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Saddam Pulls Back Elite Forces

Classified Pentagon reports predict that thousands of Iraqi soldiers—scared young men being used as cannon fodder on the front lines—would surrender in the first days of a war in the Persian Gulf.

That information has not trimmed the Pentagon's casualty estimates, which say that tens of thousands of Americans could die in the first few weeks of the conflict.

But the classified reports say many of the Iraqi troops in or near Kuwait have no heart for a fight. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein has put his youngest and least trained troops in Kuwait while he saved the best to protect Iraq.

Central Intelligence Agency reports indicate these low-level troops are easily bribed by the Kuwaiti resistance. The going rate to drive a car across the Saudi Arabia-Kuwait border without being searched is \$5. The possibility that the car carries a gun doesn't worry an Iraqi soldier enough to turn away the bribe.

He is more worried about the 200,000-plus U.S. troops massing outside Kuwait. It is not so much the numbers, but the wild stories that have spooked these teenage Iraqi defenders.

The Kuwaiti rebels have been feeding those soldiers a line about America breeding a special race of men who are more than seven feet tall and have eyes to see in the dark and through walls.

The Iraqi draftees may not be that gullible, but they are afraid. Some have confided to Kuwaitis that they have a "secret weapon" to protect themselves from the Americans. Then they pull white handkerchiefs from their pockets and wave

them in the air. These boys are "the lowest class of reservists that Saddam Hussein has put on the tripwire against opposing forces," one intelligence source told us.

Saddam's crack troops are his Republican Guard divisions, numbering about 140,000 men. They are battle tested and formidable. But they are not in Kuwait. Saddam used 80,000 of the guards to invade Kuwait Aug. 2 and had planned to keep them there. When the United States responded with troops, Iraqi military strategists looked at their maps and realized they didn't want their best and brightest on the front lines in Kuwait where they could be decimated in the opening days of a battle.

About two weeks after the invasion, Saddam pulled the Republican Guards back to Iraq. About 80,000 of them are fanned out in a line of defense, and another 60,000 are in Baghdad to protect Saddam from a coup or from a U.S. paratrooper assault.

Iraq boasts of 955,000 soldiers, but intelligence reports say most have never seen battle and are roughly equivalent in readiness to U.S. National Guard forces. Saddam said he would raise at least 100,000 more troops after the invasion, but his nation of 16 million people simply does not have enough men to keep that promise.

Although the Iraqi claim of having nearly 1 million men under arms and battle hardened is a lie, U.S. military planners don't think a war with Iraq would be a cakewalk. As we reported recently, the Pentagon estimates that as many as 30,000 Americans could die in the first 20 days of a war.

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