Persian Gulf war a study in contrasts, contradic

NORTHEAST SAUDI ARABIA — In many ways, this is a war of odd contrasts, of the modern and the primitive, of safety and death, of have and have-not.

After two weeks of high-tech aerial bombardment of Iraqi forces by the allies, shown to the public in videotapes that have led some to compare the war to a video game, the last few days have seen the most direct, vicious sort of street-to-street ground fighting.

John Mecklin

On the Scene

The images are no longer only of pinpoint, laser-guided bombs. As journalists are allowed to enter Khafji, the Saudi coastal town where some of the fiercest ground fighting has occurred, pool reports on the reality of death are filtering in. One report by a Newsweek correspondent noted that the charred skeleton of a Saudi soldier was heat-seared into the driver seat of an armored personnel carrier that was still smoldering Friday. The blackened corpse of a second soldier lay draped in death, half-in, half-out of the destroyed vehicle.

The contrasts of war occur over a very short distance. Close combat between troops who have lived in the sand and isolation of the desert for months is taking place just a three-hour drive from the modern comforts of the Dhahran area. While soldiers at the front huddle in bunkers to avoid artillery strikes and, more mundanely, attempt to keep sand out of their toothpaste as they brush in the morning, some servicemen and women live in government apartments and climate-controlled tents in the rear.

On a drive back from areas near the front lines Friday, a U.S. Marine waved from the side of a highway. He had just driven out of the desert with a disheveled, dusty Kuwaiti soldier. The soldier needed a ride to town.

"He doesn't like our lifestyle," the Marine explained.

During the ride south, the Kuwaiti, 1st Lt. Shaher Al-Enzie, expanded the explanation somewhat. He was attached to the Marines as a translator, he said, but he actually is a Kuwaiti Air Force mechanic. In some vague way he could not make clear in English the fact that he was Air Force and did not match with the needs of the Marines. It became much more obvious that he would never have been much help as a translator; questions have to be asked of him two or three ways before he understands.

Although disheveled, Al-Enzie was a genuinely nice guy. On the drive south to Jubail, the port city where he would report to his Kuwaiti colonel, he offered continuous thanks and apologies for the troubles involved in giving him transportation from the front. Whatever anyone else wanted was "no problem" for him.

At checkpoints on the way south, his cheerful nature made continuous problems. The checkpoints were manned by Saudis who ordinarily wave Western journalists through with little inspection or delay. At each checkpoint, however, the 30-year-old Al-Enzie insisted on announcing from the back seat that he was Kuwaiti, even when sentries had not bothered to examine other occupants of the car. These announcements made the Saudi sentries suspicious and they examined the Kuwaiti's identification card at great length as he explained in Arabic and said, "No problem," repeatedly in English.

After passing three desert highway checkpoints, Al-Enzie gave directions into Jubail and, it turned out, the Holiday Inn there. Passing through large oil refining complexes, the breachfront hotel eventually was reached. The disheveled and dusty Kuwaiti soldier took his belongings, including his M-16 rifle, from the trunk and insisted on buying tea for all at the hotel. First, however,
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Inside, just two hours from the carnage at Khafji, servicemen and women and civilians in Western clothes and traditional Arab robes sat about the lobby. It was hardly the lobby of an ordinary Holiday Inn. The floors were marble. The lighting came from huge crystal chandeliers. Decorative plants were strewn about in profusion. The only apparent concessions to the war also were decorative. Two colorful parakeets hopped about in a cage just inside the front door. They would warn of a chemical weapons attack if they ever stopped hopping about.

Al-Enzie bought coffee or tea for everyone, paying in U.S. dollars. It was no problem, he insisted. His colonel was not in, and Al-Enzie said he had to go to his accommodations elsewhere in Jubail. He had been in the desert four days and wanted to get cleaned up. He passed out literature from the Kuwaiti information desk set up in the lobby, then he left in a hail of thanksgiving.

In the cool, elegant lobby, while the coffee and tea and eclairs were being finished, the television news announcers said the Iraqis apparently were continuing to mass armor and troops in the desert along the Saudi-Kuwaiti border. In ordinary times, it might take three or four hours to get up there by car.