Highway of Death, the result of American forces bombing retreating Iraqi forces, Kuwait, 1991



Highway of Death, 1991.

On Sunday 24, February 1991, allied forces launched a combined ground, air and sea assault which overwhelmed the Iraqi army within 100 hours. By 26 February, Iraq had announced it was withdrawing its forces from Kuwait, but still refused to accept all the UN resolutions passed against it. Iraqi tanks, armored vehicles, trucks and troops fleeing the allied onslaught formed huge queues on the main road north from Kuwait to the southern Iraqi city of Basra. Allied forces bombed them from the air, killing hundreds of troops in their vehicles in what became known as the "Highway of Death". The scenes of devastation on the road are some of the most recognizable images of the war, and were publicly cited as a factor in President George H. W. Bush's decision to declare a cessation of hostilities the next day.

The devastating attack resulted in the destruction and abandonment of more than a thousand vehicles on Highway 80 north of Al Jahra (the official 'Highway of Death'), and several hundred more on the lesser known Highway 8 to Basra. Between 1,400 and 2,000 vehicles were hit or abandoned on the main Highway 80 north of Al Jahra. Several hundred more littered the lesser known Highway 8 to the major southern Iraq military stronghold of Basra. US planes trapped the long convoys by disabling vehicles in the front, and at the rear, and then pounded the resulting traffic jams for hours. "It was like shooting fish in a barrel", said one US pilot.

This bombing was done with cluster bombs and incendiary rounds from A-10s. A cluster bomb is a weapon containing multiple explosive submunitions. This spreads the destruction over a much wider area and doesn't leave a single huge crater behind. Anybody within the strike area of the cluster munitions, be they military or civilian, is very likely to be killed or seriously injured.



On the inland highway to Basra is mile after mile of burned, smashed, shattered vehicles of every description – tanks, armored cars, trucks, autos, fire trucks,

March 18, 1991

In hindsight it's clear that these troops were totally routed and didn't pose any threat to the coalition forces at this point in the game. Also it should be emphasized that they were retreating. However, retreating does not equal surrendered. If they didn't surrender then they were enemy combatants. Moreover retreating or "falling back" is considered a tactical movement. The vast majority of the casualties of war occur in the retreat, and so effectively the object of battle is to force the opposing army into retreat, at which point you deal the true "'death blow".

There are two factors going on here that aren't really well understood when people discuss the Highway of Death. First of all, Iraqi army was the fourth largest army in the world and had a lot of equipment that was perceived as pretty good by 1991 standards. Reasonable people were talking about the US taking 10,000 casualties during a fight that would last a couple of weeks. In the context of a fight where you're expecting to lose thousands of troops it makes a lot of sense to smash enemy military hardware when you can do it on the cheap. Second, the people who had real decision-making power didn't really have time to digest what was going on and make changes. The whole ground war only lasted four days and a fifth day would have probably meant the fall of Saddam Hussein's government. The people in charge were trying to respond to a situation that was very different from what they had initially anticipated.



A long line of vehicles, including destroyed Iraqi Army Russian-made T-62 tanks and trucks stand abandoned by fleeing Iraqi troops.



Iraq accepted UN Resolution 660 and offered to withdraw from Kuwait through Soviet mediation on February 21, 1991.



Most of the vehicles were abandoned by the time they were struck. While high casualty counts are upwards of 10,000 for the entire battle, low end estimates are only around 200-300.



Civilian and Iraqi military vehicles litter a section of the highway attacked by Allied aircraft during Operation Desert Storm.

Interesting fact:

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  The final tally is probably in the low 1000s.

  In total between 1800-2700 vehicles were destroyed.