US military fears casualties on its long supply routes (Kuwait)

As the pilots of the US army's elite helicopter division prepare here for their role in an air blitz on Iraq, support crew are preparing for what some military officials say is an even more dangerous journey.

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Ground convoys of heavy equipment, tanks, artillery, food, fuel and thousands of troops will start creeping north over the border from Kuwait soon after the war begins as the army attempts to push quickly towards Baghdad.

The aim of the convoys linked to the 101st Airborne Division will be to supply and maintain the helicopters and seize forward operating bases after the area has been cleared of enemy dangers from the air.

The land supply routes are expected to eventually extend for hundreds of kilometres as the military gets closer to the Iraqi capital.

Although enemy fire and landmines are obvious dangers, those involved in organising the convoys are more concerned with the potentially fatal accidents that will inevitable occur as the convoy grows.

Chief warrant officer Ryan Newman served as a Black Hawk helicopter medical evacuation pilot in the 1991 Gulf War and recalled on Monday the problems created then by the convoy that built up on a two-lane road inside Saudi Arabia that ran parallel with the Iraqi border.

"You had bumper-to-bumper vehicles for a hundred miles and there were a lot of accidents," Newman, who is now the safety officer with the 101st 6th Battalion, told AFP.

"Trucks carrying an M1 tank would rear-end a large cargo vehicle carrying ammunition or food." Newman said he picked up no American combat casualties during the 1991 Gulf War, but he was kept busy attending to the accidents that occurred in the convoy.

"When you have got thousands of trucks and hundreds of thousands of pieces of equipment moving around, you are going to have accidents no matter how hard you try (not to)," he said.

The heavy machinery that will be transported north with the 101st Airborne Division is enough to make anyone concerned with road safety wince.

One of the most intimidating vehicles is the Heavy Expanded Military Tactical Truck, which weighs 10 tons by itself.

It is capable of carrying 11 tons while pulling another 11 tons in a trailer, making it a staggering 32-ton machine.

Travelling in between these road beasts at speeds of up to 40 km an hour will be tankers carrying thousands of litres of fuel and huge Palletised Loading System trucks that commonly transport ammunition.

Newman said the biggest factor involved in causing accidents would be driver fatigue.

"We are looking at hundreds, potentially thousands, of vehicles travelling hundreds of miles," he said.

"You get a guy who is fatigued and his reactions are slower and he's following a vehicle and he doesn't stop, the potential for rear ends increases." Dust storms that plague the desert regions of northern Kuwait and southern Iraq will also add to the danger because they reduce visibility between the vehicles in the convoys. "The convoys tend to close up (in a dust storm);" Newman said. "That's acceptable if the convoy slows down, but if it doesn't then you increase the possibility of accidents."

Enemy fire is another factor being considered in regards to safety for the convoys, although this risk is reduced by the US military's long-standing tactic of eliminating dangers through an air assault before sending in the ground forces.

The 101st's Aviation Brigade assistant logistician, Maj Joseph Crocitto, said infantry soldiers would also protect the convoys from any localised firing.

"We are going to mitigate the risk of enemy fire by using reconnaissance aircraft and the cavalry," Crocitto said.

Newman said landmines would not be a problem if the convoys stayed on the routes designated by military leaders as safe.

"[But] there's tremendous danger if you stray off the path that you are supposed to be on," he said.
Aside from the more dramatic dangers for the long convoys, basic factors such as food and water are also vital in determining whether the thousands of soldiers reached their destination safely.

"Just (supplying) the food and water is a monumental task by itself," Newman said. "Then when you throw in the ammunition and fuel, the scope is just enormous." Crocito said logisticians also had to ensure vehicles that broke down could be repaired quickly or towed away, and that refuelling was carried out smoothly.

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