

## 10 TIRED IRAQIS SURRENDER TO REPORTERS

by Dan Fesperman

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SOUTHERN KUWAIT

They were fed up with the hunger, the cold, the rain and the Iraqi army in general. And the last thing they wanted to do was fight whoever it was that had bombed their trenches for five weeks running.

So at midafternoon yesterday, they threw off their helmets, buried their guns in the sand and set out 10 abreast down an empty desert highway. They carried a bamboo pole with a white cloth tied to the end, and they were intent on surrendering to the first person they could find.

Two hours later, they happened to find us -- free-lance writer Michael Kelly and me -- as we drove toward them on a highway a few miles inside the Kuwaiti border.

It was indicative of the lack of resistance offered by Iraqi forces throughout most of Kuwait yesterday, as the number of captives mounted faster than anyone could keep track of.

Our first response to their white flag was to stop. Once we saw they were unarmed, we hopped from the truck to give them food -- orange juice, bread, cheese, chocolate, nuts and water, which they devoured.

Two in the group spoke halting English, but none would give a name. The one who spoke English better said they feared retaliation against their families by the government of President Saddam Hussein. They asked to come with us, but at first we declined. We were only journalists, we told them, or, in Arabic, "sahafi."

Besides, we were heading in the opposite direction, and our four-wheel-drive truck was already stuffed with nine 10-liter gas cans. So we drove away, only to find the road cut a half-mile later by a deep trench, with minefields spreading out on either side.

We turned around, and with a cold, rainy evening approaching, decided to see how many we could fit into the truck for a ride to the nearest allied troops.

These were men used to living in cramped, tiny bunkers, and all 10 managed to fit. One joined us in the front seat, four squeezed into the back seat, three sprawled and twisted themselves atop the gas cans in the back, and two clung to the open rear doors.

Two and a half miles later, we came across a northbound Saudi Arabian supply column that had just begun crossing the road.

We stopped and flagged down a truck. At the wheel was Saudi Sgt. Saleh Mhassan. I told them there were 10 Iraqis who wanted to surrender, but my English seemed to baffle him.

However, the sight of 10 men in dark green Iraqi uniforms tramping toward his truck reached him loud and clear. He grabbed his automatic weapon, jumped from the cab and rammed an ammunition clip into place with a loud snap.

The driver of the following truck did the same, and within seconds a dozen more Saudi soldiers were running and shouting toward the Iraqis, each snapping an ammunition clip into his gun.

The collective rattle sent off a keening wail among the Iraqis, who pleaded in Arabic for mercy as the Saudis pushed them to their knees in the sand. One Iraqi thrust forward his dog-eared Koran, pleading for his life. A Saudi soldier, startled by the sudden movement, snatched the book, quickly flipped its pages, then dropped it to the ground.

By now, another 20 gun-snapping Saudis had run to the scene.

Their reaction was understandable. They were drivers in the rear column of a vast supply train, and this was most likely their first look at surrendering troops. For months they had been expecting a formidable opponent described almost daily as "battle-hardened." Instead, their opponents were battle-weary.

Minutes later, Lt. Saud Otabi arrived. He ordered most of the Saudis back to their trucks. A second officer drove up in a station wagon. He distributed plastic bags of soap and mineral water to the Iraqis, an act that calmed them considerably.

The second officer said the supply trucks were traveling with the lone infantry battalion of the Saudi 4th Army Brigade, but he offered no further information.

With the scene calming down, we drove away, while the Iraqis awaited their long ride to a POW camp.

(Friend and colleague Michael Kelly, who went on to a distinguished career as editor of "The New Republic" and "National Journal," was killed in April 2002 while covering the war in Iraq. His book, "Martyr's Day," a fine and vivid account of his Gulf War experiences, is available from Vintage Books.)