Iraqis—to achieve its goal of securing control of the oil resources of Iraq and a key strategic position from which to dominate the Middle East.

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