

# “I had to save my men”

*Civilians lie dead in the killing field on Highway 8*

**S**omething terrible happened on Highway 8. Some say a hundred civilians died there. Others believe that only 40 or 50 men, women and children were cut to pieces by American tank fire when members of the 3rd Infantry Division's Task Force 315 were ambushed by the Republican Guard.

Many of their corpses still lie rotting in their incinerated cars, a young woman, burnt naked, slumped face down over the rear seat on the Hillah flyover bridge next to half of a male corpse that is hanging out of the driver's door. Blankets cover a pile of civilian dead, including a cremated child, a few metres away. A red car, shot in half by an American tank shell, lies on its side with the lower half of a human leg, still in a black shoe, beside the left front wheel.

No one disputes that the American troops were ambushed here – or that the battle only ended late on Wednesday afternoon. On the flyover, I found a dead Iraqi Republican Guard in uniform, his blood draining into the gutter, one foot over the other, shot in the head. A hundred metres away lay a car with an elderly civilian man dead under the chassis. Two fuel trucks – one of them still burning – lay in a field. An incinerated passenger bus stood beside the motorway.

Hundreds of Iraqis stared at the corpses in horror, most of them holding handkerchiefs to their faces and swatting the flies that moved between the living and the dead.

Captain Dan Hubbard, commanding the 315th's Bravo Company whose 10 tanks and four Bradley Fighting Vehicles hold the flyover bridge, described to me how his men came under fire “from 360 degrees” with rocket-propelled grenades and AK-47 rifles at 7am when civilian traffic was moving along the motorway.

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“We’re here to fight the Iraqi regime, not the civilians,” he said. “There were cars on the road when we were ambushed and we fired over their heads two or three times to get them to stop. Ninety per cent of the vehicles turned away after a warning shot.” Here the captain paused for a moment. “A lot of things go on in people’s heads at such times,” he said. “A lot of people speed up ... I had to protect my men. We tried our very best to minimise any kind of injuries and death to civilians. I have got to protect my soldiers because we don’t know if it’s a car-load of explosives or RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades]. We’ll have the cars removed. The bodies will be taken care of.”

Captain Hubbard was a thoughtful man, a 34-year-old from Tennessee who named his tank Rhonda Denise after his wife, who is “the toughest woman I’ve ever met” – though what she would make of the civilian horror on Highway 8 doesn’t bear thinking about.

Clearly the Iraqi Republican Guard also have a responsibility for this carnage since they started their ambush knowing full well that civilians would be on the motorway.

Two American soldiers were killed in the battle and up to 30 wounded. Six US vehicles were destroyed, including two tanks. Many families had come to find their dead relatives and bury them but I counted at least 16 civilian bodies – and parts of bodies – still on the highway, several of them women.

And of course, this killing field raised a now familiar question. Americans fired tank shells at civilian motorists. Still their bodies lay beside the road – with the dead soldier – and still no one had buried them. Sure, the Americans tried not to kill civilians. But all would have been alive today had President George Bush not ordered his army to invade their country. ♦