

Operation Desert

By Mark Crispin Miller

THOSE who watched the gulf war on CNN will recall the general jubilation and relief when, shortly after 10 P.M. on Jan. 16, 1991, all that good news came pouring in: Iraq's airfields wrecked, the Republican Guard decimated, no coalition casualties — and the Scud missile sites "destroyed," Wolf Blitzer told us, "by the U.S. fighter aircraft that went into Iraq in the initial assault."

Viewers who thrilled to those reports may recall their shock and disappointment a day later when it turned out that the Scuds had not been disabled after all — seven of them having just smashed into Tel Aviv, Haifa and other sites in Israel.

While that missile assault seemingly took no lives and caused no inordinate destruction, it did shake the confidence of American viewers and caused a crisis in Israel and Washington. Any retaliation by Israel may well have shattered the U.S.-led coalition. And so in order to keep Israel out of the war and to reassure the viewers at home, the Pentagon undertook an air campaign — "Counter-Scud" — to destroy Iraq's remaining Scud launchers.

The campaign soon yielded gladdening news. On Jan. 20, Gen. H. Norman Schwarzkopf, the commander of the U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf, announced on "Meet the Press" that "we have managed to destroy all of their fixed sites, 30 fixed sites" — a claim he soon repeated. He also reported that "as many as 16 mobile launchers" — of an estimated 20 — had been destroyed. With the bombing of the 30 fixed sites, this brought the total of destroyed launchers to 46.

There was much more. On Jan. 30, U.S. military briefers in Riyadh claimed "at least" three more mobile launchers, then another one on Feb. 10, three more on Feb. 15, five more on Feb. 17, seven more on Feb. 23 and, finally, on Feb. 27, an epic sweep of 16. The reports added up to total victory, and then some: Of the 50 Scud launchers (30 fixed, 20 mobile) Iraq was said by General Schwarzkopf to have possessed when the war started, 81 had reportedly been wiped out by the time the war ended.

All those upbeat claims must make

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the truth now seem incredible. In fact, for all their sorties, the U.S. forces did not destroy a single mobile launcher. "No mobile Scud launchers were destroyed during the war," said Scott Ritter, a former Marine Corps captain and now a ballistic-missile analyst with the United Nations Special Commission charged with supervising the destruction of Iraq's weapons.

The U.S. forces were not much more adept at wiping out Iraq's fixed-site launchers — despite General Schwarzkopf's repeated claims. After the war, the commission determined that Iraq had possessed 28 fixed-site launchers (not 30). Of those, two were in such pristine condition that, according to Douglas Englund, the commission's director for operations and a colonel in the U.S. Army, they were gleaming as if freshly painted. Of the remaining 26, 14 were only slightly damaged, "which means," said Mr. Ritter, "[that] with masking tape I could get those things to go fully erect." Thus Central Command actually managed to destroy only 12 fixed-site launchers.

Moreover, Counter-Scud did virtually no damage to the Scuds themselves. Aside from five non-operation-

Despite the hype, the search for Iraqi Scuds was a bust.

al missiles that were bombed in storage, and those fired during the war, all of Iraq's Scuds remained unscathed. "All evidence indicates," said Mr. Ritter, "that no missiles were destroyed by allied bombing during the war."

Perhaps the most glaring instance of military invention came on Jan. 30 when General Schwarzkopf supervised a major briefing, broadcast worldwide from Riyadh. Describing the destruction of Iraq's Scud missiles, the general turned to Brig. Gen. Buster C. Glosson, a principal architect of the air war, to present "some film that I think will speak for itself."

Poised before a large TV monitor with the legend "Mobile SCUD Destruction 28 Jan 91" glowing on the screen, General Glosson began as if pitching a screenplay: "I will put you

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in the cockpit of an F-15E for an air-to-ground sortie, and ... let you look into the night sky of Iraq as we are attacking mobile Scuds." The monitor showed grainy footage of a long white highway and then a closer shot of seven small, dark objects beside the road. The dark images were "erector launchers — mobile Scuds," said General Glosson. "There are a total of 11 vehicles in this area and all these are already loaded with Scud missiles." There was then a billowing fireball and then another, which the general replayed in slow-motion, "so you can actually see the bombs impacting."

"There's a little argument in the community as to how much damage we did in this film," added General Schwarzkopf. "The minimum damage we did on the 11 vehicles has been confirmed. We have knocked out at least three mobile erector launchers, four Scud missiles on Scud-servicing vehicles and three more Scud-servicing vehicles. The other possibility is that we knocked out as many as seven mobile erector launchers in just that one strike ... I have a high degree of confidence that we're getting better and better at our ability to find them [the Scuds] and — I think this tape

speaks for itself — in our ability to find them and destroy them."

It all made for great TV. But while the footage was authentic, the presentation was sheer fantasy. According to an allied military analyst, who insisted on anonymity, those bombed targets cited by the generals were not Scud launchers but field trucks, probably smuggling fuel from Jordan. The pilots thought that the trucks looked suspicious — three had been driving with their lights out — and therefore vaporized them, first with precision-guided munitions, then with cluster bombs.

Right after the bombing, Lieut. Gen. Charles Horner of the Air Force brought the videotape to a top-level military meeting in Riyadh. Here took place what General Schwarzkopf called "a little argument in the community as to how much damage we did." That argument did not, however, concern the number of bombed launchers, as the general implied, but the more important question of whether the targets had in fact been Scud launchers at all.

According to the military source, who participated in the meeting, two specialists — an expert on Scuds and a photo analyst — insisted that the F-15E's had bombed several trucks. Because of what this source calls the generals' "wishful thinking," the dissenters were overruled — and several other analysts supported the official view. "When you've got a three-star Air Force general, whom you work for, telling you, 'God damn it! These are Scuds!', you have a tendency to say, 'Yes, sir.'"

The dissenters were soon vindicated. The disputed tape was sent on to a U.S. intelligence agency, which used computers to enhance the images. And, said the source, the agency reported back that the vehicles were indeed mere trucks. "But because General Schwarzkopf had gone on national TV and said that they were destroyed Scuds, the official line never changed."

In managing our vision of the war, the military used TV with new sophistication. Although the camera didn't lie, its eerie revelations were distorted by expert speakers schooled in telling us exactly what we wished to hear.

The story of Counter-Scud — like the deaths from "friendly fire," the Iraqi killing fields and the actual failures of the Patriot missile — suggests that the gulf war was not the glittering high-tech triumph the Government concocted for us. It was instead a victory for overpowering force and well-aimed propaganda. □