

The dogs were yelping

They knew bombs were on the way

Day 20 of America's war for the "liberation" of Iraq was another day of fire, pain and death. It started with an attack by two A-10 jets that danced in the air like acrobats, tipping on one wing, sliding down the sky to turn on another, and spraying burning phosphorus to mislead heat-seeking missiles before turning their cannons on a government ministry and plastering it with depleted uranium shells. The day ended in blood-streaked hospital corridors and with three foreign correspondents dead and five wounded.

The A-10s passed my bedroom window, so close I could see the cockpit Perspex, with their trail of stars dripping from their wingtips, a magical, dangerous performance fit for any air show, however infernal its intent. But when they turned their DU shells – intended for use against heavy armour – against the already wrecked Iraqi Ministry for Planning, the effect was awesome. The A-10's cannon-fire sounds like heavy wooden furniture being moved in an empty room, a kind of final groan, before the rounds hit their target.

When they did, the red-painted ministry – a gaunt and sinister building beside the Jumhuriya Bridge over the Tigris that I have always suspected to be an intelligence headquarters – lit up with a thousand red and orange pin-points of light.

From the building came a great and dense cloud of white smoke, much of which must have contained the aerosol DU spray that so many doctors and military veterans fear causes cancers.

At about this time I noticed the tanks on the Jumhuriya Bridge. Two low-slung M1A1 Abrams, one in the centre of the bridge, the other parking itself over the first stanchion. Just another little probing raid, the Americans announced, but it looked much more

Robert Fisk » The dogs were yelping

than that.

I reached the eastern end of the Jumhuriya Bridge – a wide and deserted four-lane highway that soared out across the river, obscuring the American tanks on the other side – an hour and a half later. It looked grimly like that scene in *A Bridge Too Far*, Richard Attenborough's epic on the Arnhem disaster, in which a British officer walks slowly up the great span with an umbrella in his hand to see if he can detect the Germans on the other side. But I knew the Americans were on the other side of this bridge and drove past it at great speed.

Which provided a remarkable revelation. While American fighter-bombers criss-crossed the sky, while the ground shook to the sound of exploding ordnance, while the American tanks now stood above the Tigris, vast areas of Baghdad – astonishing when you consider the American claim to be “in the heart” of the city – remain under Saddam Hussein's control. I drove all the way to Mansur, where relatives of the 11 Iraqi civilians killed in Monday's massacre of civilians – the Americans used four 2,000lb bombs to dismember the mainly Christian families in the vain hope of killing President Saddam – still waited to retrieve the last of their dead.

On my way back past the Ahrar Bridge, I found a crowd of spectators standing on the parapet, watching the American tanks with a mixture of amusement and fear. Did they not know what was happening in their city, or – an idea that has possessed me in recent days – are the poor of Baghdad kept in such ignorance of events that they simply do not realise that the Americans are about to occupy their city? Could it be that the cigarette sellers and the bakery queues and the bus drivers just don't know what lies down on the banks of the Tigris?

As I arrived back at the Palestine Hotel, I saw the smoke of the shell that the Americans had just fired into the Reuters office. It was to take two lives, in addition to the reporter from the Arab al-Jazeera satellite channel killed a few hours earlier by an American air attack on his office. Despite two separate assurances from the American government that al-Jazeera's base of operations would not be targeted, it was destroyed.

Just an hour later, one of the tanks on the Jumhuriya Bridge fired a shell into the wreckage. Eighteen civilians – 15 of them women – were reported to be still hiding in the basement last night with no immediate hope of rescue.

The International Red Cross had tried to arrange a convoy out of Baghdad; inexplicably, it was reported that the Americans had refused it passage from the city.

At one point, Red Cross workers hoped to take a severely wounded Spanish television reporter with them – his leg had been amputated after the tank shell exploded below his office in the hotel – but he died during the afternoon. The American

Robert Fisk » The dogs were yelping

infantry divisional commander issued a statement that suggested the Reuters cameramen were sniping at the US tank, a remark so extraordinary – and so untrue – that it brought worldwide protests from journalists.

I don't know what it is about the street dogs of Baghdad, but they always know when the bombers are returning. Is there some change in air pressure, some high technological decibel that we humans can't hear?

The dogs always get it right. Every time they start baying, you know that the bombers are coming back. And they yelped and barked as night fell last night. And within 15 minutes, even we humans could hear the rumble of explosions from southern Baghdad. ◆