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Covert Unit Hunted for Iraqi Arms

Amid Raids and Rescue, Task Force 20 Failed To Pinpoint Weapons

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A covert Army Special Forces unit, operating in Iraq since before the war began in March, has played a dominant but ultimately unsuccessful role in the Bush administration's stymied hunt for weapons of mass destruction, according to military and intelligence sources in Baghdad and Washington.

Task Force 20, whose existence and mission are classified, is drawn from the elite Army special mission units known popularly as Delta Force. It sent a stream of initially promising reports to a limited circle of planners and policymakers in Washington pointing to the possibility of weapons finds. The reports helped feed the optimism expressed by President Bush and his senior national security advisers that proscribed weapons would be found.

Thus far, military and intelligence sources said, the expectations are unfulfilled.

Even skeptics of Task Force 20's progress in the weapons hunt speak admiringly of the team's exploits on its other assignments, in which its role was concealed. The team captured Palestinian guerrilla leader Mohammed Abbas in Baghdad in mid-April and the Iraqi scientists nicknamed Mrs. Anthrax and Dr. Germ; it fought a bloody battle behind Iraqi lines to prevent a catastrophic release of floodwaters from the Haditha Dam; and it retrieved Pfc. Jessica Lynch, an Army prisoner of war, from a hospital in Nasiriyah.

Task Force 20's principal assignment is to "seize, destroy, render safe, capture, or recover weapons of mass destruction," according to a Special Operations mission statement. To that end it staged raids ahead of the U.S. and British ground advance to seize suspected caches of nonconventional arms, gathered hundreds of weapons samples and captured as many as half of the "high value" weapons scientists and Baath Party leaders now in U.S. custody. Its role in the search for illicit arms, military and intelligence sources said, turned out to be far more important than that of the search teams operating in the open.

Yet Task Force 20 has come no closer than its widely publicized counterpart, the 75th Exploitation Task Force, to the Bush administration's declared objective. Sources with firsthand knowledge of its mission and personnel, and others with access to its reports, said the team has found no working nonconventional munitions, long-range missiles or missile parts, bulk stores of chemical or biological warfare agents or enrichment technology for the core of a nuclear weapon. The administration cited all those components specifically as part of Iraq's concealed arsenal. The arms were forbidden to Iraq under U.N. Security Council mandate, and Bush used them as his primary argument for war.

The Defense Department has not made public Task Force 20's preliminary findings, which include a cache of land mines that U.S. analysts believed to be designed for dispersal of liquid contents. The mines were an unexpected discovery made more than 24 hours before the war began on March 20. A "direct action" team from Task Force 20 swept into a military base in Iraq's western desert, near Qaim, to preempt the firing of chemical-armed Scud missiles that U.S. intelligence suspected of being at the site. The team killed the Iraqi garrison guards but found no missiles. It found the mines in a bunker nearby.

Subsequent testing, at the Navy's Biological Defense Research Directorate in Silver Spring and at an undisclosed overseas laboratory, persuaded some U.S. government analysts that the mines once held

botulinum toxin, according to two sources who spoke on condition of anonymity. But mines are not considered offensive weapons, and these had deteriorated so much that identification of their contents might be disputed, the sources said. United Nations inspectors reported in 1999 that Iraq had considered biological land mines but had no mines "suitable for filling with liquid BW agents."

"There's extreme caution of judgment," said one military official conversant with the discovery. "They don't have at this juncture great confidence that anything they have found constitutes a smoking gun."

Until very recently, the principal focus of the U.S. Central Command, which directs the search for illegal weapons, was a methodical survey of the 87 top-priority facilities identified in the "integrated master site list" maintained at the Defense Intelligence Agency.

More than 900 specialists and tens of millions of dollars of detection and laboratory equipment were devoted to the survey, and its leaders said publicly that they expected to find large caches of chemical and perhaps other weapons at the sites. That effort, a high-ranking national security official said Wednesday, was "a waste of time."

The Defense Department's new public emphasis is on "people, not buildings," as one officer put it. Some officials said previously that Iraqis would have to lead the United States to the concealed weapons. But it is now clear, from an examination of Task Force 20's work, that the Defense Department and intelligence agencies have already put that strategy to the test for 100 days.

It is possible, as some administration officials assert, that "exploitation" of files and captured Iraqis -- the intelligence term for using one lead to generate another -- may have brought the search to the brink of major results.

"People who say there are no weapons are going to be quite embarrassed within weeks or months, when the material comes out," the high-ranking official said. He said that "there are things we are finding that are in train," under preparation for public disclosure, but he declined to elaborate.

But many of those most knowledgeable about Task Force 20's work, some of whom observed it at close quarters, said there is no sign of decisive evidence in the information gathered to date. They said most of Task Force 20's successes -- seizing files, wanted scientists and potentially "hot samples" of lethal substances -- came early in the war.

Intelligence specialists at the team's Baghdad airport headquarters, where many of the most important Iraqi prisoners are held, are interrogating leaders of the former Iraqi weapons program in cooperation with the CIA and the DIA. But the highest-ranking Iraqi weaponeers -- including Rihab Rashid Taha, known in the West as Dr. Germ, and Huda Salih Mahdi Ammash, a Texas-trained microbiologist dubbed Mrs. Anthrax -- have disclosed almost nothing.

"Most of the very senior people, the [deck of 55] cards people, are saying very little," said a career national security official who is in a position to give an authoritative assessment. "What they are saying is largely BS -- 'I was not very close to Saddam,' 'I don't know anything about WMD.' It's all very orchestrated."

Though the weapons hunt was Task Force 20's primary assignment, some of its greatest successes came in the three additional missions for which it was organized.

One was "direct action" against time-sensitive targets in enemy-held territory. Among the disaster scenarios envisioned by Gen. Tommy R. Franks, the Central Command chief, before the war was the prospect that Iraqi forces might destroy the Haditha Dam, which holds vast floodwaters on the Euphrates River 130 miles northwest of Baghdad. Its demolition would likely have killed a great many Iraqi civilians, "caused an

ecological catastrophe and flooded the Euphrates plain, which was a primary approach to Baghdad" for the 3rd Infantry Division, a knowledgeable officer said.

Task Force 20, including a detachment from the Army's 75th Ranger Regiment, took the dam intact after three to four days of intense combat beginning April 2. It found no evidence that the Iraqis in fact attempted to blow up the dam.

Task Force 20 was also assigned to capture or kill "high-value targets," the U.S. military's euphemism for high-ranking wanted Iraqis. Some, such as Taha and Ammash, played important roles in the weapons program, and others, including Abbas, were sought for unrelated reasons. The team's third mission was prisoner rescue, and it led the mission to retrieve Lynch from her Iraqi hospital bed in early April.

In its weapons hunting assignment, the special mission unit at the core of Task Force 20 had many advantages over the Defense Department's more public search teams. The teams operating openly lacked reliable communications gear, Arabic linguists, on-call helicopters and personnel with experience in Iraq. They often visited sites without knowing the extensive histories of U.N. inspections there. One team leader did not recognize Iraq's second-largest nuclear waste storage facility.

"We do not have the capability to fight for intelligence," the leader of one search team said. "We do not have the capability to fight for materiel. We do not have the capability to take people for questioning against their will. There are other units in the armed services that do that."

Task Force 20 employs the best-trained combat forces in the U.S. military. It can launch a mission with less than an hour's notice and communicate securely from anywhere in Iraq. It is equipped with the most advanced detection technology, including DNA identification of pathogens. Its biological and chemical laboratories, from the Theater Army Medical Laboratory, fit inside a collapsible tent that could be transported on the back of a Humvee. And it has full-time access to stealthy helicopters -- MH-60 Pave Hawks, MH-47 Special Operations Aircraft, and AH/MH-6 Little Bird gunships -- that enabled it to move covertly and defend itself.

Task Force 20 was able to reach most of its early target sites before they could be stripped by Iraqi insiders or looters from the general population. Because of that, the team took many more potentially "hot samples" than the openly operating search units. It has shipped hundreds of samples to Army and Navy laboratories in Maryland, one senior officer said, including about 90 this month. Knowledgeable sources said that none of the samples has produced a definitive hit.

Site survey teams attached to conventional military units, which most often found their targets looted and burned, occasionally learned to their chagrin that mysterious U.S. forces had already been there. Col. Richard McPhee and his subordinates at the conventional headquarters took to calling them "secret squirrels." In one case, Task Force 20 was still working when a survey team arrived. Its leader, who did not provide details of his unit or mission, ordered the survey team to leave.

"They were all in uniform, but some were obviously civilians -- long hair, guts on them, some old guys," said a regular Army officer who was present. "There was no attempt at deconfliction at all," he added, using the military term for avoidance of duplicate effort.

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