



BETWEEN A COUGH AND A HARD PLACE

Humanity Wrap by Roger Beaumont.

The relationship between the media and the military in the Iraq war has best been described as "the unspeakable in pursuit of the incomprehensible". But then, more and more journalism is opinion. Listen to any of the correspondents in the desert and you will find that what they say is nine parts opinion and surmise, and one part fact. Exactly like a Thai government enquiry into one of their own on corruption charges.

Television reporters are finding ever more baroque ways of telling us they don't know anything. There are equipment nerds who just want to be next to large "bangs", and empathists who want to tell you how they feel about how they suppose other people they can't see are feeling. There are gossip strategists, and sound-bite Hemingways - "millions of hacks embedded in mini bar!" - and there is also real courage and sincere journalistic commitment, but there isn't much journalism.

The anti-war brigade has been sustained by anti-Americanism, which explains why the BBC and the anti-war press have seized on every small setback as potentially a vast misfortune. The BBC is fighting a solidly dull map-room war, with plenty of studio speculation from Jane's "Fighting Swivel Chairs".

But opinionated journalists have nothing on ignorant ministers. From Sky News: "Umm Qasr is a city similar to Southampton," UK defence minister Geoff Hoon said in the House of the Commons. "He's either never been to Southampton, or he's never been to Umm Qasr," says a British infantryman patrolling Umm Qasr. Another soldier added: "There's no beer, no prostitutes and people are shooting at us. It's more like Portsmouth."

Forces Fighting Talk. Embugged: Embedded reporter who forgets he/she is a journalist.

For those of us watching in bed to those of us watching under the kitchen table, it was just one click from the dullsville Oscars to shock and awe. In Hollywood the men wore black ties (Ben Affleck said he'd leave it to his stylist to decide), the 101st Airborne wore camouflage, the Iraqis wore brick dust, and I was wearing nothing at all. It's four in the morning and those damn sirens keep waking me up, and I've been looking at a picture of green blobs for half an hour and it's beginning to resemble those ink spots Freudians use to ascertain lunacy. Still, miracles are not unknown, especially in the Middle East, which invented them.

Numbers about SARS now dominate our days. Some are pumped up, others dumbed down, others blatantly altered. A friend in Shanghai is now seriously worried. "I don't believe the numbers. It's classic Chinese denial. What's worse is that you have no idea how much people cough and spit in this city." There goes the five day mall crawl package to Yuxi.

From a historical perspective, there have been remarkably few casualties both civilian and military in Iraq. But there is no doubt about the numbers on the Somme on July 1, 1916, where the British suffered 57,470 casualties in the first 24 hours after gaining a measly 1.5 km. Despite this, General Haig pressed on with the attack until November 19. When the offensive was

eventually called off, the British had lost 420,000 men and were still three miles short of the villages of Bapaume and Serre, part of their first day objectives.

Aswanky new luxury townhouse development for the local celebocracy is offering a "Total Solutions Enhanced Concierge Service". A what? On a scale of embarrassing moments from the real estate sector, this comes just underneath having your phone ring the theme from "Bonanza" in the last act of "King Lear".

We can only guess what would now be filling the newspapers if coalition forces were not advancing on Baghdad. Perhaps more space would have been given to the drug suspect who "might have committed suicide" by submerging his head in a toilet water tank at Hua Mark police prison



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(bollocks). Or, how about the Norwegian villagers who reported the bright flare of a UFO only to learn that what in fact they had witnessed was a cat exploding in a fireball after climbing an electricity pylon. Or, about our politicians who lay down the laws and break 'em with impunity - and immunity. If that wasn't bad enough, my motorcycle driver is having a rough time; his parents had to sell their pigs to pay the electricity bill.