

I'm not quite sure why this has come to mind today. Maybe it's because I attended a recent ceremony marking the 35th anniversary of the end of active operations in the Gulf; Op Granby to the Brits, Desert Storm to our major allies.

But I've been refreshing my memory on something that happened in that conflict. A strategic bridge over the wide Euphrates river was repeatedly attacked by coalition aircraft because it was part of an Iraqi military supply line, and was therefore a legitimate target even though it was close to a population centre.

On 14 February 1991 a Royal Air Force Tornado GR1 aircraft fired two laser-guided bombs which were aimed at the bridge. Due to a malfunction, at least one bomb failed to pick up the guidance and continued past the intended aiming point and instead struck a crowded marketplace, killing between 50 and 150 non-combatants and wounding many more.

Civilian casualties caused by coalition air operations were already under intense scrutiny, as the incident happened only the day after the widely publicised Al-Amiriyah shelter bombing in Baghdad (13 February 1991) by U.S. aircraft. Nevertheless, the facts of the Fallujah mistake being clear, the RAF spokesman Group Captain David Henderson issued a statement within hours that the bomb had malfunctioned and failed to follow its laser guidance, and acknowledged that the RAF had made an error.

This acknowledgement was widely reported by British media and praised shortly afterwards in the House of Commons. Other than a few of the usual suspects describing the event as 'an atrocity', later criticism by organisations such as Human Rights Watch concentrated on the fact that so-called "smart weapons" such as laser-guided bombs were not as reliable as they were being often portrayed at the time, and should therefore be employed with more caution.

I remember much of this because at the time I was serving with British forces preparing in the desert for the coming ground war. We had every reason to welcome any damage done to Iraqi military forces and their ability to manoeuvre and resupply. But in this case the technical error was clear and the presentational damage would have been far greater if it had not been admitted. The RAF's prompt statement seemed to me and, I think, many of my comrades as exactly right.

Of course the circumstances and responsibility (if any) for unintended civilian deaths can be far more complicated than what happened at Fallujah. Investigation can be challenging amid the fog of war; 'the first report is always wrong'. Nevertheless, knee-jerk denial without the facts can do far more reputational damage than an honest undertaking to investigate.