

While 1st Marine Division had been reducing the *Baghdad Division* near Al Kut, the Army's 3d Infantry Division, with the 101st Airborne Division in trace, had continued its march up through the western desert, reducing resistance in and around the cities of Najaf, Karbala, and As Samawah. The relationship between these two divisions was not unlike the relationship between 1st Marine Division and Task Force Tarawa, with the heavier force in the lead and the lighter force securing the lines of communication. By 3 April, the 3d was on the outskirts of Baghdad, ready to move on Saddam International Airport, soon to be renamed Baghdad International Airport, or "BIAP," as it came to be known to most American military personnel. (General McKiernan viewed the airport as one of the enemy system's key nodes, both as a symbol and as a useful piece of real estate; he placed considerable emphasis on seizing it and planting his own flag on it.) On the same day, the Marine division was once again on the march toward Baghdad, from the southeast. Along the way, the 5th Marines fought one of the fiercest engagements of the war on Route 6 near the town of Al Aziziyah.

The enemy was a mix of *Republican Guard* troops, *Saddam Fedayeen*, and foreign "volunteer" fighters from Syria, Egypt, and other Arab countries. During the day, the division lost an M1A1 Abrams tank to a mobility kill and three more to bad luck, transmission problems and mud, making it one of the worst days of the war for Marine armor. Nevertheless, there was no stopping the advancing Marines, or the tank recovery teams, for that matter, which overcame significant obstacles to get the tanks off the battlefield and back to friendly lines.³⁰⁹

By 5 April, the 3d Infantry Division was ready to launch the first of its "Thunder Runs" from the west, its version of the "in-and-out" raids into Baghdad. There was some hard fighting on the way in and out of town. As usual the losses were disproportionate. The Army lost one M1A1 Abrams, but the Iraqi losses were far greater. At the same time, other units from the 3d Division moved west and north to isolate Baghdad.

One of the most amazing things about the "Thunder Runs" is that they, and subsequent forays into Baghdad, were filmed by television crews and broadcast, in real time or near real time, almost as if they were sporting events. But not everyone could watch. The frontline commanders at the regimental level and below did not have much information about what was going on in the "outside" world, the world outside their regiment, perhaps their division; there was a "digital divide" between them and their seniors in

the rear, where the amount of information available was simply staggering. The more senior headquarters had a staff with a mind-numbing array of computers, televisions, telephones, and the like. The CFLCC command center at Camp Doha, Kuwait, looked something like mission control in Houston, an amphitheater with enormous screens at the front of the room and rows of desks with computer terminals and telephones. The I Marine Expeditionary Force Main was in the "Bug," the somewhat less comprehensive but still very well connected portable command post. Television sets tuned to news channels were ubiquitous at the higher headquarters, in offices, mess halls, gymnasiums, and berthing spaces. It was almost literally impossible to get away from televised images of the war on the Cable News Network or on the Fox News Channel, whose embedded reporters were popular both with military audiences and with the troops themselves.³¹⁰

On this, the "high" side of the digital divide, there was, arguably, too much information available. It was difficult to know which data stream to enter, how to extract what was relevant, and how to combine streams. Assessment played an important role in managing data. At I MEF, the future operations section was charged with assessing progress toward goals and laying out upcoming decision points. In the vernacular, the calculus was here is where we are, here is where we are trying to go, and here is where we will have to make a decision about the route we need to take in order to get there.³¹¹ At CFLCC, General McKiernan and his chief of staff, General Robert Blackman, had organized the staff by function rather than by traditional Napoleonic section, and created the effects board in order to think of the battle in terms of the effects they wanted to have, rather than the objectives they wanted to seize. Then they instituted the battle update assessment (BUA) in place of the battle update brief (BUB). Virtually every day during the fight, either the commanding general or one of his principal staff officers chaired this virtual staff meeting, which was an attempt to manage the data flow and distill it into a useful form. Run by the CFLCC staff, it was conducted by secure video teleconference and included as participants senior officers (usually flag rank) from all of the major subordinate commands. Eschewing the awkward-sounding acronym "BUB," General McKiernan had opted for the more euphonious "BUA" because he wanted to make the point that the meeting was not about information as much as assessment. He described the battle update assessment as an attempt to lay the foundation for "decision su-

Command in the Information Age

At senior headquarters there has probably never been so much incoming information as there was during the Iraq War, whether it came from official sources or from unofficial sources such as Cable News Network or Fox News. Putting more information into the hands of senior commanders looks, at first glance, like setting the conditions for micromanagement. But generally that did not happen. First, most seniors seemed to exercise restraint the majority of the time. Lieutenant General David D. McKiernan, for one, understood he was there to shape the fight and then leave the details up to subordinate commanders. Second, even if he had wanted to micromanage, the pace of operations generally outstripped the pace of information, especially of good information. General McKiernan commented that since first reports were so often wrong, it was better not to act on them. Finally, even if a higher headquarters had good information and wanted to micromanage, it was often difficult to do so, especially if the subordinate command was moving or was at or below the digital divide. Communications with mobile units or units in built-up areas were just not that good.

Even routine management was difficult. The staffs who tried to stay ahead of the curve and “paper the war” often failed, at least between 20 March and 9 April. Events happened faster than anyone could write old-fashioned operations orders, especially fragmentary orders, before they were overtaken by events. One of the operations officers at the 1st Marine Division, Lieutenant Colonel Paul J. Kennedy, commented that the operations tempo was such that he could not wait for the actual fragmentary orders, but found it possible to work off the preliminary warning orders put out by I MEF.* This was even true at lower levels. At Regimental Combat Team 5, Colonel Joseph F. Dunford found he could not control his command through any kind of systematic planning process after the Opening Gambit.** Interestingly, the special operations community appeared to have an unusually long planning cycle, up to 96 hours, which did not make for happy customers at I MEF. As one senior commander commented, “If they cannot plan and execute any faster, we are

going to have a lot of highly trained guys doing flutter kicks in the rear during ops.”* Along the same lines, comments were made about the process for generating Coalition Forces Air Component Command sorties being far too slow.

The result was more and more instances of “healthy,” straightforward command and control. Imaginative commanders brought “new” products on line to replace the older, barely manageable processes that looked in many ways like a return to the basics. Effects-based planning was one such product. When it worked as intended, General McKiernan’s battle update assessment was another. Written or “audible,” most operations orders in Operation Iraqi Freedom were about desired effects and reflected the commander’s intent. Speaking for division, the operations officer during Operation Iraqi Freedom, Lieutenant Colonel Clarke R. Lethin, made a pitch for communicating that intent:

How many times have we seen commander’s intent developed by the staff, lethargically reviewed by the commander, and then delivered in a briefing without the least bit of emotion? [By contrast,] the division fought by [traditional] commander’s intent—a statement of intent that reflected the commander’s personality, intuition, sense of purpose, and then [was] delivered to every Marine and sailor in the division.**

Lethin could have been speaking for I MEF as a whole. General James Conway and his subordinates made distinct efforts to communicate their intent, in person, to the extent possible, to every member of their commands. This was one reason for their series of “go-to-war” speeches. They did much the same after the force crossed the line of departure. Although General Conway could have commanded I MEF from Camp Commando in Kuwait, he believed it was necessary to stay forward, to see for himself what was going on, and to meet with his commanders face-to-face. He left the staff work, and the increasingly time-consuming Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) battle update assessments, to others and, as his forces advanced deeper into Iraq, moved

*LtCol Paul J. Kennedy intvw, 6Nov03 (MCHC, Quantico, VA).

**Col Joseph F. Dunford intvw, 17May03 (CAT, Studies and Analysis Division, MCCDC).

*Quoted in LtCol Mark M. Tull intvw, 18May03 (CAT, Studies and Analysis Division, MCCDC).

**LtCol Clarke R. Lethin, “1st Marine Division and Operation Iraqi Freedom,” *Marine Corps Gazette*, Feb04, pp. 20, 22.



Photo courtesy of 1st Marine Division

The typical forward combat operations center was fully staffed with immediate access to both classified and unclassified digital and analog communications.

the I MEF Forward command post first to Jalibah on 24 March and then to An Numaniyah in early April. Just before the assault on Baghdad, Conway very nearly succeeded in his attempts to visit every unit in 1st and 7th Marines, which were about to engage in the difficult task of subduing the capital city. Almost like a commander in the U.S. Civil War, he wanted to see, and be seen by, his Marines before the battle.* In similar fashion, General James Mattis kept his finger on the pulse of his division during the battle. He separated himself from the “noise” of staff work and, in search of a purer form of warfighting, set off on the battlefield with a tiny retinue and a cell phone. He prosecuted the war as much through personal contact with his commanders, either face-to-face or on the telephone, as through staff channels.

Those who did not meet personally with General Mattis could read his intents messages that were posted, sometimes daily, on the division Web site on the SIPRnet for all with access to this classified network to see. These messages were short, one or two pages long, and written in plain English, outlining the situation as Mattis and his staff saw it and telling readers what the division intended to accomplish. The same was true of some of the slides presented at the battle update assessments and posted on the CFLCC website; the best slides were carefully drafted and approved by the commander himself, containing “balloons” clearly highlighting his intent. Many staff officers

began the day by reviewing what was posted on the CFLCC website and those of higher, adjacent and subordinate commands. One staff officer, Colonel Ronald J. Johnson, Brigadier General Richard F. Natonski’s operations officer, commented that posting information about Task Force Tarawa on the web enabled I MEF to keep track of the task force and simplified relations between the two commands.*

Transmitting products like the intents messages and the battle update assessment slides, the SIPRnet web made this one of the most democratic wars in the nation’s history in the sense that if you had access to a classified computer, as most staff officers and commanders did, you could be empowered by information that in the past was held only by a few officers. The availability of information could make operations that much more efficient. Staffs with access to the same data could plan and operate at the same time without going through time-consuming coordination rituals. Gone were the days when planners had to work in isolation and then pushed products up their stovepipes for their commanders to approve before the commanders passed it to their counterparts. This usually far outweighed the downside, which was that now “an overeager command could monitor every potential contingency and plan for commitments that would never be levied, creating unnecessary confusion and fatigue.”**

*Reynolds, Journal, entry for 1July04.

**Fontenot, et al., *On Point*, p. 11.

*LtCol Williard A. Buhl intvw, 4Nov03 (MCHC, Quantico, VA).

periority.” It was to enable the commanders to make decisions in the course of their duties after the assessment. He wanted to hear how the major subordinate commands assessed their current and future situations, on the operational level of war, thinking ahead at least 96 hours.^{312*}

Both General McKiernan and General Blackman thought the battle update assessment often fell far short of the mark. Some briefers simply recited staggering laundry lists of events as opposed to concise, conceptual summaries of how they saw the battle, and were cut short by McKiernan or Blackman, once with “No, no, no, no—just tell me what I need to know.” The various Service cultures were on display during the assessment, with Army commands tending to report in great detail, while the Marines reported more concisely though not necessarily more conceptually, and the British Army seemed to want to report as little as possible. As time went on, the presentations became longer, less conceptual, and more factual, perhaps because of the press of battle. Usually run at 1000 or 1100 local every morning, the assessment could occupy a large chunk of a staff officer’s or even a commander’s day, since it generated its own set of pre-meetings and post-meetings, and there were complicated slides to prepare on PowerPoint. Some commanders decided to delegate the battle update assessment function to others and seldom appeared on the CFLCC screen.

One thing that distracted staff officers and commanders from assessment was the factual reporting they believed they had to focus on, in part on account of pressure from higher headquarters. Many military reporting procedures had not changed much since World War II, Korea, or Vietnam—the battalion reporting to the regiment to the division, and so forth, a system that worked well enough when the front was relatively static but did not work well when there were multiple, simultaneous lines of operation. It was difficult for units on the move to communicate, especially in built-up areas, because they were busy with other tasks and because the technology often let them down. The I MEF current operations officer, Colonel Dennis Judge, commented that he always knew where his forces were, no thanks to combat reporting, which, he said, “just was not there.” Instead he was able to rely on automated systems like the “Blue Force Tracker,” which did not require anyone to stop what he or she was doing during combat op-

erations to write and send a report.^{313*}

There were others whose job was to report in real time and who had the technology to do so without having to work through a military chain-of-command: the embedded journalists, whose work appeared on the ever-present television screens. The media had been “embedded” (this war’s jargon for “assigned”) down to the battalion level for the duration of hostilities and had the ability to report directly to their home offices, which in turn were able to rebroadcast their stories in very short order.^{314**} What often happened was that higher headquarters would pick up a breaking story on the media and then go back down the chain-of-command to get the official reporting about it, which would painstakingly work its way back up the chain and seemed often to be wrong, at least initially. Some staff officers concluded either that “first reports are always wrong” or that they needed to browbeat their subordinates into doing a better job of reporting. But the problem persisted throughout the campaign. As one CFLCC staff officer quipped, “If you want information bad, you will get bad information.”

In early April, as events unfolded around Baghdad at dizzying speed, every commander desperately wanted up-to-the minute information however he could get it, whether from the television newsmen, whose reporting was amazingly vivid and reasonably accurate (on television you could literally hear and see the tanks fire their main guns at Iraqis along the main streets of Baghdad), from the battle update assessments, or even from the official spot and situation reports, which were less timely and far less vivid but a little more accurate.

In the absence of other guidance, the Marines operated in accordance with the next senior commander’s intent, which remained simple and consistent: encircle the capital and conduct raids. The I MEF staff officers reported that their plans were to “continue to establish the eastern outer cordon of Baghdad . . . and . . . [be prepared to] support further CFLCC missions. . . [in support of] regime removal.”³¹⁵ Since there was little by way of amplifying instructions, they had the leeway to exploit opportunities as they saw them. During a conversation on 6 April, Colonel Steven

*The blue force tracker included a transponder that transmitted its location and received the location of all other transponders on the same system, displaying them on a small screen. Since it was not line-of-sight but relied on satellites, it had clear advantages over some “legacy” systems to identify friend and foe.

**By and large, the results of embedding were favorable all around; the reporting had more depth than it otherwise might have, and many journalists seemed more sympathetic to their subjects than they had been in previous conflicts.

*The general procedure at CFLCC and other major commands was for operational planning teams, or other groups of specialists drawn from various disciplines, to study problems, propose solutions, and for senior officers to make decisions in small groups.



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Noncommissioned officers of the 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, urge their fellow Marines to cross the damaged Diyala Bridge under fire on the southeast outskirts of Baghdad. The award-winning photograph was taken by The Boston Herald staff photographer, Kuni Takahashi.

Hummer of 7th Marines commented that CFLCC had not issued orders telling the field how to conduct raids, and he planned to do it his own way.³¹⁶

On that day, the Army was still planning in-and-out raids. On 7 April, the day of the second “Thunder Run,” the 3d Infantry Division reported that it controlled a zone from the international airport to one of Saddam’s palaces, with armor at all the main intersections in between, but planned to pull back to the airport. Soon the plan changed; the troopers believed they could hold their ground in downtown Baghdad. This was fine with General McKiernan, who endorsed the idea when General William Wallace told him about the situation. General McKiernan made it plain that it was the corps commander’s call; this was a tactical decision, best left to the commander who was in contact with the enemy.³¹⁷

While the Army was raiding into Baghdad, the Marines were working to cross the last major obstacle on their way to Baghdad. That was the Diyala River, located east of the city and flowing roughly north to southeast into the Tigris. It had been briefed as a minor obstacle with numerous fording sites.³¹⁸ But this was definitely not the case for the Marines,

who found it a challenge just to get close enough to the river to take a look at it. Even with engineering support, crossing did not look easy; the problem was that the riverbanks were either steep, muddy, or both, and the local roads were bad. On the afternoon of 6 April, division reported with some frustration that it had completed a reconnaissance of some 60 kilometers of the Diyala and had “found no viable crossing.”³¹⁹ It had also encountered stiff resistance in some places.

On 7 April, the frustration continued, preventing forward movements, which may have been a blessing in disguise. General Mattis’ comments for that day, and the next, in the daily I MEF sitrep reflected his concern that the logistical situation was “tenuous” and that his command could be nearing a “logistical culminating point,” fairly grim words for a very “cando” commander. He concluded that he was determined to continue “all previous measures to lighten the logistical burden in hopes of building up substantial stocks . . . for future operations,” which included conserving artillery ammunition.³²⁰ On 8 April he wrote that the division had only one “day of supply” of food and that it was so low on artillery am-



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Engaging the enemy using a P7 amphibious assault vehicle, Marines assigned to Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, attack an Iraqi sniper position near Baghdad.

munition it had decided to rely more heavily on the air wing than on artillery for counterbattery and preparatory fires.³²¹ But on 8 April he was able to report that his regiments were all across the Diyala. They had crossed using a variety of means—from seizing bridges, to building bridges, to swimming vehicles across. At two locations, the 8th Engineer Support Battalion played a critical role, putting in assault bridging while under fire, something the Marine Corps had not done for decades. At one RCT 1 crossing site, Iraqi resistance had ebbed as the amphibious tractors entered the water. One of the Iraqi prisoners of war explained why: “When we saw the tanks floating across the river, we knew we could not win against the Americans.”³²²

After crossing the Diyala, 7th Marines had gone on to conduct a raid on the Rashid military complex on the outskirts of Baghdad, the ideal intermediate objective, not quite in the city but a good platform for attacks into it when the time was right. At the same time, 5th Marines was attacking first to the north and then to the west to extend the cordon around the

city.^{323*} The cordon would not be fully complete until 0215Z on 9 April, when the division reported that RCT 5 had cut Highway 2, which ran to the northwest out of Baghdad, and that it had elements of the U.S. Army’s V Corps in sight.

By now, most units in the division had shed their chemical suits, the protective overalls in the “woodland” green pattern that contrasted with the desert camouflage uniforms and constricted movement, not to mention how hot they could make the Marine or sailor inside. The general assumption had been that Saddam would use chemical or biological agents outside but not within the Baghdad city limits. The Marines had been on tenterhooks, waiting for the

*According to West and Smith, Col Hummer “forgot” to issue a withdrawal plan for this raid. This is consistent with Hummer interview. The cordon would not be fully complete until 0215Z on 9 April, when the division reported that RCT 5 had cut Highway 2, which ran to the northwest out of Baghdad, and that it had elements of the U.S. Army’s V Corps in sight. (West and Smith, *March Up*, pp. 233-234; I MEF sitrep 081800ZApr03 to 091759ZApr03 [Copy in Reynolds Working Papers, MCHC, Quantico, VA].)



Photo courtesy of the 1st Marine Division

Marines from 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, on their first patrol through a crowded community in Baghdad's Saddam City, were greeted by thousands of apprehensive Iraqis who lined the streets.

seemingly inevitable report and enduring the almost eerie absence of bad news. But it never came, and the word was passed that since the Marines were now at the city limits, commanders could make the call on the right protective posture. For most Marines, shedding the unwanted second skin was an incredibly liberating and energizing experience, energy that General Mattis wanted them to use on the enemy in Baghdad.³²⁴

For their part, the wing and the service support group had continued to do incredible work, pushing supplies to the front, especially through the airhead at Qalat Sikar, which was south of Al Kut, and getting ready to set up shop at another airfield, Salman Pak, on the outskirts of Baghdad. The Marines soon had the food and ammunition they needed, and the cordon around the city was nearly complete, CFLCC's precondition for the next phase. In the words of the command chronology: "By establishing a cordon, the division had closed the door for the enemy's escape, and opened the door to operations inside the city."³²⁵ Now all they needed was permission to proceed beyond their limit of advance.

By 1800Z on 8 April, I MEF was planning to conduct "armed reconnaissance in force into Baghdad" on the next day, and division reported that it was

contemplating specific "offensive operations within Baghdad [in order to] complete the removal of the Regime." This was quite a change from the day before, when the focus had been on crossing the Diyala.³²⁶ Finally, early on 9 April, the division received the go-ahead from General Conway to attack its targets.³²⁷ A few hours later, the field historian at force headquarters, Major Theodore R. McKeldin III, noted that I MEF had been "cleared hot" by CFLCC for the eastern part of the city.³²⁸ By the time McKeldin penned this note late in the morning, the regimental combat teams had started to move toward the objectives that the division staff had so carefully selected. As one of the embedded reporters, Peter Baker of *The Washington Post*, wrote, they were executing the plan for the day, which "was to keep chipping away at . . . Saddam Hussein's power structure. The Marines would stab into Baghdad and seize a paramilitary base, a secret police headquarters and a presidential palace."³²⁹

No one was entirely sure what the day would bring. At the morning staff meeting, General Conway commented to his staff that he thought there would be a "big fight" for Saddam's palaces.³³⁰ Division had concluded that the threat from conventional forces had been "nearly eliminated," that there would be lit-

tle by way of centrally controlled, organized resistance. But there were reports of irregular formations.³³¹ The regiments were ready to fight if they had to. Soon many of the reports from the front showed quite a different picture. Cable News Network was with 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, as it went into the city, and Fox News was with 3d Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion to the northeast. Instead of fighters, both battalions encountered crowds of jubilant Iraqis who welcomed their liberation. One of the armored reconnaissance company commanders, Captain Brian B. Smalley, said later that it was “like driving through Paris in 1944.”³³²

In his trailer at force headquarters, now at An Numanayah, General Conway watched the dramatic television footage, some of it showing the poor Shia neighborhood known as Saddam City (and later as Sadr City), which the Marines had originally bypassed. The images impressed him so much that he decided to approve Mattis’ request, which had apparently percolated up from the regiments, simply to advance in zone until they encountered opposition. But his optimism was guarded: “Our intent was to constrict the city using various key objectives as lily pads to reduce the regime on the east side. What we are seeing on TV is happening in some Shia neighborhoods. We cannot make the mistake to say that is happening all over Baghdad. We still have a military imperative to conduct operations to reduce . . . regime-related facilities.”³³³

Conway discussed the issue with his Army counterparts at a midday video teleconference, and ultimately there was broad agreement on “a plan for a decisive assault on the city” by the Marines and the Army.^{334*} This was the end of the various plans for a methodical advance to seize particular objectives, let alone the plan for in-and-out raids. The division finally had a free hand in Baghdad.^{335**}

The result was that RCT 7 happily assaulted

*Gen Mattis commented later that the division had “full cooperation” from Gen Conway in his attack on Baghdad. Gen McKiernan also permitted his subordinate commanders a wide range of latitude in tactical decisions.

**The 1st Marine Division command chronology mentions another plan that was supposedly under consideration on 9 April at “higher headquarters.” This was for a second operational pause, to give the centralized authority in Baghdad a chance to turn over the city peacefully. The division and I MEF are said to have opposed the plan on the grounds that there was no longer any such authority. It is not clear how division learned of this plan. “Army planners had anticipated that it could take weeks to reduce Baghdad through . . . raids . . . , allowing more time to bring forward military police, civil affairs, and other units required to keep order.” (1stMarDiv ComdC, Jun03 [GRC, Quantico, VA]; Atkinson, *In the Company of Soldiers*, pp. 287-288)



Photo courtesy of the 1st Marine Division
Cpl Edward Chin of Company B, 1st Tank Battalion, drapes an American flag over the head of a large statue of Saddam Hussein in the Firdos Square traffic circle. It was quickly replaced with an Iraqi flag on orders from above.

through its assigned area of operations, moving from the southeast to the northwest on the north bank of the Tigris. The list of sites they secured on that day was impressive—the Ministry of Intelligence; the Ministry of Oil; Uday Hussein’s offices, which were already burning when the Marines arrived; the Iraqi air force headquarters, which had been destroyed; and the *Fedayeen* headquarters, which was listed as “rubbled.” At the end of the day, the division’s plans were just as ambitious as its accomplishments: “to have made [the Marine] presence known in all of [our] city zones by morning tomorrow [and] over the next few days . . . allowing the local populace . . . to return to some sense of normal life.”³³⁶

Among the sites in the 7th Marines area of operations was Firdos Square in downtown Baghdad. It was dominated by a six-meter-high statue of Saddam Hussein with his right arm raised in a heroic gesture. The 3d Battalion, 4th Marines, rolled into the square late in the day on 9 April. A crowd quickly gathered. Given the proximity of the local haven for journalists, the Palestine Hotel, there seemed to be as many foreign reporters as Iraqi citizens in the crowd. An Army psychological operations team attached to the Marines arrived and announced over a loudspeaker in Arabic that the Marines had decided the statue should come down. Millions around the world were able to watch the events in real time on Cable News Network and other television networks. A Marine named Corporal Edward Chin, of Company B, 1st Tank Battalion, climbed onto a derrick that extended from his M88 tank retriever. He reached up and placed an American flag over Saddam’s face. Some of

the Iraqis said, "No, we want an Iraqi flag," and, within one or two minutes, Chin took the flag down and replaced it with an Iraqi flag. Next a stout rope was fitted around the statue, and then to a cable on the tank retriever. When the tank retriever pulled, the statue came down, slowly, as the metal bent and Saddam slipped off the pedestal. The crowd rushed forward, swarming over the fallen statue. One group of Iraqis dragged its head to an unknown but no doubt unpleasant fate.³³⁷

There are a few arresting images in every war, and the toppling of the Saddam statue was one of them for the Iraq War. It was not exactly what the high command wanted. Generals Tommy Franks and McKiernan, each at his own headquarters, had been watching the scene unfold on television, and when the American flag went over Saddam's face, Franks picked up the telephone to call McKiernan, who did

not need to be told why his boss was calling. Even before General Franks could say anything, General McKiernan said, "We are already on it."³³⁸ As commanders from General Franks to General Mattis had told their troops over and over again, this was not a war of American conquest, but of Iraqi liberation. The flag that mattered was not the American flag; it was the Iraqi flag, flown alone, in sites no longer dominated by statues and murals of Saddam Hussein. Nevertheless, the Saddam statue's fall marked a turning point; the end of Phase III seemed to be in sight, even though there would still be some hard fighting.

While the statue had been coming down, Marines a few blocks away had been exchanging fire with regime loyalists, and the next day, 10 April, was no better. On the contrary, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, spent the better part of the day securing two objectives, Saddam's Almiyah Palace, one of many

A Marine provides cover with his 5.56mm M16A2 assault rifle, with attached M203 40mm grenade launcher, as his squad from Company C, 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, moves through the grounds of one of Saddam Hussein's palaces in Baghdad.

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Phase IV in Baghdad

Lieutenant Colonel Christopher C. Conlin, commanding officer of 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, wrote a vivid account of the quick and dramatic shift from Phase III to Phase IV on the streets of Baghdad:

Within minutes of our seizure of the capital, one of my lieutenants was presented with the rapidly expiring body of an Iraqi who had been pried from a vehicle accident seconds before. He was not a war casualty, but a simple victim of a "routine" incident. The fact that the locals brought him to us as he was in his final death spasms was their unequivocal realization that the normal procedure, going to the hospital or calling the police, was gone. This episode was duplicated throughout our zone with geometrically increasing frequency. Frantic locals ran up to tell us phones were out, doctors reported hospitals being looted, and that the water was off. They were desperate to know where they should dump the trash, could they use cell phones, or was it OK to drive to their father's house in Mosul? They approached us to arrest a strange man with a gun lurking in their neighborhood. We were

approached by alleged sheiks who demanded to [see] "his Excellency the General" about their tribe's loyalty to Mr. Bush. . . . On and on the requests came. All being diligently received and somehow answered by our young squad leaders and platoon leaders. We too were in transition. Having overwhelmed organized resistance, we were hot on the trail of Saddam's . . . Fedayeen. . . . Our aggressive small unit leaders were able to hit them in their homes and offices in ever quickening succession. We created hunter-killer teams on the fly, sending our very talented Humint Exploitation Teams . . . PsyOps and Civil Affairs . . . Teams down to the platoon level . . . Companies worked huge urban sectors usually rotating platoons to achieve a 24/7 battle rhythm. The effect was dramatic Within a week of liberation, the markets were open again, . . . many were going back to work, there was a new police force reorganizing, neighborhoods were organizing . . . Lessons Learned: . . . Press flesh, kiss the babies, and kill the enemy.*

*Col Christopher C. Conlin, "What do you do for an encore?" *Marine Corps Gazette*, Sep04, pp. 74-80.

throughout the capital and the country, and Imam Abu Hanifah Mosque. First they had to drive through a hail of rocket-propelled grenades and "a torrent of heavy machine gun and small arms fire," and then, perhaps the ultimate nightmare, they got lost and had to make a U-turn while under fire. If you think it is bad enough to drive in an unfamiliar city in the Middle East, imagine what it is like to do so with people shooting at you. The Marines were encountering foreign "jihadis," Islamic fundamentalist paramilitary fighters. The mosque was a target because it had been the location of what someone called an "Elvis sighting," Saddam Hussein was said to have entered the mosque, and the Marines were told to secure the perimeter to keep anyone from entering or leaving. The report turned out to be false, but the jihadis still fought with determination. By the end of the day, RCT 5 reported it had lost one Marine killed in action and 42 wounded, along with two tank mobility kills, another unusually bad day for tanks in this war. The commander of RCT 5, Colonel Dunford, remembered

10 April as both the worst and the best day of the war. It seemed like the worst day while his regiment was heavily engaged in downtown Baghdad. His fear was that there would be many more days of heavy fighting. But it turned into the best day when his 1st Battalion reported that the situation was well in hand and that after the fight it was encountering crowds of cheering people, some eight or nine deep, shouting in broken English, "Good, good, Mister!"³³⁹

The fighting tapered off rapidly, the regime's "last stand" in Baghdad turned out to be so short that it was anticlimactic. There was no sign of Saddam. Some thought (erroneously, as it turned out) he could be lying under the rubble of a restaurant in the Mansour district that had been struck by smart bombs on 8 April. His government had simply evaporated. The civil servants, including "Baghdad Bob," the infamous spokesman who kept predicting on television that Coalition forces were on the brink of annihilation, had simply stopped coming to work. Very soon looters took over the city. If the focus on



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Armed with M16A2 assault rifles and 81mm shoulder-launched anti-armor rocket launchers, Marines from Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, clear the streets of Iraqi resistance block-by-block on their way to securing the Presidential Palace.

9 and 10 April had been on crowds who were literally applauding the collapse of the Saddam regime, it quickly shifted to those who were taking advantage of the situation. The television news broadcast one scene after another of Iraqis, young and old, carrying away anything that was not bolted down from government offices, from official residences, from army bases, even from schools and hospitals. Particularly upsetting for some westerners was the apparent looting of the antiquities museum, a repository of ancient and irreplaceable treasures.

The extent of the looting, and what to do about it, certainly seemed to catch the Coalition by surprise. The basic outlines of OPlan 1003V did not extend far beyond the goals of securing the oil fields, removing the regime, and finding weapons of mass destruction; there had been a great deal of detailed planning, and rehearsals, for Phase III, but the post combat Phase IV had, by comparison, been virtually neglected. If Phase III had been the favorite son, Phase IV was the redheaded stepchild and now he was acting out.³⁴⁰ When asked about the looting, American officials were low-key. On 9 April, Secretary of Defense

Rumsfeld downplayed the problem, as did Generals Conway and Mattis and other senior Coalition commanders. They implied that the Iraqi people had earned the right to profit at the expense of their dictatorial government, and that there was, in any case, only so much the U.S. forces could do, given their limited numbers. General Conway said, "Does it bother me . . . that I see people taking an office chair or the guts of a refrigerator or an air conditioner? Not really, . . . at least [not] at this point. . . . [I]t is got to be the pent-up frustration they've experienced for the better part of their lives."³⁴¹ General Mattis offered the uncharacteristically mild observation that the Coalition was "in that kind of never-never land right now . . . we're not in full control [yet], so you're in that transition period."³⁴²

By the next day, the Coalition forces were shifting their approach and trying to address the problem as best they could with the limited resources at their disposal. Early on the morning of 10 April, a pedestrian suicide bomber blew himself up and injured five men from 5th Marines. The incident caught General Conway's attention. He called it "a sobering reminder

. . . that much work remains to be done.” The Marines “must . . . quickly transition to Phase IV Stage B civil-military/humanitarian assistance operations to stabilize the situation and demonstrate our resolve to . . . the newly liberated . . . people” of Iraq. The theme at the I MEF’s morning staff meeting was that the Marines needed to switch from a combat role to a stabilizing role. For that reason, Marines were ordered to take steps to control the looting, which included the protection of International Red Cross facilities by 7th Marines.³⁴³ On the same day, 7th Marines took the initiative to establish a civil military operations center in the centrally located Palestine Hotel. The other regiments followed suit in short order, reaching out to local leaders and generally establishing useful contacts in the interests of restoring some semblance of order and basic municipal services. The division’s artillery regiment, 11th Marines, played its part. Realizing he was unlikely to need much more artillery support, General Mattis took the unusual step of turning the division civil military op-

erations center over to 11th Marines and assigning the artillerymen their own sector of Baghdad along with the infantry regiments.³⁴⁴ Late in the day, he was feeling upbeat about the situation: “The city in our zone is . . . [almost] entirely in USMC hands. While it will remain a dangerous place for days to come, the local populace is wholly supportive of our efforts and active patrolling will impose our will. . . . We will calm the situation and . . . build on the goodwill we have experienced to date.”³⁴⁵

That Baghdad was still a dangerous place was an understatement. The Marines faced a number of daunting tasks from turning the lights back on to explosive ordnance disposal. One problem was, in the words of the division’s command chronology, it seemed that “virtually every block” in Baghdad had its own weapons cache. Some of these caches were enormous, “containing every conceivable type of weapon and ammunition, to include tanks, mortars, artillery pieces, and even . . . surface-to-surface rockets.”³⁴⁶ On the march up to Baghdad, Army and Ma-

LCdr Bryan Schumacher, left, and HM Zachary Rowe, of the Regimental Aid Station, 5th Marines, render medical assistance to a wounded Iraqi civilian in the northern Baghdad suburbs.

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rine units had, like Task Force Tarawa in An Nasiriyah, found weapons caches throughout the country, often in schools, hospitals, and mosques, to say nothing of the enormous ammunition supply points that covered acres and acres of ground. In the convoluted logic of the Saddam regime, it was only fitting that the capital itself be lavishly supplied and ready for a drawn-out fight. Although Iraqi intentions remained unclear, the discoveries suggested that the regime had been getting ready to back up its threat that the Coalition would face a people in arms, or some kind of guerrilla war, if it invaded Iraq.³⁴⁷

Well to the south of Baghdad, Task Force Tarawa had already been conducting Phase IV operations over a vast stretch of country with its approximately 13,000 Marines and sailors. When it expanded its battle space to the north, it became responsible for providing security along the major supply routes, Routes 1 and 7, which meant it had to occupy or neutralize threats in the area. This was in addition to remaining responsible for An Nasiriyah, where Tarawa Marines continued to make notable strides in eliminating enemy resistance and establishing city government. The city of Ad Diwaniyah astride Route 1 posed a typical challenge, which the Marines met in ways that were becoming typical. In early April, various kinds of enemy formations continued to pose a threat to convoys passing through. While cor-

doning off the city, Tarawa made good use of its Operational Detachment-Alpha, a U.S. Army Special Forces unit that cultivated the population and gathered actionable intelligence. This in turn led to attacks on specific targets with precision munitions. Similarly, in the nearby city of Al Hamsha, information gathered by special operations forces led to a strike against the Ba'ath Party that caused the death of the local Ba'athist leader and was followed by a successful revolt by the local citizenry.

In much the same way, Task Force Tarawa prosecuted attacks against enemy forces in several other cities along Route 7, the other major supply route. These cities were Al Hayy, Qalat Sikar, and Ash Shatrah. Another city that more or less liberated itself was Al Amarah, where elements of the task force had gone to eliminate the *10th Armored Division* from 8 to 12 April in the "Battle of the Icons." In mid-April, after the British expanded their zone to the north and took charge in Amarah, Task Force Tarawa shifted its focus to the cities of An Numaniyah and Al Kut. The task force placed a battalion of infantry in An Numaniyah, where I MEF main had set up an interim command post, and set up its own headquarters on the airfield at Al Kut in hardened aircraft shelters that were mercifully cool, a brief respite from the heat but not from the high tempo of operations.³⁴⁸

Chapter 8

No Smell of Saltwater: North to Tikrit, South to Ad Diwaniyah

The expeditionary force's focus had always been on Baghdad. The events of 9 and 10 April signaled the end of the combat operation that most Marines had expected to conduct. Those with longer memories remembered that before the war began, Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) had gamed a scenario for securing the oil fields around the city of Kirkuk from the south, instead of the north or the east, and that the I MEF had written a branch plan for Kirkuk.

Some 150 miles north of Baghdad, Kirkuk was the oil capital of the north. The surrounding oil fields were comparable in significance to the southern oil fields and represented an objective far too important to ignore. There had been various plans for the Army to secure the area, especially by introducing the 4th Infantry Division through Turkey. But if that proved impossible, other CFLCC troops might have to advance from the south. After the war, General James Conway remembered being asked by CFLCC if the Marines could take on the mission if necessary, and he answered that it could be done, if necessary. The force was not looking for yet another mission at the end of its supply tether but would take it on if tasked. When asked on 9 April by a journalist about ordering the Marines to advance to the north, General Conway commented: "That would be tough for us. We are a long way from our sea base. As Marines, [if] we do not smell saltwater . . . that makes us a little uneasy. That said, our logisticians, . . . augmented by our [air] wing, have done a magnificent job. . . . To take [it] . . . another couple [of] hundred miles would be extremely difficult. It's difficult right now—that would be extremely difficult. But it might be something that we have to ask our people to do."³⁴⁹ A few days later, during a staff meeting, Conway made the sensible comment: "We are not putting our hand in the air for that . . . [we] have enough [to do] already."³⁵⁰

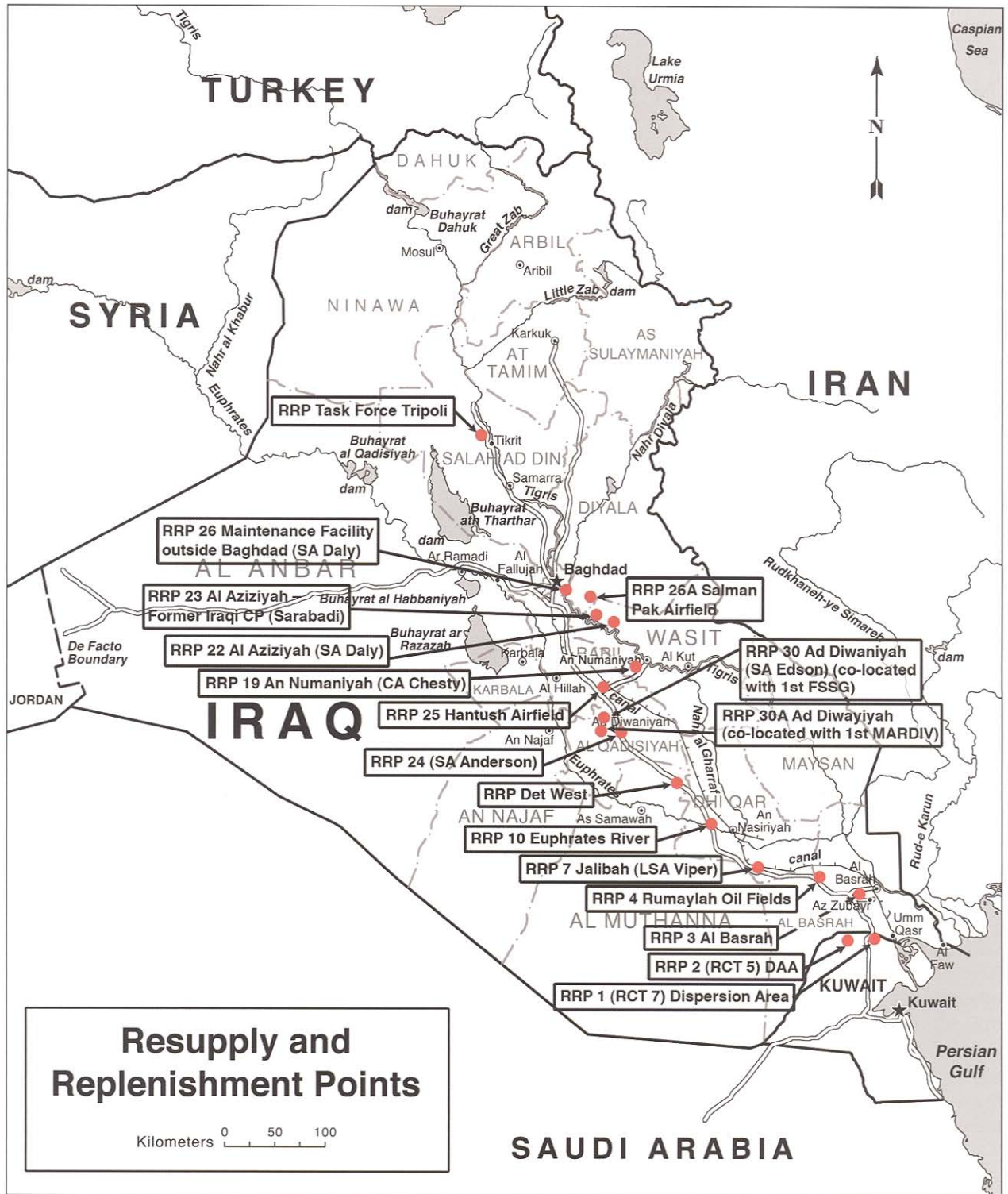
Coalition Forces Land Component Command's pre-war questions meant it was not a complete surprise when the issue came up again and occupied General Conway and his staff on 10 April. The expeditionary force issued a verbal order to division to "be prepared to" proceed to Kirkuk, and to force service support group and wing to be prepared to support the attack. The guidance was to focus on the objective and to

avoid being sidetracked by enemy formations along the way.³⁵¹

General James Mattis had already been thinking about the north. Amazingly, he had recently gone on record as being "prepared to continue the attack to Kirkuk . . . and secure the . . . oil field." This was on 8 April, the day when it was worried about running out of ammunition while it was finishing the struggle to get across the Diyala River, just before what would be, for many of its Marines, the fight of a lifetime in Baghdad.³⁵² Even though division had apparently long had a contingency plan on the shelf for an attack to the north, this was just about as far forward as anyone could, or did, lean in his fighting hole during Operation Iraqi Freedom.³⁵³

The 1st Marine Division then announced that it could "collapse" its cordon around Baghdad and form a task force, to be known as "Tripoli," after another Marine march across desert sands, that of Lieutenant Presley O'Bannon to Derna in 1805, to conduct the operation. The assistant division commander, Brigadier General John F. Kelly, would command, using the nucleus of the division's forward command post.³⁵⁴

Preparations intensified on 11 April. The I Marine Expeditionary Force issued a formal warning order for the continuation of the attack to Kirkuk. Mattis decided on the composition of the force. It would be the division's three light armored reconnaissance battalions: 1st, 2d, and 3d; 5th Battalion, 11th Marines; and Company G, 2d Battalion, 23d Marines. This would amount to the equivalent of a reinforced armored reconnaissance regiment. Logistics would roll with the task force, which would have a dedicated combat service support element; but some resupply would have to come from the wing, which pitched in with plans to establish forward arming and refueling points as the task force moved north and secured suitable pieces of terrain. Cargo helicopters and C-130 Hercules cargo haulers, the workhorse of choice for many missions in Iraq, would deliver supplies to the arming and refueling points. By this point in the campaign most acknowledged that the Marine KC-130s, many of them piloted by reservists, were ideal for the distances and the loads in Iraq; General James Amos was to call them "the queen of the prom" in a postwar



interview.³⁵⁵ For its part, the division staff went so far as to analyze the makeup of the oil fields, build objective folders, and recommend schemes of maneuver to General Kelly.

The I MEF plan for Kirkuk was overtaken by events

that had been set in motion before 10 April. Kurdish forces, advised by U.S. Army Special Forces teams, seized the oil fields. As of 1800Z on 10 April, Coalition Forces Air Component Command stopped bombing the city of Kirkuk, because organized enemy resist-

The Other Prisoner of War Rescue Operation

Some of the most high-profile stories of the war were about American prisoners of war, especially the rescue of Army Private First Class Jessica Lynch, who had been captured early in the fighting around An Nasiriyah and later became something of a media figure in the United States. On the night of 1-2 April, Task Force Tarawa had facilitated her rescue. But the rescue at Samarra was as memorable, if not as celebrated. It was a victory for the Marine traits of getting out, meeting the Iraqis, and taking calculated risks. On 13 April, human intelligence exploitation team 3, led by First Lieutenant Nathan M. Boaz, entered the city, and an Iraqi policeman approached with information about U.S. prisoners. To pinpoint the location without compromising the source, the exploitation team's chief, Staff Sergeant Randy Meyer, gave the policeman a global positioning system receiver and told him how to use it to record the location of the Americans, which the policeman did. Even though he was under pressure to continue on to Tikrit, 3d Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Herman S. Clardy III, decided on his own that the information was reliable enough to act on, and that trying to rescue the prisoners was worth the time. Armored reconnaissance scouts and exploitation team members proceeded to storm the house pinpointed by the informer and, without firing a shot, freed the seven grateful soldiers—two pilots and five members of Jessica Lynch's unit, who had also been captured



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LCpl Curney Russell and Cpl Christopher Castro from 3d Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion provide a steady arm for rescued prisoner of war, U.S. Army Spec Shoshana Johnson of the 507th Maintenance Battalion, as she and other repatriated prisoners are led from a Marine KC-130 aircraft at Kuwait City.

in An Nasiriyah on 22 March. One of the pilots later described the rescue on television in vivid terms, cheerfully recounting that he had never before been so glad to see a group of men who looked like hollow-eyed killers coming to get him. The news of their release was immediately briefed throughout the theater, and the prisoners were whisked to the rear.*

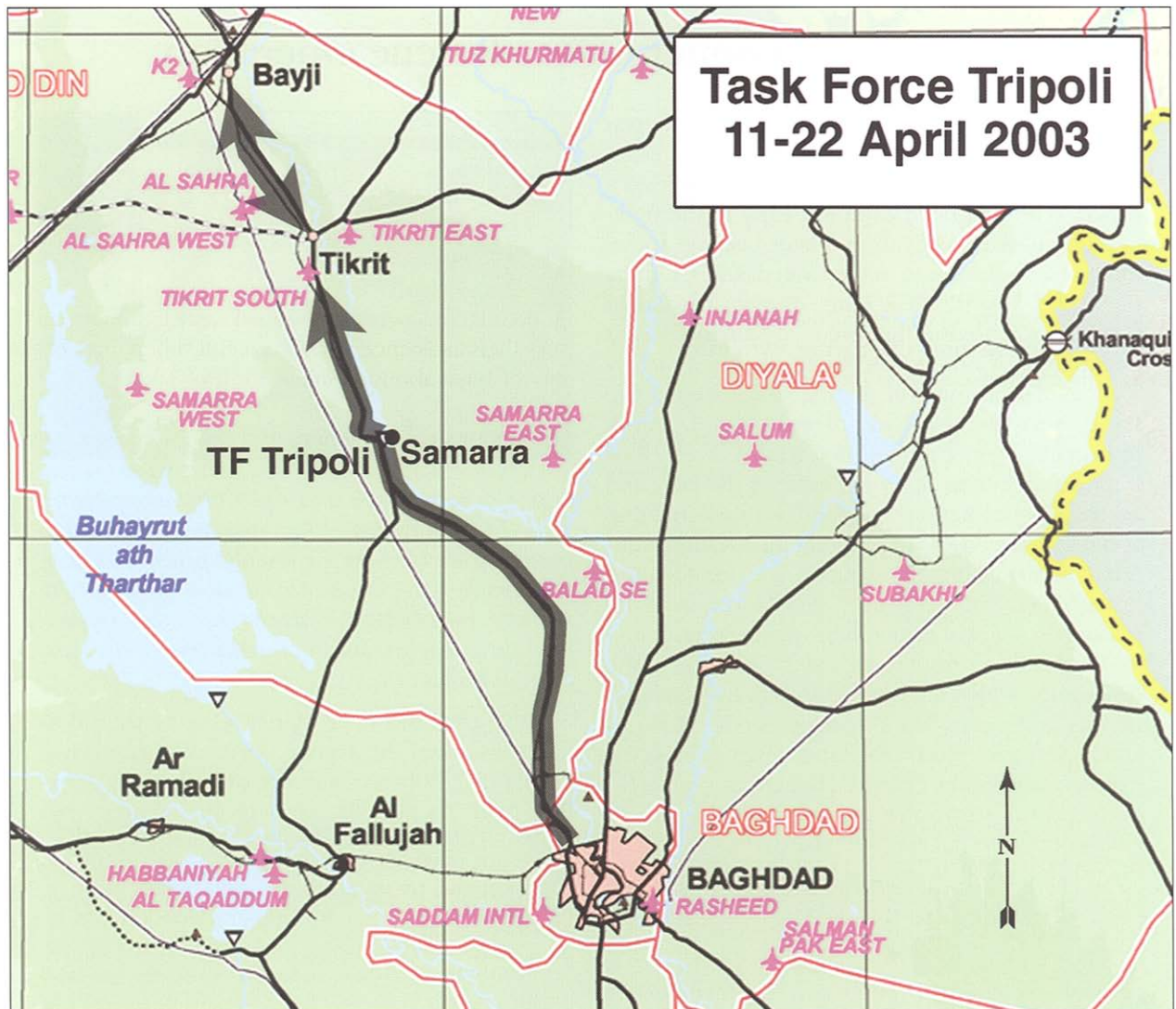
*In addition to the division command chronology, see LtCol Herman S. Clardy III, email to author, 28Apr04 (Reynolds Working Papers, MCHC, Quantico, VA).

ance was crumbling. On 11 April, the city was in Kurdish hands. By late afternoon on the same day, CFLCC changed the Marines' target to Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown, which was only about 100 miles north of Baghdad. General Conway commented to his staff by way of explanation that the Marines "were the best force available now to do this."³⁵⁶

Tikrit was assessed by various intelligence elements as a logical place for the regime to make a last stand; the division framed the operation as an attack to deny the enemy safe haven and to prevent the escape of high-value targets. The enemy forces that the division expected to encounter were one or two brigades of the *Special Republican Guard* and a few hundred paramilitary fighters. The general assumption was that the paramilitaries would fight but that the uniformed soldiers would not.

The change may have been frustrating to some forces and division planners, but overall it was a positive development, since it was relatively easy to substitute Tikrit for Kirkuk, and Tikrit was closer to Baghdad; the supply tether would not have to stretch as far. In General Mattis' words: "The division is stretched, but not to the breaking point, with stabilization ops in Baghdad [and] TF Tripoli focused on Tikrit. . . . We are green on logistics, but will require a new . . . estimate of supportability if ordered to the Kirkuk or Mosul area."³⁵⁷

What General Conway called "the final attack" officially began on the afternoon of 12 April, at 1255Z, to be precise and proceeded rapidly up-country. It was, in a sense, a quintessential Operation Iraqi Freedom operation. It was short-fused and had a commander who stressed the need for speed. He



task-organized in a matter of hours, making good use of two weapons systems that also seemed to have been made for a place like Iraq, eight-wheeled light armored vehicles and Cobra helicopter gunships. "It was," the command chronology recalled, "comforting [to have] the Cobra escort. They were masters at rooting around the enemy's potential hiding spots and building our situational awareness around every corner. . . . We gained a deep respect for the Cobra pilots during the war."³⁵⁸ The wing's airborne forward air controller complemented the work of the Cobras and kept in touch with a section of Harrier jets that were dedicated to the task force. When this piece of division-wing coordination was reported to I MEF, the word was that if anyone opened fire on the Marines, he would not live to regret it.³⁵⁹

After leaving its assembly area, Task Force Tripoli passed first through friendly territory, with Iraqis lining the roads to wave and shouting greetings like

"Good, good!" In Samarra, a city between Baghdad and Tikrit, there was a happy event when the 3d Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion found and freed seven American prisoners of war on 13 April. Then, closer to Tikrit, the locals became less friendly and in some cases downright hostile. There were even more murals, portraits, and statues of Saddam here than in other parts of the country, where they were certainly plentiful enough, but the Marines noticed only a few had been defaced. Both on 13 and 14 April, there was "minimal contact" with enemy formations, occasional firefights, some of them intense, on the way to the objective.

"Minimal contact" is the kind of phrase that senior commands put in situation reports. To the Marine on the ground who is risking his life during one of the few firefights of the day, it certainly does not seem "minimal," and the division's command chronology contains vivid descriptions of fights with *Fedayeen* in

and around Tikrit. Even by the Iraqi standard, which seemed to call for every school and mosque to be filled with munitions, there was a great deal of military hardware in the area. The Marines of 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, for example, passed through a “large area [south of Tikrit] . . . with multiple revetments that contained enemy vehicles” and then called in air strikes on the vehicles before proceeding on to a crossroads where they took a number of rocket propelled grenade rounds, one of which struck the tailpipe of a light armored vehicle. The Marines returned fire, destroying two trucks and killing five of the enemy. Once inside the city, the Marines found massive amounts of ordnance, including a compound with 30 warehouses of weapons and a cache at a hospital containing literally thousands of AK-47 rifles. The division concluded that “the amount of ordnance found in our sector is overwhelming and will require months of dedicated lift to remove it all.”³⁶⁰

By 15 April, fighting had tapered off, and Task Force Tripoli found itself the de facto source of power in Tikrit. The question was how to use that power to address the bewildering array of problems that the city faced. The existing power structure, the tribal sheikhs, approached the task force, outlined the situation as they saw it, and wanted to establish a leadership council. Brigadier General John Kelly was reluctant to deal with the sheikhs, who were hardly a democratic body and had done business with Saddam Hussein. In the end, he decided that the sheikhs represented as good an interim local government as any and met with them on 15 April to lay out his view of the situation. He repeated a number of basic themes: the Marines would take responsibility for the security of the area; the locals would help the Marines hunt down any remaining foreign fighters or Saddam loyalists;

MSgt David Livingston from Marine Wing Support Squadron 271 supervises a KC-130 Hercules offload of fuel at a forward arming and refueling point.

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and, finally, the sheikhs would bear much of the responsibility for restoring power, water, food, and medical services. All of this was easier said than done; the 15 April meeting was simply the beginning of a process that entailed numerous meetings between the sheikhs on the one hand and General Kelly on the other, as men conditioned by long-simmering feuds and unaccustomed to democracy took their first tentative steps away from a dictatorship that had dominated their lives for 30 years. A by-product of the good relations between General Kelly and the sheikhs was their assistance in the peaceful “liberation” of the city of Bayji about 25 miles north of Tikrit.

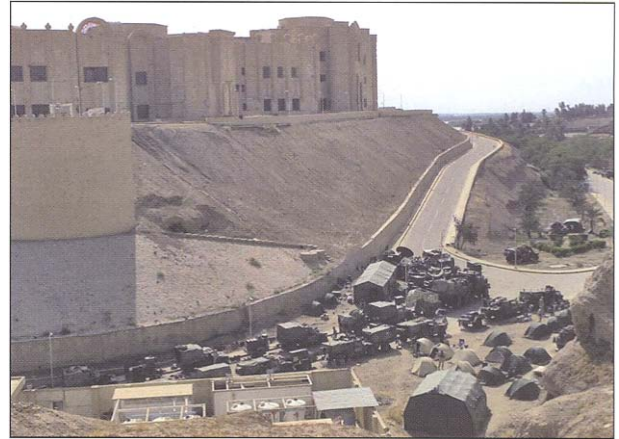
Meanwhile, out on the streets of Tikrit, the Marines dealt with such challenges as a panicky crowd of citizens who wanted to cross over a bridge that had been weakened during the war; a group of vigilantes who established their own checkpoints outside the city, apparently to harass people they did not like; and marauding Kurds, the ethnic minority who had suffered at the hands of Saddam’s regime and were not inclined to treat the citizens of Tikrit gently. The Marines’ aggressive patrolling, typically by dismounted infantry without flak vests and in soft covers, along with their commonsense solutions to problems, restored more than a small semblance of order to the city within a few days.

Between 19 and 21 April, Task Force Tripoli conducted a relief in place with the Army’s 4th Infantry Division and prepared to rejoin the main body of 1st Marine Division. The 4th Infantry Division had spent the war en route first to Turkey, where it had been unable to land, and then to Iraq through Kuwait. Although major combat operations had ended, this division characterized its move north to the zone it would occupy as an “attack,” which led to some unfortunate incidents. On 19 April, the Marine division complained about U.S. Army Apache helicopters entering Marine battle space “without permission or clearance to engage,” and then firing at abandoned enemy armor located between the 2d and 3d Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalions. The 4th Infantry Division also seemed intent on treating the Tikritis as hostile, which distressed the Marines, who had gone to some lengths to establish good relations with the locals. General Mattis himself noticed that like the 3d Infantry Division, the 4th had a lot of armored vehicles and only a limited number of dismounts and went on record with a prediction that “the lack of Army dismounts is creating a void in personal contact and public perception. . . . Our forces need to project confidence in the security environment we have created. That is best exemplified in light, mobile forces in

contact with the local citizenry sans helmets and flak jackets and without armored vehicles. If we cannot engender friendship and confidence in the local security environment, we cannot set the conditions for good order integral to a return to civil control."³⁶¹

General Mattis' comment applied not only to Tikrit but also to Baghdad. While Task Force Tripoli was securing Tikrit and preparing for a relief in place with 4th Infantry Division, three regiments of the division had been consolidating their gains in Baghdad and getting ready to turn their zones over to 3d Infantry Division in accordance with the plan for the occupation of Iraq. The civil-military operations center run by the artillerymen of the 11th Marines, continued to find stopgap solutions for the many problems they faced; with remarkably little assistance or guidance from anyone, it had established cells for police, fire, electricity, water, and medical care, and the instant experts worked their issues as best they could. The operations center appointed an interim police chief and opened an Iraqi police academy. It facilitated and coordinated the work of nongovernmental organizations like CARE, the Red Cross, the Red Crescent, and the World Food Program. Meanwhile, out on the streets, the regimental combat teams maintained checkpoints to control movement in their sectors, which they moved often to frustrate any attempts to target them. The division took some additional steps such as delivering public safety messages, in the hope of controlling the rampant looting and widespread crime that had broken out when the regime collapsed and left a power vacuum in Baghdad. Since this was something no one had really planned for except in the most general terms, there had been an ad hoc quality about the guidance from CFLCC and I MEF about looting and crime that seemed to boil down to "stop it if you can" and left it up to the units in contact to come up with workable solutions.³⁶²

Even though there was only so much the Marines could do in the few days between the collapse of the regime and their scheduled departure from Baghdad, they appear to have made some progress. One Marine, Major Jason L. Morris, of 3d Battalion, 5th Marines, observed that the eastern half of Baghdad seemed to have returned to something like normalcy within 10 days of the fall of the Saddam statue on Firdos Square. Morris attributed this to the division's approach, which he characterized as relatively low impact. Even in the days immediately after 9 April, Marines allowed the local citizens to go about their business so long as they did not interfere with Marine business. There was certainly an active Marine presence in the streets, especially by dismounted in-



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Marines assigned to the 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion encamp below one of Saddam Hussein's palaces in Tikrit, the Iraqi president's hometown.

fantrymen, but he did not think they gave the city the feel of being under martial law. He supported General Mattis' argument that infantrymen are better suited for patrolling a city than armored vehicles.³⁶³

As impressive as its beginnings were, no one will ever know how effective the division's occupation of Baghdad would have been in the long run. By 15 April, if not before, the division staff had begun to prepare for a turnover to the 3d Infantry Division, with the assistance of the Army's 358th Civil Affairs Brigade's Deliberate Assessment Team. Detailed staff work and command interaction followed at various levels, more or less spontaneously, "without written orders, instructions, or doctrine of any kind," to quote the division's command chronology.³⁶⁴ The actual relief in place in Baghdad occurred between 18 and 20 April, another eventful day. While elements of the division moved south to Ad Diwaniyah, where it relieved the Army's 82d Airborne Division and established a new headquarters, I MEF convened a combined Phase IV and retrograde-reconstitution-regeneration conference at its dusty field headquarters in An Numaniyah.

Phase III, the war from the line of departure in Kuwait to the enemy center of gravity in Baghdad, had gone by in the blink of an eye, a remarkable performance by any standard. But there had been a cost. For the Marines, the casualties were on the order of 75 killed in action and 300 wounded. Even if statistics did not lessen the heartbreak of loss for each man who died, the numbers were far smaller than had been feared, which was something to be thankful for.³⁶⁵ The Marines honored their dead and wounded and prepared for the next phase of the operation.

Chapter 9

The Other War in the North: Marines in Kurdistan and Mosul

Task Force Tripoli was not the only Marine command that operated north of Baghdad, which included great stretches of territory that fell under Joint Special Operations Task Force North, commanded by Colonel Charles T. Cleveland, USA. Cleveland, who had apparently been in Iraqi Kurdistan for months, reported not to Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC) but to Coalition Forces Special Operations Command, another CentCom dependency. Using various kinds of paramilitary forces, he ran the war in the northeast corner of Iraq, responsible for its defense from the Iraqi Army and for preparations to secure the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk and their surroundings. He had, in a sense, taken on the mission that had been assigned to the 4th Infantry Division, to put pressure on Baghdad from the north, or at least to manage the situation in the north in order to prevent any surprises that might undermine the offensive in the south. To do this he had at his disposal a U.S. Special Forces Group, made up of three Special Forces battalions, and Kurdish formations as well as Coalition airpower in general support. There was a U.S. Air Force contingent with some air and ground assets complementing the Special Forces, and Colonel Cleveland could also request sorties from Coalition Forces Air Component Command. As for the Kurdish fighters, there were some 70,000 of them, grouped into two militias identified with the two main Kurdish political parties, the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan and the Kurdish Democratic Party, which were now cooperating against the common enemy but had in the past sometimes turned on each other, exhibiting some of the less attractive aspects of a warlike culture. The Special Forces had been working with these fighters for at least a few months.³⁶⁶

There was another group working in the north that did not come under Cleveland but cooperated with his command. It was the handful of Marines known as the Military Coordination and Liaison Command, led by Major General Henry P. Osman, the commanding general of II Marine Expeditionary Force from Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, another one of the low-key but very effective generals who left their mark on Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The Military Coordination and Liaison Command



Photo courtesy of Field History Branch

MajGen Henry P. Osman, a graduate of Old Dominion University, was commissioned in 1969. Over the ensuing years, he commanded a rifle platoon and company in Vietnam, a 1st Marine Division infantry battalion, and served in numerous staff assignments before assuming command of II Marine Expeditionary Force in August 2002.

had a complicated history. In the fall of 2002, General Osman had watched Brigadier General Richard Natonski and 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade's preparations to join I MEF in Kuwait for the attack from the south. This was neither unexpected nor a particular hardship to II MEF; since the end of the Cold War, and the shift in focus away from the North Atlantic, II MEF had served largely as a force provider for other theaters. The 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade was by design a detachable module of II MEF. General Natonski himself was the deputy expeditionary force commander, as well as the commander of the brigade. Similarly, many of his officers were dual-hatted, with both force and brigade functions. The deployment of the brigade meant the force staff had only a small residual capability, but it was still a capability that could be put to good use in the

CentCom theater. General Osman believed that II MEF could field a small joint task force and told Headquarters Marine Corps as much.³⁶⁷ What happened next was a dialogue between II MEF and Headquarters Marine Corps over the potential uses of II MEF's staff, animated at least in part by the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General James L. Jones' continuing interest in northern Iraq, especially the northeast corner of the country with its large Kurdish minority.

In 1991, in the wake of Operation Desert Storm, there had been a humanitarian crisis in northern Iraq following Saddam Hussein's brutal suppression of a Kurdish revolt. After a delay, President George H.W. Bush had directed the Commander-in-Chief, U.S. European Command to conduct an operation to provide humanitarian assistance to the tens of thousands of Kurds who, in the aftermath of the revolt, had become refugees in their own homeland. The result had been Operation Provide Comfort, a multinational effort that had lasted for about four months and created the basis for de facto Kurdish autonomy for the next decade. Iraqi troops stayed out of Kurdish territory, part of the northern no-fly zone enforced by Operation Northern Watch. That said, in 2002 there were up to 12 Iraqi divisions north of Baghdad, at various stages of readiness, grouped in *I Corps* and *V Corps*. A number of them were assessed as capable of advancing into Kurdistan. Both the Iraqis and the Kurds actively manned and patrolled the "Green Line" that divided their spheres of control.³⁶⁸

The Commandant had been the 24th MEU (SOC) commander during Provide Comfort, and he had not forgotten the experience. Now, in late 2002, as he prepared to step down as Commandant and take up the responsibilities of Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, he wanted to do what he could to support CentCom in the coming war against Iraq. One of his agenda items was to explore the need for another such mission with Marine participation.³⁶⁹ Would the CFLCC attack from the south lead to another humanitarian crisis in the north? If so, it would involve Turkey, a NATO ally. Southern Turkey was the obvious location to stage the mission. This was therefore a matter that the Supreme Allied Commander, like his predecessor 13 years earlier, needed to consider. The border between Iraq and Turkey was also the border between CentCom and European Command; anything that happened in northern Iraq would affect both commands. General Osman and the II MEF staff were natural candidates for a military-political mission to the region, and after he had more or less volunteered his services, Osman discussed the

contingency with General Jones in November and December 2002. He also met twice with General Anthony Zinni, another veteran of Operation Provide Comfort, who, while at Central Command, had spent much of his time traveling around the region practicing military-political diplomacy.³⁷⁰ By late January 2003, after 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade had left Camp Lejeune, General Osman was in touch with the senior Marine in U.S. European Command, Marine Forces Europe commander, Lieutenant General Martin R. Berndt, about standing up a joint task force to coordinate Phase IV, that is, post combat, operations in northern Iraq. To consider, first, how to staff the joint task force and, second, how it should operate, II MEF had created an operational planning team.³⁷¹

On 17 February 2003, General Osman and a few of his principal staff officers flew to the European Command headquarters at Stuttgart, Germany, to discuss the potential operation with military planners at Marine Forces Europe, which is part of European Command. Next they visited Ankara, Turkey, for meetings with subject matter experts at the American embassy and the Turkish General Staff. To put it mildly, the Turks had no enthusiasm for a mission to help the Kurds, especially one operating out of southern Turkey, and did not offer much by way of help or encouragement. Since they wanted to keep their own Kurdish minority in check, the last thing the Turks wanted was for the Iraqi Kurds to assert themselves. The Turks and the Kurds had a long tradition of enmity, and the United States had to strike a delicate balance between using the Kurds against the Iraqis and not upsetting Turkish sensibilities. This was one of the reasons why the United States could not use the Kurdish militias as proxies in the quite the same way it had used Afghan militias in late 2001 and early 2002. Throughout the operation, as General Osman and his officers encountered strong, even visceral, anti-Kurdish sentiments among the Turkish officers they met, they made it part of their mission to do what they could to keep such sentiments in check. It did not help that General Osman had a typically Turkish surname but was not of Turkish descent, leading his Turkish contacts first to imagine that they were speaking to a compatriot, and then to disappointment when they were disabused of that notion.

General Osman's small group went on to Camp Doha, Kuwait, to meet with General David McKiernan and his staff, whom they found to be, understandably, preoccupied with other matters and not able to devote much attention to northern Iraq. The group's last stop was CentCom headquarters at Doha,

Qattar, where there were more discouraging meetings. A down-to-earth son of Georgia who called it like he saw it, Colonel Robert L. Hayes III, the I MEF operations officer, remembered thinking that no one really seemed to want the mission to happen. He himself was beginning to question its utility, especially since his mission analysis showed that the conditions that had called forth Operation Provide Comfort in 1991 simply did not exist in 2003. There did not appear to be an impending humanitarian crisis; on the contrary, this time the Kurds appeared to be well prepared for any such eventuality. The joke among members of the staff was that this task force without a mission should be known as "JTF JDK," for "just do not know." Someone even went to the length of ordering coffee cups with an official-looking "JTF JDK" logo.

Virtually at the last minute, during a meeting with General John P. Abizaid, USA, the deputy commander of CentCom forward and another veteran of Operation Provide Comfort, the mission was saved. General Abizaid analyzed the current situation from another angle and came to the conclusion that the presence of the right American flag officer would definitely be value added. That officer's mission would be to preserve the status quo during combat operations, in effect, to help secure the northern flank, and not just to prepare for humanitarian assistance after the war. The officer would work to keep the Kurds (and the other minorities) in check, which in turn would keep the Turks from intervening "to protect their equities," a distinct possibility if the Kurds seized Kirkuk, the medium-sized city that was the key to the northern oil fields, and Mosul, its larger neighbor to the north, with a population of more than 1.5 million that many senior Ba'athists called home. Even without the Turkish factor, there were so many different groups with ancient conflicts against one another that the region was a powder keg. The Turkish threat to intervene if the Kurds "got out of hand" was the match that could have set it aflame. With this vision, General Abizaid played the leading role in converting the European Command initiative into a CentCom mission and became the mission manager to whom Osman reported, on an almost daily basis. General Abizaid told General Osman that the best place for the Military Coordination and Liaison Command was in northern Iraq, not southern Turkey.³⁷²

Even though Kurdish Iraq was more or less autonomous and enjoyed the protection of its own forces, this was still enemy territory. Getting ready to operate in Saddam's backyard during the war made

matters more interesting and it called for a lot of creative preparations. Leaving roughly 30 members of his staff in Stuttgart, General Osman decided to enter Iraq with only a handful of Marines, a total of six. Through a portable communications suite, they would "reach back" for support to Stuttgart from members of the II MEF staff who had deployed to European Command, and rely largely on the Kurds and U.S. Special Forces for situational awareness, security, and other forms of support. They acquired a mix of civilian sports utility vehicles and one pickup truck, a Ford F-350, through a mix of open purchase and barter with the U.S. Air Force. They planned to travel in uniform, with a mix of light weapons. Everyone on the tiny staff had more than one job. Colonel Keith A. Lawless, for example, was not only the intelligence officer (his normal job), but also the political adviser and a bodyguard armed with an M4 assault rifle. Colonel Lawless' colorful operations chief, Master Gunnery Sergeant Richard C. McPherson, doubled as an interpreter in addition to his normal duties, and as driver and bodyguard. Born in Jamaica to Scots-Lebanese parents, McPherson had served a number of tours in the Middle East and was an accomplished Arabist.³⁷³

Just getting the approvals to travel through Turkey, and then to cross the Turkish border into Iraq, was no simple matter—requiring at one point the personal intervention of General Jones, the Supreme Allied Commander, Europe, with the Turkish high command. Finally, on 23 March the small task force made it out of Turkey and found itself very much alone on the Iraqi side of the deserted border crossing, until two heavily armed U.S. Army Special Forces noncommissioned officers appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, to serve as escorts and advisers. They made no secret of their initial lack of enthusiasm for the newcomers who were taking them away from their primary duties of training the Kurds and helping them to kill Iraqis. But, like others in Joint Special Operations Task Force North, they soon discovered that General Osman's group was low-maintenance and that its work could complement that of the Special Forces.³⁷⁴

Within two hours of crossing the border, Osman's work started in earnest. At a town called Dahok near the Green Line, he stopped to meet General Babekir al-Zibari, the senior KDP military leader in the region, whom General Osman came to appreciate as "a great warrior and a great . . . patriot."³⁷⁵ Babekir's troops, and those of other Kurdish organizations, were known generically as the "Peshmerga," literally, "those who face death." The average Peshmerga

fighter looked like a cross between a mountain man and a horseman, but there was little doubt about his motivation or his fighting ability. Peshmerga groups ranged from loosely organized militia to semiprofessional paramilitaries, with about 45,000 loyal to the Kurdish Democratic Party and some 20,000 answering to the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan.

Over the course of a meeting that lasted many hours and included an elaborate lunch, General Babekir talked about his appreciation for what the United States was doing in the region, and especially for the work of the U.S. Special Forces, with whom he had a strong ongoing relationship. He said he was eager to do more, which was his way of saying he wanted to cross the Green Line and fight the Iraqis. In what was to become a familiar refrain, General Osman counseled patience, explaining the instability that Kurdish action could unleash, given Turkish sensibilities. General Babekir took this on board and asked if General Osman could do anything about the Iraqi artillery on the other side of the Green Line that could range Dahok. Osman made no specific promises but said he would see what he could do. By chance, a few hours later a heavy Coalition air raid was made on the Iraqi lines, and General Osman's penny stock with the Kurds increased in value a hundred fold. The result was, in the words of the mission's communications officer, Lieutenant Colonel James E. Bacchus, "effervescence" from the Kurds, who felt they had been abandoned by the Americans in the past. Perhaps this time it would be different.³⁷⁶

General Osman and his party went on to the town of Salaheddin, where they stayed in a guesthouse belonging to the Kurdish Democratic Party, the somewhat more westernized, and larger, of the two Kurdish political parties. The next day, 24 March, General Osman held a press conference, there being a large contingent of media in Salaheddin, during which he explained the Military Coordination and Liaison Command's mission in general terms, outlining such functions as "the deconfliction of military activities," synchronizing humanitarian assistance, and "the maintenance of stability."³⁷⁷ Reports of the conference described the liaison command as a "special military command to protect northern Iraq and satisfy Turkish security concerns along the Turkey-Iraq border," and especially to "dissuade Turkey from sending troops to northern Iraq."³⁷⁸ The presence of a two-star Marine general had clearly caught the attention of the players on the field and demonstrated that the United States wanted to make sure the game was played by its rules. It also contributed to the "information operations" against the Iraqis, who had to be

asking themselves what a senior American officer was doing in Kurdistan, was he paving the way for a larger force? General Osman did nothing to discourage this speculation, especially when he reached out to the Iraqi generals on the Green Line, passing a very direct written message from General Tommy R. Franks: "Decide now. I, General Franks, will help you destroy Saddam's regime, or I will destroy you."³⁷⁹

The next few days saw a round of seemingly endless meetings with a bewildering array of local groups, from the routine, such as coordination with Joint Special Operations Task Force North, to the conventional, such as meetings with the Kurdish Democratic Party and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, to the exotic, such as with the Iraqi Turkomen Front, representing the Turkish minority in the region, and the Supreme Council of Iraqi Revolutionaries, an anti-Saddam group supported by Iran. Most of the time General Osman drove long distances to meet the local politicians and functionaries, choosing to meet them on their own turf rather than summoning them to his headquarters; he wanted to avoid the appearance of seeming like an imperial envoy. This entailed some risk of attack on the road from Iraqi operatives, who were said to have targeted the general for assassination. Although sometimes accompanied by a small Kurdish security detail, along with one or two U.S. Army Special Forces soldiers, force protection for the small group was mostly a matter of not making its destination known until the last minute and then traveling at breakneck speed on bad roads. In the end, the general told his drivers to slow down; he said he would rather die from a sucking chest wound than from the seemingly inevitable car crash. Once they arrived at a home or office, there were elaborate rituals of courtesy to follow, which typically meant drinking a lot of tea and eating large quantities of unusual food. Some of the food was easily identifiable, like roast lamb and rice, two local staples. But there were also unusual foods, like one that a member of the mission could only describe in his notes as a "strange veggie." This routine, and General Osman's personal style, which was characterized by patience, politeness, and persistence, enabled him to build relationships with virtually all of these groups. Although Osman did not supplant Colonel Cleveland, he became something like the senior adviser to call in order to discuss a plan, or the honest broker who could keep the peace between warring factions.

The value of these relationships emerged as the Iraqi regime collapsed at the end of the first week in

April, and the Iraqi soldiers in the north either surrendered or simply changed into civilian clothes and went home, like thousands of their comrades throughout the country. One result of the collapse was a power vacuum in Kirkuk and Mosul that some Kurds wanted to fill. There had been substantial Kurdish minorities in both of these Iraqi cities, and many Kurds had lost property when Saddam Hussein had “Arabized” the region. Understandably, the Kurds wanted to protect and assert their interests in both cities, while the Turks wanted to make sure the Kurds did not turn them into centers of Kurdish power. Apart from its interest in removing vestiges of the former regime, especially in the “loyalist” city of Mosul, and stabilizing the region, the United States was as dedicated to protecting the oil fields around Kirkuk as it was to protecting the southern oil fields around Basrah. With its blue-collar outlook, Kirkuk reminded General Osman of a frontier oil town, while Mosul seemed to be more developed and sophisticated, even attractive in parts.

The Kurds became increasingly anxious as rioting and looting spread through Mosul, where there were few Coalition troops in evidence. In Kirkuk, the Kurdish Democratic Party and its Peshmerga took the initiative to fill the vacuum. Its leader, Jalal Talibani, literally moved into city hall. His Patriotic Union rival, Massoud Barzani, immediately complained to General Osman that Talibani had broken the rules and expanded his sphere of influence at Barzani’s expense. Barzani claimed to be losing ground because he had listened to General Osman’s pleas for restraint. Osman’s response was to drive to Kirkuk on 12 April, through a kind of no-man’s land, and find Talibani, whose reaction on seeing the general was to try to embrace him in order to celebrate the day the Kurds had returned to Kirkuk. Within seconds Talibani saw that the general did not share his mood. The two stepped into the former mayor’s office, where General Osman told Talibani in no uncertain terms why he and his forces had to leave Kirkuk. If they stayed, the result could be Turkish intervention, and a war within a war. This was no idle threat; there were Turkish liaison officers and a few Turkish special forces soldiers on the ground pursuing their own, crosscutting interests. Talibani, who spoke good English and wore western-style clothes, reluctantly came around to the general’s point of view and agreed to withdraw himself and his troops from Kirkuk. Even General Osman’s staff was impressed with this result, remarking, “Gee, Sir, you threw Talibani out of town.”³⁸⁰

The townspeople of Kirkuk had seemed to be fa-



Photo courtesy of Field History Branch
Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld, center, talks with Massoud Barzani, left, president of the Kurdish Democratic Party, in Salabuddin, Iraq, during meetings with Kurdish party leaders.

vorably disposed to the Coalition and eager to return to a peacetime routine. At first they had not known what to make of the unusual group of Marines driving into town in black sport utility vehicles. But when they had realized they were looking at Americans, they had started to applaud. Mosul, by contrast, felt hostile, not unlike Tikrit. The locals appeared glum, and there were Iraqi flags flying everywhere, even from mosques. It did not help that Peshmerga elements were active in the city, which inflamed tensions between Iraqis and Kurds. While the city was quieter on 13 April than it had been the day before, General Osman agreed with task force officers that pockets of unrest were still apparent and that the United States needed to increase its military footprint as quickly as possible.³⁸¹

As if on cue, the 26th MEU (SOC) appeared over the horizon. It was the only readily available, uncommitted force in the area and was still in the Mediterranean, under the cognizance of Sixth Fleet, which meant it was ultimately under the command of General Jones. It had been natural for him, a Marine with an interest in northern Iraq, to discuss and plan its employment with CentCom. General Jones had always been a keen proponent of putting a Marine air-ground task force into northern Iraq, and a Marine expeditionary unit fit the bill.³⁸² Commanded by Colonel Andrew P. Frick, the 26th MEU was another unit that had had an incredible existence, so different from most peacetime expeditionary units that simply went from one landing exercise to another until their time was up. The 26th MEU had flown from expeditionary shipping into Afghanistan the year before in what was viewed at the time as validation of the Marine doctrine and was now about to launch a new

long-distance operation over semihostile territory.³⁸³

Part of the Marine expeditionary unit soon flew by Lockheed KC-130 Hercules aircraft from Naval Air Station, Souda Bay, on the island of Crete, to northern Iraq, a distance of some 975 nautical miles, while its air combat element, Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 264 (HMM-264), self-deployed from the USS *Iwo Jima* (LHD 7) in the eastern Mediterranean to fly nearly 500 nautical miles into Iraq, possibly a new record. The unit historian, Captain Arnaldo L. Colon, noted that the “HMM-264 self deployment into Iraq was the farthest a MEU (SOC) ACE [aviation combat element] had ever flown. Prior to that flight, HMM-365 had flown the farthest with 380 nautical miles into Afghanistan in support of Operation Enduring Freedom.”³⁸⁴ The route flown on 12 and 13 April skirted the Turkish/Syrian border and led to a U.S.-run expeditionary airfield at Irbil, in northern Iraq, where the Marine expeditionary unit came under the tactical control of Joint Special Operations Task Force North. Although they welcomed the arrival of the expeditionary unit, General Osman and the Military Coordination and Liaison Command had no command relationship with the unit.³⁸⁵

The 26th MEU had been briefed for a mission to establish security checkpoints to prevent high-value targets, mostly senior Ba’athists, from trying to escape

to Syria. One officer, First Lieutenant Sunny-James M. Risler, later recalled he had not known what to expect on arrival in Iraq; he was under the impression that he and his men needed to be ready to fight their way off the aircraft. But once they landed in Irbil, the Marines found that joint task force had the situation very well in hand; not only was the airfield secure, but there was a base camp complete with a good chow hall!³⁸⁶

The only problem was that they were not going to stay long in Irbil. Soon after landing, Colonel Cleveland asked the Marines if they could take on a new mission—provide a stabilizing presence in Mosul. Both the battalion commander at the airhead, Lieutenant Colonel David K. Hough, and Colonel Frick were ready to adapt and respond, which pleased Colonel Cleveland, who was said to have been frustrated at times by other Services’ lack of responsiveness. So, within a short period of time, the leading elements of 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, went on to Mosul without even having had a chance to find a good map of the place, let alone to plan. Over the next few days, the expeditionary unit flowed the rest of its assets to Mosul and established a presence around the local airport.

On the morning of 15 April, the 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, was involved in an incident that could have

A 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit explosive ordnance team, along with a security detail from 1st Battalion, 8th Marines, move in to search the remains of a demolished building near the airport in Mosul, Iraq.

Photo courtesy of Field History Branch



occurred almost anywhere in Iraq during this period. Tasked to conduct security operations for a regional coordination center in downtown Mosul, Company B drove to the government building, the former Ba'ath Party headquarters, along with civil affairs and Special Forces personnel. An angry crowd near the building became progressively angrier after a loud-speaker mounted on an ambulance began to broadcast a message in Arabic and a supposed "peacemaker" spoke to the crowd. It turned out that the crowd was angry because they believed that certain Iraqis who had benefited from Saddam's rule were to remain in power under the American occupation. Since none of the Americans at the governate that day spoke Arabic, they did not know what the problem was until much later. Some members of the crowd tried to punch at the Marines and to spit on them. Others tried to get close and, in the words of Sergeant Bryan L. Gilstrap, reach "into their pockets."³⁸⁷

The tension was palpable for the Marines, who were still getting adjusted to being in Iraq, to say nothing of a mission that was neither full-blown combat nor peacekeeping. True to their training, Marines checked the compound, manned the perimeter, and, according to Captain Colon, reacted to the first rounds that were fired at them by firing over the heads of the crowd. Sergeant Gilstrap, who was the scout-sniper team leader, remembered seeing an Iraqi raise an AK-47 rifle to a firing position, which made him a legitimate target under the rules of engagement. Gilstrap fired at, and hit, his target. This was followed by an intense firefight as the Marines and the crowd fired at each other. Sergeant Gilstrap said it was like the scene in the movie *Rules of Engagement* that showed Marines defending a U.S. Embassy in the Middle East against a mix of demonstrators and shooters (the movie raised questions about how much force the defenders were au-

Two Iraqi teenage boys are unfazed by the presence of a Marine from the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit, who is providing security at the Ibn Sina Teaching Hospital in Mosul.

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thorized, or entitled, to use). At some point a number of armed men tried to breach the perimeter and were killed or wounded by the Marines. As the unit's command chronology noted, the "crowd dispersed only after fixed-wing aircraft, coordinated through JSOTF-N, made low-flying passes over the area." There were no Marine casualties.^{388*}

Lieutenant Colonel Hough, the battalion commander, decided to keep his Marines at the site overnight, and the company spent the night improving its positions. The next day, the hostile sniping started back up. The Marines used a CH-46E helicopter as a counter sniper platform, with some success. But later in the day, Iraqi fighters began preparing to fire rocket-propelled grenades and crew-served weapons against the Marines from urban high ground. After consulting with his Army Special Forces counterpart, Colonel Frick decided to withdraw Company B. Given the force ratios and the general hostility in Mosul, it made sense to leave the exposed position at the government building. After dark, Company A and Special Forces soldiers ran a convoy of trucks into the site to return Company B to friendly lines. Although the evolution occurred without further incident, officers in the expeditionary unit operations section commented that they would have felt more comfortable running light armored vehicles or amphibious assault vehicles into the heart of town, which they had not brought with them into Iraq.^{389**}

*Capt Arnaldo Colon reported seven confirmed kills. *The New York Times* reported that on 15 and 16 April there were 17 Iraqis killed and 39 wounded but does not specifically state that all of these casualties were from firefights at the government building. The command chronology does not state a precise number, only that "several Iraqis were killed or wounded." After the firefight there were allegations that the Marines had overreacted, that is, that their response had not been proportional to the threat. At Col Frick's behest, 26th MEU's staff judge advocate, Maj Ian D. Brasure, conducted an informal investigation to determine if there needed to be a more formal investigation of the allegations. After talking to participants in the firefight, he came to the conclusion that that would not be necessary. (Capt Arnaldo L. Colon, ed., "U.S. Marines in Northern Iraq: A Certain Force," n.d. [Filed with 26th MEU(SOC) ComdC, Jan-Jun03, GRC, Quantico, VA]; 26th MEU(SOC) ComdC, Jan-Jun03; Maj Ian D. Brasure telephone conversation with author, 17May04)

**According to Gen Osman, who was apparently recording information that had been passed to him: "Col Frick decided to abandon the RCC [Ba'ath Party headquarters] that had been occupied based on suggestions by several local leaders. Late yesterday, the Marines guarding the RCC spotted several men establishing a machine gun position and carrying an RPG in a building situated about 200 meters from the RCC. In light of the firefight from the previous day and what appeared to be an upcoming fight, it was decided a more secure location was in order." (Gen H. P. Osman sitrep to Gen J. P. Abizaid, 7Apr03, [Copy in Reynolds Working Papers, MCHC, Quantico, VA])



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Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division arrive at Mosul Airport on 23 April, relieving Marines of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit of security and stability operations in northern Iraq.

For the remainder of its time in Mosul, which lasted until it was relieved by the 101st Airborne Division (Air Assault) in late April, the 26th MEU conducted a variety of security missions in and around Mosul, none quite so dramatic as the first, but still important and useful. The expeditionary unit also put its aviation assets to use for the mutual benefit of the Marines and the Army Special Forces. This was especially true of the Marine KC-130 at the unit's disposal, which again proved their flexibility and their worth. On 23 April elements of the 101st began relieving the Marines at the airfield, and the 26th MEU began the process of disengaging and redeploying. By 2 May, its redeployment to Souda Bay was complete. Colonel Frick's view, in retrospect, was that the unit (like the coordination and liaison command) had successfully bought time for the Coalition—a stop-gap force that had helped to restore some semblance of law and order in a difficult operating environment.^{390*}

As the 101st took over from the Joint Special Operations Task Force, the Military Coordination and Liaison Command contributed its insights on the situation. General Osman spent a good part of 22 April with the incoming commander, Major General David H. Petraeus, explaining his work and passing

*Col John P. Holden, deputy chief of plans for Sixth Fleet, stated that the reason for redeploying the 26th MEU after such a short period of time was that Coalition Forces Land Component Command decided that with the 101st Airborne Division on site, there was no longer any need for the Marines. (Col John P. Holden intvw, 9Jun03 [MCHC, Quantico, VA])

on his views on recent developments in northern Iraq. In particular, Osman described Mosul as “different than any other city in Iraq” with its “feeling of having been defeated vs. liberated.” He believed a strong United States presence was needed to enable key leadership to “feel comfortable enough to come forward.” He concluded that as soon as the new leadership was able to establish itself, “we will want to remove the United States presence quickly.”³⁹¹ General Osman conducted similar briefs with, among others, the commander of the 4th Infantry Division, Major General Raymond Odierno, and representatives of the Office of Reconstruction and Humanitarian Assistance. Some members of General Osman's staff thought the office was better prepared for a reprise of Operation Provide Comfort than for the situation that northern Iraq actually faced. Since its chief, retired Lieutenant General Jay M. Garner USA (Retired), was yet another veteran of that operation, this was understandable. Once he had conducted out-briefs with all of these officers, General Osman determined his mission was at an end and had arrangements made for his group to fly home.

What was the significance of General Osman's mission? What did the Military Coordination and Liaison Command contribute with some measure of success to a situation that was already being handled by the U.S. Army Special Forces? Arguably, the presence of a general officer freed the Special Forces from having to focus so heavily on day-to-day political relationships, thereby enabling them to focus more on the military side of things. At the same time, the command accomplished its own mission. General Osman did not win a war. The coordination and liaison command did not receive or return fire, although it came close on some days. But it did help to prevent a small war, and it did contribute to the success of Operation Iraqi Freedom as surely as if it had maneuvered a Marine air-ground task force over northern Iraq.^{392*}

*The Military Coordination and Liaison Command evokes the utility of the kind of engagement that was practiced so well by officers like Gen Zinni when he traveled around the CentCom area of operations to establish relationships with local leaders. The military historians Murray and Scales have argued that this is the next level the U.S. military needs to reach. Just as the Marine Corps and its sister Services learned how to operate lighter and faster between 1991 and 2003, there is now a need to learn how to be attuned to the cultural contexts in which they operate, refining the ability to find and manipulate “non-kinetic,” social or political, pressure points, which can often eliminate the need for “kinetic,” or traditional military, interventions.

Chapter 10

A Marriage of Convenience: Cooperation Between I MEF and the British Division

Like the war in the north, the war in southeast Iraq had some of the character of a private war. It was conducted by some 16,000 colorful fighters who had been fighting small wars for centuries, did things their own way, got along famously with Marines, and even spoke English.

The habitual relationships were there. British and American forces had been cooperating in the Persian Gulf since Desert Shield and Desert Storm. Their air forces jointly enforced the no-fly zones. After September 2001 there had been British liaison officers at CentCom and joint operations in Afghanistan. Some senior American and British decision makers already knew one another, which made planning that much easier, and there were a number of established joint procedures. The shared knowledge of the area, and of each other's procedures and personalities, made it easier for the British to succeed even though it was very late in the day when they started appearing in Kuwait in significant numbers to join I MEF.

Some of the unknowns about British participation were resolved only during the combat phase. The threshold issue was whether the British would fight alongside the Americans at all. Although the British prime minister, Tony Blair, proved to be a staunch ally before, during, and after the war, he faced a good deal of political opposition to his Iraq policy at home. This introduced an element of doubt, almost up to the last minute before G-Day, as to whether the British government would be able to order its troops into battle.

Even assuming that London would give the word to fight, there were still other significant unknowns. One was where the bulk of the British forces would attack from. Until December 2002, there were the plans to introduce most of the British from the north, that is, from Turkey, alongside the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division. According to testimony given to the British House of Commons: "In the very early planning, the Americans had decided to attack only from the south. . . . Militarily it made more sense to . . . attack on two axes, because there was going to be congestion. That was suggested to the Americans, who seized it with both hands, and that is why there was

thought . . . of putting an axis through Turkey."³⁹³ The truth is a little more nuanced. General David McKiernan, for one, commented in December 2002 that he had "always wanted a supporting attack out of the north that makes Saddam Hussein . . . look in two directions at large conventional forces."³⁹⁴

If a British division had attacked from the north, the British contribution to I MEF would probably have been nothing more than the Royal Marine unit earmarked for an amphibious operation against the peninsula in the southeastern corner of Iraq.* Always considered a piece of key terrain, Al Faw was an obvious choice for an amphibious assault of some sort. It faced Kuwait across a bay, making it a perfect launching pad for short-range missiles against Kuwait City or Coalition forces packed into the desert camps north of the Kuwaiti capital. It also straddled two important waterways, the channel to Iraq's only deep-water port, Umm Qasr, and the Shatt al Arab, which ran between the Persian Gulf and the "capital" of southern Iraq, Basrah.

By late December 2002, in the face of continued Turkish intransigence, the British had begun to explore "the southern option."³⁹⁵ That was the month when there were preliminary talks between General James Conway and the senior British Army liaison officer at Coalition Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC), Brigadier General Albert E. Whitley, which helped to lay the groundwork for British cooperation with I MEF. Around the same time, British military officers were attending various CentCom conferences and exercises like Internal Look, but they were there only as observers, not as participants.^{396**}

By early January 2003, I MEF and British planners were working hard to make up for lost time. Switch-

*"It was always planned that the Royal Marine Commandos would operate in the south." As the British Marine commander, Brigadier Jim Dutton, explained: "It was going to be . . . just one commando unit, in conjunction with the SEALs." (House of Commons, *Lessons of Iraq*, Vol. 1, p. 44)

**At senior levels, British and American officials held increasingly detailed discussions about Iraq from the summer of 2002 onward. It appears there was a continuum, a series of lesser decision points, rather than one or two decisive conferences or agreements. (House of Commons, *Lessons of Iraq*, v. 1, pp. 32, 34)



Photo courtesy of CFLCC

Coalition senior commanders, including LtGen David A. McKiernan and MajGen Robin V. Brims, commander of the 1 (UK) Armored Division, conduct final planning for the seizure of the southern Iraqi city of Basrah.

ing from the northern to the southern option meant the British would have to change their force mix. Instead of a predominantly armor, mechanized package, suitable for traveling and fighting over long distances, it now made sense to put together a lighter package, especially since there might be more fighting in the built-up areas of Umm Qasr and Basrah. So the British division, whose formal title was 1 (United Kingdom) Armored Division, evolved into a hybrid of forces, the more or less independent units from various commands and regions being roughly comparable to Marine regimental combat teams: 16 Air Assault Brigade, 3 Commando Brigade, and 7 Armored Brigade (the only one that was an organic part of the division). The Commando Brigade was the parent unit of the battalion-sized Royal Marine commando that had been aimed at Al Faw; it was now reinforced by another Royal Marine commando, but since it was still short of its full complement, the resulting gap was ultimately filled by the 15th Marine Expedition Unit.

The headquarters elements arrived in theater first, and, aware that CentCom was planning to be ready to fight sometime in March, did a remarkable job of orchestrating the surge of forces into Kuwait, running them through the CFLCC reception, staging, and integration process and establishing not only internal but also external command and control mechanisms. The man who made this happen was Major General Robin V. Brims, the division's commanding general, who was tall, thin, articulate, approachable, and full

of energy. A career officer who had been commissioned into the light infantry and subsequently served in Germany, Northern Ireland, and the Balkans, he was the kind of soldier Americans did not meet every day. There was a trace of old-school eccentricity in his official biography, which described him as "single, a cricket fanatic, Newcastle United supporter, and outdoor enthusiast whose specialty area is bonfires."³⁹⁷ It was a trait that made him all the more attractive to Marines, whose values sometimes seem to be from another era. In this he was not unlike General James Mattis, with whom he was to forge a good working relationship.³⁹⁸

Quick to visualize the desired outcome, General Brims put his stamp on the division, issuing his "GOC [General Officer Commanding] Directive 1" on 3 February 2003:

We are TaCom CG I MEF. We create tactical effects to enable decisive delivery of his plans. We are integrating with HQ I MEF and its subordinate formations. Whilst we have been planning within I MEF for barely a month, much of I MEF has been planning, even conducting scenario related training, for many months. . . . We have identified five critical elements of 1 (UK) Armd Div's AO upon which we need to have an effect:

- | | |
|---|----------------------------|
| a. Iraq's Armed Forces | c. Oilfield infrastructure |
| b. Irregular forces working against the Coalition | d. UMM QASR |
| | e. BASRAH . . . |

We must also establish all our personal and electronic connectivities and processes with HQ I MEF. Our force is designed to be supported by I MEF deep assets. We must establish the techniques for delivering this in a timely, effective, and safe manner.

We are maneuverists. We must grasp opportunities to deliver our missions with minimum kinetic force. Iraq must still exist after the conflict as a sovereign state, stable and able to defend itself. . . . We shall probably be the first Coalition forces to implement Phase IV. We can set the pace.³⁹⁹

Despite their late arrival, the British received a warm welcome from I MEF. To review the bidding, I MEF could now assign some of its missions to the British and would not be stretched as thinly as it would otherwise have been. It could even ratchet the tempo of operations up still higher. With respect to the "Opening Gambit," I MEF decided not to change the carefully rehearsed plans to seize the oil fields in the first few days of the war. The planners considered the late date, and the extensive rehearsals that 1st Marine Division had already conducted, and decided it made more sense to leave well enough alone. The Marine division would still seize the objectives, but the British units, following close behind, would take over the security mission soon after the initial assault. Similarly, 15th MEU, operating under British control, would seize Umm Qasr but then turn the city over to the British and revert to U.S. Marine control.⁴⁰⁰

The Marines were so pleased with the presence and the potential of the British that by early March, they had decided to expand their area of operations by a further 250 kilometers to the north. According to the British division's war diary, written in somewhat formal English, "it was envisaged that after the execution of the initial Base Plan, which sees the division seizing the Al Faw Peninsula, subsequent operations would involve a push north by a brigade to the vicinity of Al Kut and Al Amarah. This would be conducted in parallel with 1st MarDiv and TF Tarawa to secure and screen the eastern Flank. The origins of this increased role apparently came from a mutually registered desire at all levels to maximize the full potential of the division's combat power."⁴⁰¹

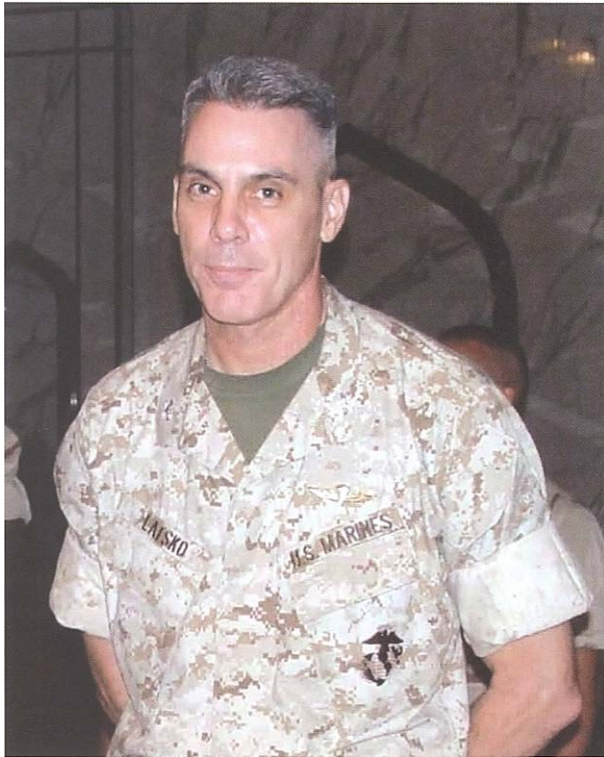
General Conway remembered later that one of the deciding factors in the distribution and timing of tasks was the amount of equipment available to the British as G-Day approached. The deployment phase was

completed by 18 March, but the division was not ready to cross the line of departure. Quite simply, the U.S. Marines had more at their disposal, while the British would not be fully equipped until after the war had begun.⁴⁰² It was, as the British parliamentary report concluded, a "close run thing."⁴⁰³

By G-Day the division itself was combat ready; that is, ready for what in American terms was a running start, even though some of its units were not ready. It could carry out the missions that were to occur on the first days of the war, and would have to continue to prepare for the missions that were to occur after the initial battles. General Brims explained: "Sometimes you have to be positive . . . you are dealt a hand of cards . . . you would like to have 52 cards in the deck. . . . But, in this case, we had actually declared readiness with 46 cards."⁴⁰⁴ His subordinate, Brigadier Graham J. Binns, the commander of 7 Armored Brigade, was not quite so sanguine, saying he "felt that we were carrying a lot of risk. The mood was one that we were not ready. . . . that the soldiers . . . were not properly equipped."⁴⁰⁵ But throughout the process there was a great deal of creativity and adaptation that made the British ready to cross into Iraq on 20 March.

The synergy that developed between the British division and I MEF between January and March 2003 certainly eased the joint preparations for combat. Over the years, the U.S. Marines had nourished a relationship with the Royal Marines, while the British Army had tended to forge its relations with other armies on the continent, and the Royal Air Force had cooperated with the U.S. Air Force in the Persian Gulf, all good preparation for fighting as part of a Coalition. It was something new for U.S. Marines and the British Army to work closely together, but it did not take either side long to discover the common ground. The two forces had similar cultures, traditionally oriented to "small wars," independent operations, and mission orders. The leaders' personalities meshed, not only between those of the same rank, as in the good relationship between Generals Mattis and Brims, but also between superior and subordinate. General Conway's command style sat very well with General Brims, who said that throughout his association with the Marines, he consistently felt empowered and never constrained.⁴⁰⁶

The process was strengthened by the exchange of liaison officers who actively interpreted their charters. The head of the U.S. liaison team to the British headquarters was Colonel Thomas C. Latsko, who embedded most of his Marines in the U.K. division's operations section, where they became active par-



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Before heading the liaison team with the British headquarters, Texas-native and Miami University of Ohio graduate, Col Thomas C. Latsko, had served as operations officer, 3d ANGLICO, battalion maintenance officer, 4th Tank Battalion, and as an advisor to the 1st Naval Construction Regiment.

ticipants in planning and operations. The Marines found that the British division was far more map-centric than any American command. Battle updates took place around the “bird table,” a large table covered with maps and overlays for what looked to American eyes like World War II briefings. No one used PowerPoint software. The demeanor of the British officers around the table seemed informal, even casual; for example, there was little apparent consciousness of rank, and first names were used freely. But there could be little doubt about their professionalism. Units, and individuals, typically reported only what the next higher echelon needed to know. Briefers were held to time limits. Most British officers had a strong ability to visualize the situation, enter into creative and occasionally pointed debate about possible courses of action, and issue clear mission orders, which were far less detailed than American operations orders but, like most Coalition orders in this war, focused first on the desired effect, as opposed to simply directing a particular action.⁴⁰⁷ Marines working with subordinate British commands

made similar observations, saying they found British briefs to be straightforward, person-to-person, and not cluttered with detail—overall, a “nice change of pace.”⁴⁰⁸

Colonel Latsko and his deputy, Lieutenant Colonel Edward J. Quinonez, made it their business to bring the British command-and-control system closer to the American one, and holding school at the British command center, introduced their new comrades in arms to various computerized American systems. By the end of the fighting in Iraq, the two systems were literally operating side by side, and British and American staff officers could work both at the same time to mutual benefit, although the gap between them, at least in terms of hardware, remained significant and was the subject of a British lessons-learned article.⁴⁰⁹ One significant technological issue was SIPRnet connectivity. This internet channel was arguably the primary means of communication for U.S. forces in this war. Without access to SIPRnet, the British often felt at a loss, and liaison officers had to develop work-arounds.⁴¹⁰

Alongside Colonel Latsko's officers in operations was a U.S. Marine air support element, which was able to provide the rapid response and coordination of close air support that is the function of the Marine direct air support control center. The air support element operated mostly out of the British combat operations and information center, built around the “bird table,” but also sent its Marines down to the two British brigades that wanted their services. There they joined forces with Reserve Marines from the 1st and 3d Air-Naval Gunfire Liaison Companies (1st and 3d ANGLICOs), small numbers of whom had been deployed to the British division and immediately integrated into its training cycle. Recognizing their usefulness in joint and combined operations, General Jones had wisely brought the air and naval gunfire liaison companies back on line during his tenure as Commandant. This was proof of concept.⁴¹¹ The 7 Armored Brigade had made a point of getting its air and naval gunfire liaison Marines to participate in training on British simulators in Germany, where they also made a point of exploring local drinking establishments together. As British officer Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas D. Ashmore commented, if shedding blood is the best way to build comradeship, drinking together is the second best.⁴¹² The officers of 7 Armored viewed Marine air as the great “get out of jail” card, but thought that air and naval gunfire liaison companies alone would be enough and passed up an opportunity to have its own air support element, a decision it came to regret once its sister brigades