

# On Death Road, Iraqis least of worries

NORTHERN SAUDI ARABIA — As the air war and sporadic ground clashes proceed, seemingly endless convoys of allied military vehicles continue to move north and then spread west along the border with Kuwait and Iraq.

This massive supply effort clogs roads everywhere, but a significant part of it traverses a desolate highway so dangerous it has gained a nickname: Death Road.

The name does not come from Iraqi military attacks, which so far have not reached the road, but from ordinary traffic accidents. Neither the traffic nor the accidents on Death Road, however, are ordinary.

While they waited near the eastern end of Death Road for repairs to their truck Saturday, three Army National Guard truck drivers said a two-lane highway, one of the major supply routes for the allied buildup, has become legendary among those who must use it. They said authorities have acknowledged six deaths on Death Road since the Persian Gulf War started, but they believed a lot more have died there.

"It sure keeps us awake," said one of the drivers, a Howe, Texas, native who calls himself Road Warrior.

"Death Road, I seen one (accident) the other day I couldn't believe," he said.

Road Warrior (the drivers refused to give their names on instruction of their superiors) claimed the mixture of a curving, narrow highway, long convoys and drivers of all nationalities has led to so many fatal accidents body disposal has taken an odd turn.

His claim could not be confirmed, and may be apocryphal, but it expresses the impact Death Road has had on its users.

"The way the Saudi people do it, they just take the bodies out in the desert and burn them," Road Warrior said. "We've had to tell them, 'Look, if there's any



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On the Scene

desert, Death Road offers nothing more sinister than bleakness. Flat desert and an occasional group of camels or sheep do not strike terror in the heart. As it continues west, though, the road begins to narrow and the desert starts to rise. The highway begins to curve toward passes in a series of ridges across the desert.

As the road rises and constricts, convoys of tank carriers, busses full of soldiers, fuel tankers and troop lorries go slow in both directions. Civilians who usually drive the road at high speed become impatient, and on Saturday they repeatedly turned the harrowing, patchwork two-lane highway into a swerving three-lane free-for-all. Passing is often accomplished to the right, through the roadside desert.

The combination of vehicular insanity, wartime urgency and bleak isolation has, oddly enough, created a sort of esprit de corps among convoy drivers. At an ageless truck stop scrubbed of any speck of paint by sand and wind, six other National Guard truck drivers were taking a break from Death Road Saturday afternoon.

They were from Oklahoma and would not give their names. They were 100 miles from nowhere but they were not going to let it get them down.

"Where you from? Texas?" one asked. "Welcome to World War IV."

"You got any pull with Congress, man?" another chimed in. "We've been here three months. Get us outta here."

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Americans, don't burn the bodies.'"  
As it begins its course across the

"If I wanted to be full-time Army I would have joined the sucker," a third Okie said.

The drivers were delivering a set of wooden shower stalls, a load of gasoline and a fork lift to a base just a few miles from the Iraqi border. Because they had to travel Death Road to do it, they were going to enjoy life while they could.

One way to do so is to eat food other than the despised MREs — meals ready to eat provided by the U.S. military.

The guardsmen had been able to find Top Shelf prepared meals and M&M candy while they were south of Death Road.

"C'mon, let's rock and roll," the lead driver said, starting up his truck. "Be careful. It gets a lot worse up here."

True to prediction, the highway got worse. Heading west, it got narrower, and rougher. Horribly wrecked cars and trucks were scattered everywhere off to the side. Eventually, the road crested and came down into a small Arab town overrun with Saudi and American soldiers and vehicles. The convoys were so thick soldiers had to act as traffic police.

Ordinarily, the town could not have been home to more than 2,000 or 3,000 people. It had a couple of mosques, a few hundred one-story, sand-blasted houses and a street or two of worn-out businessfronts. The only hotel had a herd of goats grazing next to it.

There was, however, one pay phone on the main street. Standing in line were some Ohio National Guardsmen, also part of a transportation unit. They had been in Saudi Arabia only a month, but they had advice for anyone wanting to head further west.

"Once you get further up, it's pretty rough. The tanks have torn it up pretty good," Spec. Brian Koch of Ashland Ohio said. "There's accidents everywhere. Be careful."