

Hardest 'yet to come'

U.S. troops confront deadliest battles yet

As many as 9 soldiers killed when Iraqi forces faked surrender, attacked

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AN NASIRIYAH, Iraq — U.S.-led forces suffered their worst casualties of the war yesterday in two bloody battles near An Nasiriyah that raged for hours before Iraqi resistance was vanquished. Marines said they would move around the city rather than march through it on the road to Baghdad.

The battles at An Nasiriyah drew some attention from the relentless advance of the U.S.-led forces, now less than 100 miles from Baghdad after four days of the ground war. Scores of American military personnel landed in Kurdish territory, as the move to open a northern front gathered strength.

"I think we're advancing more rapidly than anyone could have expected," said U.S. Maj. Gen. Daniel P. Leaf, who coordinates the coalition's air campaign.

But at An Nasiriyah — on the Euphrates River 233 miles southeast of Baghdad, near the ancient town of Ur, birthplace of the patriarch Abraham — the allied juggernaut sustained its worst casualties so far.

And in the face of that resistance, Marine officials said they expected to sidestep An Nasiriyah rather than fight to capture it — the same strategy they employed in Basra.

American authorities detailed two bloody battles:

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A U.S. soldier from the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force stands guard at a burning oil well at the Rumeila Oil fields, the second largest, yesterday in Iraq. Several oil wells have been set ablaze by retreating Iraqi troops.

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Captured soldiers appear on Iraqi TV

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DOHA, Qatar — Looking by turns frightened or stoic, five captured U.S. soldiers were thrust in front of an Iraqi TV microphone and peppered with questions yesterday. The footage also showed at least four bodies.

U.S. officials confirmed that 12 soldiers and at least one aircraft were missing in southern Iraq, and said the troops may have been lured into a trap by Iraqi soldiers pretending to surrender.

The scenes of interrogators questioning four men and a woman were broadcast by the Arab satellite station Al-Jazeera with footage from state-controlled Iraqi television. Each was interviewed individually. They spoke into a microphone labeled "Iraqi Television."

A senior defense official said the Pentagon did not know precisely how many captives there might be, and declined to identify the unit involved so as not to panic soldiers' families. Some Iraqi soldiers acted as though they wanted to surrender, then opened fire, the official said.

Al-Jazeera quoted unidentified Iraqi officials as saying the Iraqis are using a defensive tactic of falling back, allowing their enemy to overextend itself and become vulnerable to attack behind the lines.

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News of war interrupts spring break

By Rebekah Kleinman & Kristina Dunham

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When classes ended March 14 for spring break, a war with Iraq was only in the back of many students' minds. But today, it could be hard for many people to think of anything else.

Wednesday night, President Bush ordered the start of a U.S. war against Iraq. Initial strikes were enacted to disarm the country, with attempts to kill Iraqi President Saddam Hussein.

Students who spent their spring break across the border faced additional security measures before re-entering the U.S., and although some say they were not concerned about terrorist activity at home, they feared they would not make it back to Arizona.

"I don't think people were that concerned (about the war), they were more concerned about getting into the country," said Michael Tankenoff, an undeclared freshman.

Other students opted to spend their week off rallying against the war.

Arthur Richards, an undeclared sophomore, was arrested in San Francisco for involvement in an anti-war protest where all of the more than 500 protesters were arrested.

Richards was originally in San Francisco with the UA's Alternative Spring Break program, but became involved in the protest after intersections and streets in the city were stopped by the masses of people.

"I intend to be involved in a number of acts of civil disobedience in the weeks to come," he said.

In Tucson, a visible outcry against the war is displayed on "A"

Mountain. The "A," which was painted green last week in honor of St. Patrick's Day, is now black. A group called "People Against Imperialism," claimed responsibility for the action.

Below the mountain, during an anti-war protest Thursday outside the Federal building downtown, community members, including UA students, displayed strong concern for the troops and Iraqis affected by the war.

"There were a couple of different moods," said peace activist Rachel Wilson, a research technician in the Speech and Hearing Laboratory. "There was extreme despair because we had actually invaded Iraq, but also tremendous power to have us all down there."

More than 300 anti-war protesters flooded the downtown area, in addi-

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Anti-war protesters gather in front of the Federal building in downtown Tucson, Thursday, March 20.

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