American soldiers really aren't spoilt, trigger-happy yokels
By Jonathan Foreman
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Whether the deaths of Uday and Qusay Hussein were self-inflicted or not, the military operation to capture them was immaculate. There were no American deaths, 10 minutes of warnings were given over loudspeakers, and it was the Iraqis who opened fire. So sensitive was the American approach, they even rang the bell of the house before entering.

The neat operation fits squarely with the tenor of the whole American campaign, contrary to the popular negative depiction of its armed forces: that they are spoilt, well-equipped, steroid-pumped, crudely patriotic yokels who are trigger-happy yet cowardly in their application of overwhelming force.

And, unlike our chaps, none of them is supposed to have the slightest clue about Northern Ireland-style "peacekeeping": never leaving their vehicles to go on foot patrols, never attempting to win hearts and minds by engaging with local communities and, of course, never removing their helmets, sunglasses and body armour to appear more human.

As a British journalist working for an American newspaper, who was embedded with American troops before, during and after the conquest of Saddam Hussein’s Iraq, I know this is all way off the mark; a collection of myths coloured by prejudice, fed by Hollywood’s tendentious depictions of Vietnam (fought by a very different US Army to today’s) and by memories of the Second World War.

The American soldiers I met were disciplined professionals. Many of them had extensive experience of peacekeeping in Kosovo and Bosnia and had worked alongside (or even been trained by) British troops. Thoughtful, mature for their years, and astonishingly racially integrated, they bore little resemblance to the disgruntled draftees in Platoon or Apocalypse Now.

Yes, American troops wear their helmets and armour even though removing them might ease local relations. But it’s easy to forget that British troops in Northern Ireland have very often worn helmets when patrolling unfriendly areas. And the disaster that took the lives of six Royal Military Police officers in Majar may indicate that American caution - whether it means wearing body armour, or ensuring that soldiers have sufficient back-up or are always in radio contact with headquarters - isn't so foolish.

And it's simply not true that the Americans don't patrol at all, patrol only in tanks or never get out of their vehicles. I accompanied foot patrols in Baghdad as early as April 13, only days after Saddam's presidential palace was taken. The unit carrying out these patrols was also assigned to escort SAS troopers around the city. The SAS men told me how impressed they were, not just with the Americans' willingness to learn from them, but with their training and self-control.

The idea that American troops are lavishly equipped is also a myth, a fantasy bred out of resentment of American wealth in general. The battalion in which I was first embedded came to war in creaky, Vietnam-vintage M113 armoured personnel carriers, which frequently broke down in the desert.

The battalion fought in green heavyweight fatigues because the desert camouflage ones never arrived. And, though a shipment of desert boots turned up just before the invasion, many were the wrong size, so that these GIs had to make do with black leather clompers designed for northern Europe in December. Perhaps most resented by the troops, they were not issued with bullet-resistant vests, only flak jackets, making them vulnerable to small-arms fire.

Another myth is that the Americans are also softies who live and fight in amazing, air-conditioned comfort. The truth is that the GIs encamped in and outside palaces and Ba'ath party mansions not only lack air-conditioning but also running water, unlike most of the population they guard.

And, unlike their British counterparts, they have no communication with their families at home. Many British troops are able to use the "e-bluey" system to email their loved ones on a frequent basis. The only times most GIs in Iraq ever get to let their spouses know they are well is if a passing journalist lets them have a couple of minutes on the Satphone.
And I remember what a thrill it was when I got my hands on a British ration box after nearly three months on American MREs (meals ready to eat). GIs bored of endless variations upon chilli and macaroni were amazed to find that British rations included things such as chicken and herb paté. And they were willing to trade everything from boots to whole cases of their own rations to get some.

Though the US Army lacks our regimental system, different American divisions vary greatly in culture and experience. The Third Infantry Division - the unit that reached Baghdad first and took the city in a feat of great boldness - has been kept in Iraq because its soldiers are clearly better than newcomers at the difficult task of winning hearts and minds in a newly conquered country.

You could see this in the way the tank commander, Captain Philip Wolford, broke the rules and walked around the area his company controlled, alone and bare-headed, chatting with the locals and organising food, medical care and even employment. I wish that more British reporters had gone into the streets with 3ID men such as Sgt Darren Swain, a no-nonsense soldier from Alabama who is loved in the Baghdad area his men call "Swainsville" because, off his own bat, he takes humvees out every morning to provide security at local schools.

More recently, American soldiers have been charged with the sensitive task of searching those who enter the Palace district of Baghdad. One Shi'ite mullah felt it a great dishonour to be searched. The soldier responsible, Captain Wolford, agreed to take him round the back of the building and search him in private. Once there, the mullah agreed to be searched. Captain Wolford refused then to search him - the agreement to comply was enough. The gentlemanly approach much pleased the mullah.

It is because of this kind of sensitivity that the Americans have slowly and quietly achieved the intelligence triumph that led to the discovery and killing of the sons of Saddam Hussein.

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