

Waiting for the missiles

Operation Desert Storm broke over downtown Baghdad at 7 p.m. EST last night.

Waves of U.S. night attack aircraft — F-117 Stealth fighters, F-15E's, Navy E-6's — and British Tornados, unleashed the opening salvo of a mighty war against Iraq.

Many observers had expected that President George Bush would wait for at least a few more days to give Saddam Hussein a final chance to pull out of Kuwait.

But the President, fearful that Saddam might stage a partial pullout that would throw the U.S.-led coalition into disarray, decided to attack almost at once.

Now that the war has begun, the big question concerns the Scud missiles of Iraq.

As of this writing, and circumstances are changing by the second, there are a few unconfirmed reports of Iraqi missile strikes against targets in Saudi Arabia.

But it must be remembered as I discuss targets and tactics, these are still the very first hours of the war, as U.S. Secretary Dick Cheney emphasized last night.

No Iraqi missiles have yet been fired at Israel, in spite of Saddam's threats to riposte to any U.S. attack by launching chemical missiles at the Jewish state.

This suggests that either massive U.S. barrage and point jamming has disrupted communications between Iraqi military headquarters in Baghdad and the air defense system, that Iraqi missiles have been destroyed by U.S. strikes, or that Saddam is holding back Scuds for later use.

Baghdad, by contrast, has been hit by bombs. Fires are reportedly raging around key military and industrial targets in downtown and the suburbs.

Having been recently in Baghdad, I could vividly feel and share the tension in the voices of reporters filing from the Iraqi capitol.

During my visit, I often scanned the night sky, half expecting to see U.S. attack aircraft boring in to attack.

From the tall Sheraton and Al-Rashid hotels, you can see the entire panorama of Baghdad, a large, sprawling, low-lying city on the banks of the Tigris River.

The likely targets of last night's air attacks were Iraqi military headquarters in Baghdad, Saddam Hussein's underground command bunker,

ERIC MARGOLIS



Baghdad Radio and the national communications system.

Also on the high-priority target list are the Scud missiles — particularly those at the H-2 and H-3 airbases in western Iraq that are targeted at Israel.

Key radars of the Iraqi air defense system will have been destroyed by anti-radiation missiles and communications between air defense sites were jammed or knocked out.

With daylight, massive waves of American and British attack aircraft, including U.S. Navy bombers, will begin pounding Iraqi air bases.

The concrete and earth shelters protecting Iraqi fighters will be under constant attack.

Runways will be cratered to prevent Iraqi interceptors from taking off.

At the same time, air attacks will continue against headquarters in Baghdad and around the country, including Kuwait.

Intense daylight bombing will concentrate on Iraqi communications centers, chemical weapons and munition plants, bridges, fuel depots and telecommunications in an effort to paralyze and blind the Iraqi leadership and limit the armed forces' ability to react.

Today, as the Iraqis recover from the first shock of the night assault, will probably show whether or not Baghdad will use any of the "secret" strategic weapons that it claims to possess.

If Iraq doesn't use all its Scuds, they will soon be destroyed — if they have not been already.

Any long-range missile strikes against Israel may be expected, along with missile and air strikes by Iraq against the Saudi bases being used by the U.S. for this bombing campaign.

We will see if Saddam's threats were pure bluff.

As expected, there has been no action by coalition ground forces. They are being held back pending the outcome of the air campaign.

Unless Iraqi ground forces attack into Saudi Arabia — and this is highly unlikely given their lack of air cover — we can expect little action on the ground for at least a few more days.

The clear coalition strategy is to first pound Iraq from the air, limiting its casualties, and then demand that Saddam withdraw his forces from Kuwait.

If the Iraqi leader refuses, coalition ground forces will then go into action.

America and its allies expect a swift victory, relying on their massive air superiority. But Saddam's strategy is to hunker down, absorb frightful punishment, and then go on to fight the U.S. in a long, bloody ground war that he believes the Americans will not have the fortitude to sustain.

Whether Iraq's military forces can withstand the punishment being rained on them from the skies by Desert Storm remains in question.

Jordan's King Hussein has given what is probably the best prediction. All sides in this great battle, he said, will be the losers.