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Pg. 1

GIs Won't Forget Duty At Iraq's 'Alamo'

By Stephen J. Hedges, Tribune correspondent

It was the end of another tense night inside the close, neglected walls of this building in a far-off corner of western Iraq. Army Capt. Steve Smith's face betrayed the weariness that comes with his new assignment: guarding this squat symbol of Iraq's uncertain future. But he made a stab at cordiality.

"Welcome to the Alamo," he said one morning last week, extending his hand to a visitor. "It has been unusually quiet."

The quiet did not last. It never does. Within a few hours, Smith and his men were being pummeled by mortar rounds, rocket-propelled grenades and rifle fire.

Of the many violent episodes that ripple each day through the Iraq that America has invaded and is now struggling to remake, the running standoff at the police station in Husaybah, nestled against the Syrian border, is one of the oddest.

The station itself has no strategic value, and there is no question that U.S. forces there, with more than 1,000 reinforcements nearby, can hold it. But in the last two weeks, the complex's 10 rooms, three cells and courtyard the size of a boxing ring have become the most violent place in the country.

The Americans say they are determined to stay to enforce some normalcy for Iraqis.

"I believed that I had to reassert some control over the functions in the town," said Lt. Col. Greg Reilly, the U.S. commander here. "There was a need to stabilize it, in my mind."

Every 24 hours, the station sustains four to six attacks from an unknown but determined enemy. The assaults began after Reilly, who commands the Tiger squadron of the Army's 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment, decided earlier this month that the Army should occupy the station.

The result was the Alamo.

Husaybah and the towns around it--an area known as Al Qaim--were the scenes of fierce fighting early in the summer. But until the current troubles, Reilly said, the region slowly had been growing more secure.

\$1.5 million for infrastructure

"We had made a lot of progress here," Reilly said. "We've spent \$1.5 million doing things for the people here. Fixing up the schools, the hospital, water pumps. . . . So we were headed in the right direction."

Until, he said, Police Chief Rasheed El We Aded was slain.

Husaybah, population 60,000, is a border town, and like border towns in every unstable part of the world, it is home to a community of professional smugglers.

On Oct. 7, Reilly's soldiers conducted a raid. Acting on information from the regiment's intelligence unit, troops targeted 25 locations and detained 112 people, 67 of whom are still in custody.

Reilly described them as "leaders, facilitators for organizing the resistance."

But the ambitious raid had repercussions. The operation took place just one day after Reilly had met with the police chief. Reilly believes the chief's assassins drew the wrong conclusion.

Possibly a fatal deduction

"It got back to us that we had unhinged a huge smuggling operation going into Iraq," Reilly said. "They just assumed he was giving us the information."

The day after the raid, gunmen killed the police chief, leaving the police force, which consists of 130 men armed with 85 Kalashnikov rifles and three patrol vehicles, afraid to leave the station.

Handbills soon appeared outside Husaybah's mosques and on the central market street--the soldiers call it Michigan Avenue--listing people the opposition said were collaborating with the U.S.

Next, a band of about 20 gunmen showed up at the police station, which was manned by a small force of Iraqi recruits. The gunmen laid siege to the place and held it for seven hours before leaving. They warned the police officers to quit the force or be killed.

That's when Reilly dispatched troops from the 3rd Armored's nearby Tiger base, a railroad yard 20 miles southeast of the town. With the Army at the police station, some of the police officers have returned. At least a third have not.

For Reilly, guarding the station was necessary to regain public support for the struggling police force and to assure Iraqis serving inside the station that the U.S. troops would stand by them.

"I seized the police station to provide security," he said. "An adverse effect is that day and night they're attacking our position. We will maintain that position in hopes of restoring confidence."

The attacks on the station began when the soldiers arrived, and they now come regularly.

"Usually they let the locals know so nobody gets hurt," said Smith, the Army captain. "The street outside will get real quiet, and then we know that something's about to happen."

The station, which is on the eastern edge of the mile-long market street, is vulnerable. Its back is exposed to several alleys and narrow streets with abandoned buildings, an ideal firing place for the 60mm mortar rounds that are the enemy's weapon of choice, Smith said.

Quiet before the storm

Most of the attacks, though, come from places beyond the building's iron front gates. Sometimes it is gunfire from buildings across the street. But usually, Smith said, mortars are lofted from farther away.

Based on the arc and impact points of incoming rounds, Smith's team has an idea from where the attacks are coming. But catching the assailants is difficult.

"It's hard to track them down in those kinds of buildings," he said. "I think what they're doing is firing from the back of a truck and then taking off."

Even more difficult is determining just who the enemy is. Until recently, Reilly said, his best guess was that "local thugs" made up most of the resistance, conducting "about 60 attacks over the last 90 days, all of it incredibly ineffective."

But intelligence and recent raids, he said, have shown that anti-coalition fighters from elsewhere in Iraq may have come to Husaybah to join the assaults. Since the police chief's death, attacks on the nearby border checkpoint, occupied by U.S. troops and Iraqi civil servants, also have increased.

Raja Nuwaf Fahan al-Sharji, the town's mayor, said such violence is not exclusive to Husaybah, but has infected "the whole country."

"The presence of the coalition forces is the problem," al-Sharji said. "People here reject their presence in the city, and they do not want them to stay in the city. If they go out, we would take control of the security and maintain it."

Still, al-Sharji concedes that the chief's death weakened his police force, prompting officers to "fear what would happen next."

Reilly held a meeting last week with local leaders, sheiks and clerics to discuss security and ask for help attracting police recruits. The next day about 20 young men appeared at the station. They were jeered by schoolchildren as they arrived and left.

Officer's determination

Reilly said that he is determined to keep the station open to the public, despite the risk of gunmen or a suicide bomber walking into the place. When the new police recruits arrived, he told a skeptical Smith to invite them in.

"This is a service-oriented place," Reilly told his captain. "People are going to come here for help. People are going to come here to give us information. People hopefully will come here to volunteer for the police department."

"Sir," Smith responded, "I understand. But I am sure you can understand our concerns about force protection."

"Steve," Reilly replied, "I understand, but people are going to come here, and you're going to have to deal with them. You can't turn this place into a fortress."

American and Iraqi authorities have recruited a new police chief, Suhial Najeem Majeed, who has worked in communities near Baghdad.

Speaking in his new office inside the station last week, with its glass windows facing Husaybah's market street, Majeed said he is well aware of the risks to his officers and himself.



"God will protect me," he said. "God will give me my destiny."

Just four hours later, Majeed was slightly injured in a mortar attack on his new place of employment.