

Saddam's army a mirage?

MONTEGO BAY, Jamaica — Not much has changed since I lived here 21 years ago. Downtown Montego Bay is still a dump, but the weather is exquisite, Jamaicans as charming as ever and the pace of life delightfully slow.

To recover from the Gulf war, I've isolated myself in a lovely villa up in the hills above town, floating on a lie-low in the pool, thermoburning into a fiery hue of red.

I asked a local his view of the war.

"Well, sah, me don't think much about the man Saddam. We got other problems, like the GCT."

Trouble in paradise. Poor Jamaica is about to get its own version of the GST — the GCT — no doubt a hi-tech import from advanced Canada. Now Jamaicans, too, can groan and moan under the scourge of ever-higher taxes.

As I floated and fried, my mind drifted back to the far-away Gulf. What, I kept asking myself, happened to Saddam's huge, million-man army, supposedly the fourth largest in the world? Where did it all go?

In retrospect, the Gulf war seems like a sci-fi battle on the dark side of the moon. We know something happened, we've seen a few TV shots of mayhem and wrecked vehicles, and heard loud fanfare about the glorious victory against the forces of evil. But, as yet, we have absolutely no idea of what really occurred in this most mysterious and censored of wars.

For example, the Pentagon claims that 42 Iraqi divisions, with 4,000 tanks, were destroyed. This works out to about 500,000 combat troops, not counting support units, and at least 90,000 military vehicles. Coalition forces captured around 60,000 static Iraqi troops assigned to hold the southern front — the kind of wretched cannon-fodder known in Ottoman armies as Bashi-Bazouks.

But if the allies really did cut off the entire 500,000-man Iraqi force in the Kuwait theatre, as claimed, what happened to the remaining 440,000 men? Many, obviously, were killed — say 20,000 or 30,000. Where are the rest? They seem to have vanished like a desert mirage.

Before the ground war, the Pentagon estimated the U.S. would suffer 20,000-30,000 casualties in

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land combat. Less than 200 allied troops, including airmen, were killed, a goodly number by friendly fire. How to explain this huge discrepancy?

Here are some suppositions.

First, there never were 42 Iraqi divisions in the Kuwait theatre, but something closer to 15. All along, the U.S. has vastly exaggerated Iraqi military strength.

Second, it seems likely that Saddam ordered his troops in Kuwait to begin pulling out shortly before the allied ground attack began. A retreat under enemy fire is the most dangerous of all military operations, and one almost guaranteed to produce chaos and panic. This is exactly what happened.

Saddam, hoping an 11th-hour Soviet peace plan would save him, waited too long before ordering his troops out of Kuwait, producing an enormous rout.

Yet all of this still does not explain what happened to the rest of Saddam's army.

Six to eight Republican Guard divisions were reportedly destroyed. So far, however, I have not seen one single photo or TV film of any of the T-72 tanks, Brazilian armored vehicles, or G-5 guns with which the Guards were specially equipped. Only films of old T-54/55 tanks dug into firing pits and lots of wrecked Chinese armored personnel carriers that were standard equipment for Saddam's regular infantry divisions.

Either the Pentagon is still censoring film footage of the major tank battles in southern Iraq or they may never have occurred on the scale claimed by U.S. spokesmen. Or most of Saddam's best units did manage to escape north to the Basra region before the U.S. Seventh Corps completed its encirclement of the Kuwait theatre.

Question: Was this done on purpose? Did the U.S. and Britain allow enough of Saddam's troops to escape in order to preserve his control inside Iraq?

Reports coming out of southern Iraq say Republican Guard units are battling Shia rebels in at least five major cities, including Basra. These were the very same units supposedly destroyed in the land war. Evidently, more intact Iraqi units escaped than was first reported.

This brings us back to the question of how many Iraqi troops were in the field to begin with. Months ago, this column observed that Iraq's effective combat strength was about 400,000 men, with 1,000 modern tanks and less than 100 modern jet fighters. And of these, only 13 divisions, some 156,000 men, were first-rate troops. The rest of Saddam's forces were an armed horde of no military value.

Soon, I hope, we'll get answers to these mysteries. Meanwhile, I'll keep floating and wondering what happened to Saddam's stealth army.