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'The Yank opened up. He had absolutely no regard for human life. He was a cowboy out on a jolly'

Patrick Barkham meets the "friendly fire" victims

THREE wounded British soldiers described yesterday how they survived a terrifying attack by an American anti-tank aircraft that killed one of their troop and destroyed two armoured vehicles.

One of the survivors criticised the American pilot for showing "no regard for human life" and accused him of being a cowboy who had gone out on a jolly.

Another survivor said that he had stumbled out of the burning wreckage of his light tank and waved frantically to the pilot of the low-flying A10 to try to halt his "friendly fire" as he returned to attack again.

The blunder, 35 miles north of Basra, left one soldier missing, presumed dead, and another in intensive care on the hospital ship *RFA Argus*. A sixth Household Cavalry soldier escaped without injury when the two Scimitar light tanks were destroyed.


Lieutenant Alex MacEwen, 25, Lance Corporal of Horse Steven Gerrard, 33, and Trooper Chris Finney, 18, were flown home last night with shrapnel wounds and burns. Before leaving the *Argus* they spoke of their bewilderment and anger that, despite flying very low over their heads, the A10 pilot apparently failed to recognise the coalition identification markings on their British-made tanks. Another vehicle in the five-strong convoy patrolling the marshes near the meeting of the Euphrates and Shatt al-Arab rivers bore a large Union Jack.

"All this kit has been provided by the Americans. They've said if you put this kit on you won't get shot," LCoH Gerrard said from his hospital bed on the *Argus*. "We can identify a friendly vehicle from 1,500 metres, yet you've got an A10 with advanced technology and he can't use a thermal sight to identify whether a tank is a friend or foe. It's ridiculous.

"Combat is what I've been trained for. I can command my vehicle. I can keep it from being attacked. What I have not been trained to do is look over my shoulder to see whether an American is

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shooting at me.”

The two Scimitars, followed by two armoured engineers' vehicles and another Scimitar light tank, were on a “recce” of a road northwest of al-Dayr, 25 miles north of Basra in southern Iraq, on Friday. After coming under fire from Iraqi artillery, they were instructed to investigate a shanty town when another light reconnaissance tank troop captured several white pick-up trucks laden with armed Iraqis.

Troop leader Lieutenant MacEwen — who now has special plastic bags tied round his hands to treat his burns — described how the convoy tensed, fearing an ambush, as they watched villagers waving white flags approach from behind a large bank.

“My heart started pounding,” he said. “You could see the white flags above the bank, but you didn’t know whether they had any intention of surrendering or ambushing us.”

LCoH Gerrard, the commander of the leading tank, described “frightened and curious” villagers waving white flags. “I stuck my hand up and waved at them. I could see they were frightened. I felt sorry for them.” Suddenly, LCoH Gerrard heard the distinctive, relentless roar of an A10’s anti-tank gunfire. “I will never forget that noise as long as I live. It is a noise I never want to hear again,” he said.

“There was no gap between the bullets. I heard it and I froze. The next thing I knew the turret was erupting with white light everywhere, heat and smoke. I didn’t even have time to close my eyes or blink. I don’t know why I’ve still got hair or eyebrows.

“I felt I was going to burn to death. I just shouted, ‘Reverse, reverse, reverse’. My headset had come off. My gunner was screaming, ‘Get out, get out.’ I was out of the turret in milliseconds. How I got out of that hole I don’t know. Then I saw the A10 coming again and I just ran.

“I’ll never forget that A10. He was about 50 metres off the ground. He circled, because he can turn on a ten-pence. He came back around. He was no more than 1,000 metres away when he started his attack run. He was about 500 metres away when he started firing.

“On the back of one of the engineers’ vehicles there was a Union Jack. It’s about 18 inches wide by about 12 inches. For him to fire his weapons I believe he had to look through his magnified optics. How he could not see that Union Jack I don’t know. It was like *Platoon*. I was stood there on a little bank 25 metres away from my tank waving.”

The front two Scimitars, packed with ammunition, grenades, rifle rounds and diesel tanks, exploded into flames. Lance Corporal of Horse Matty Hull, 25, did not escape.

Trooper Finney was injured when the A10 returned for a second run. He said: “The plane came over again and it started shooting. I saw sparks coming from the ground or my leg. It didn’t hurt, it felt like someone had kicked me in the back of my leg. I felt warm down the back of my leg. Blood was spurting everywhere. I

thought I was dead.”

LCoH Gerrard criticised the A10 for shooting when there were civilians so close to the tanks. He said: “There was a boy of about 12 years old. He was no more than 20 metres away when the Yank opened up. There were all these civilians around. He had absolutely no regard for human life. I believe he was a cowboy.

“There were four or five that I noticed earlier and this one had broken off and was on his own when he attacked us. He’d just gone out on a jolly.

“ I’m curious about what’s going to happen to the pilot. He’s killed one of my friends and he’s killed him on the second run.”

Lieutenant MacEwen described how he saw the A10 return after he stumbled, burning, from his flaming tank and ran for the cover of a reed bed on the marshes. “There was a horrible smell of what I thought was something burning, but then I discovered it was a bit of my own eyebrows. That lingered with me for a good hour or two.”

He added: “After this I am quite pleased to be going home. ‘Blue-on-blue’ has always been one of my biggest fears. It is something that my friends and family joked about. ‘Don’t worry about the Iraqis, it’s the Americans you want to watch.’ The proof is in the pudding really.”