

U.S. Marines in Battle

An-Najaf

AUGUST 2004





The Fight for An-Najaf in Context

The city of an-Najaf, Iraq, is a provincial and market center located on the western branch of the Euphrates River approximately 100 miles south of Baghdad. Its population (prewar) of 563,000 expands at times with pilgrims to this important center of Islamic scholarship and theology. It is the location of several significant shrines for Shi'a Muslims and boasts one of the largest cemeteries in the world. Its more recent history has been marked by conflict of a political nature as the place of exile for Ayatollah Khomeini and site of the assassination of Ayatollah Mohammad Sadiq. It served as the location of Shi'a resistance to perceived political oppression and was a place of battle once more in 2004.

This is a "battle study" written purposely from the perspective of the Marines, soldiers, and sailors who fought at an-Najaf in August 2004. Some context is needed to fit these events within the evolution of the campaigning in Iraq in 2004. The Americans deployed to al-Anbar and an-Najaf Provinces, faced a variety of threats as Iraq attempted to again govern itself. Threats were from disparate sources, including Sunni fighters in Fallujah and Shi'a fighters in Najaf. Behind each was the possibility of al-Qaeda in Iraq or criminal exploitation of any disruption of Coalition efforts to establish responsible Iraqi Government. This complexity of threats did not lend itself to easy solutions. In March 2004, Lieutenant General James T. Conway's I Marine Expeditionary Force was faced with an outbreak of Sunni insurgency in Fallujah. At the same time, a Shi'a uprising took place across Iraq, including Baghdad, Najaf, an-Nasiriyah, al-Kut, al-Amarah, and Kirkuk. The fighting spread to Karbala, Hillah, and Basrah with attacks on Iraqi and Coalition outposts. This fighting dropped off in June with the establishment of the Iraqi Interim Government of Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, but the menace of further violence remained.

The Multi-National Force-Iraq, under General George W. Casey Jr., USA, felt that before the Iraqis could be responsible for security in each province, the centers of violence had to be dealt with by a "clear-hold-build" approach. Baghdad, Fallujah, and Najaf were thus targeted. When Muqtada al-Sadr fomented another uprising in August, the recently arrived 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit found itself assigned to quell the uprising in Najaf. It would be reinforced for this effort by two U.S. Army and four Iraqi Army battalions. The narrative that follows documents this effort from the small-unit level. The importance of the close relationship between political and military force is emphasized. The intent is to provide a view of combat for the education and training of Marines who might face similar circumstances.

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The Battle of An-Najaf

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Before the Fight

Deployed to Iraq in mid-2004, Lieutenant Colonel John L. Mayer's Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines (BLT 1/4) expected a relatively familiar mission as operational reserve in the Baghdad region. Instead, it walked into the path of a raging storm, resulting in one of the most intense battles the Marine Corps had seen in Operation Iraqi Freedom. In the city of an-Najaf, the battalion engaged a fanatical enemy in a place where "it rained shrapnel," and machine gun, small arms, and rocket-propelled grenade fire reached intensities unknown to already battle-tested Marines.¹ Temperatures soared past 125 degrees Fahrenheit in compressed and confusing city blocks. The special operations capable 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (11th MEU), of which BLT 1/4 was the ground combat element, operated in a tightly restrictive supporting arms environment reminiscent of Vietnam at its height—and it cost Marine lives.

Even before they departed, the Marines of Colonel Anthony M. Haslam's 11th MEU did not expect an easy deployment. The command element anticipated tense periods of combat as inevitable no matter what the mission. But the violence that followed came more quickly than even the most foresighted expected.² The Marines always stood ready to fight, but confrontation developed so rapidly, and later so explosively, that 11th MEU commanders found the need to expedite and adjust their plans.

The first adjustment came as the expeditionary unit found its mission changed just days out of port from Kuwait. Originally slated as operational reserve for the Baghdad area, theater commanders recognized that the 11th MEU did not possess the necessary manpower required to support the anticipated violence and instability in the capital city following the transfer of authority from the coalition leadership to that of the Iraqi interim government. Instead, the theater commanders assigned the unit a challenging security and stability operation mission. The expeditionary unit was to take

control of the southern Iraqi provinces of an-Najaf and al-Qadisiyah, an area of 16,000 square miles with a violent recent past that still festered. Colonel Haslam and his officers took the sudden change of mission in stride and began planning accordingly. Studying intelligence reports, the 11th MEU staff outlined a comprehensive, aggressive long-range plan.³

As Lieutenant Colonel Mayer's battalion landing team deployed, it faced a situation of growing violence and complexity that had been building since the Coalition's initial invasion of Iraq in 2003. The defeat of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent establishment of a provisional government in early 2004 created an environment of volatile political instability, particularly in the Shiite cities of southern Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr, a charismatic Shiite Muslim cleric, had emerged as a self-proclaimed populist champion of Iraq's poor and oppressed. As the defender of the downtrodden, al-Sadr demonized the occupying American forces as well as what he considered their puppet Provisional Iraqi Government. His followers included the Mahdi, an armed paramilitary force that served as al-Sadr's private army and whose members vowed to follow his orders to the death. Driven by al-Sadr's inflammatory rhetoric, the militia initiated a widespread insurrection throughout much of Iraq on 4 April 2004 when the newly established Provisional Iraqi Government issued an arrest warrant for al-Sadr for the murder of an Iraqi judge.

Fighting erupted in several major Shiite-dominated cities, including Baghdad, Karbala, al-Kut, an-Nasiriyah, and others, principally south of the capital. Over the next two months, Coalition forces responded to quell the uprising, battering the militia in several engagements, with 1,500 to 2,000 of its members killed in the fighting. The insurrection nearly collapsed, with the remaining militia fighters making a last stand at Najaf. But before the Coalition could completely eliminate the militia, they negotiated a truce effective as of 6 June 2004 that temporarily ended the fighting and left al-Sadr unscathed.

Under the truce terms, al-Sadr and his followers were to uphold a cease-fire, disarm, and relinquish territory held by his forces, but the agreement allowed the militia to retain control of Najaf and al-Kufa, al-Sadr's home territory, and restricted access of Coalition forces into either city. With this reprieve from the Coalition, al-Sadr converted the two

On the Cover: *Marines of Company A, BLT 1/4, strike the militia occupied Iraqi police station in Kufa near an-Najaf during a raid on 20 August 2004.*

Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

A Marine of Company C, BLT 1/4, stares at a poster of Muqtada al-Sadr during a raid on al-Sadr's house on 12 August 2004.

cities into his own personal kingdom.⁴ More importantly, Multi-National Corps Iraq (MNCI) placed the vast Wadi al-Salam Cemetery, the Imam Ali Mosque, and the Kufa Mosque completely off limits to all Coalition forces. This mandate effectively created a safe haven into which the American forces could not enter without permission from the highest U.S. military authority in Iraq.

Optimism surrounding the truce soon dissipated as al-Sadr's militia, using fear and violent oppression, took over Najaf and Kufa and reinforced control.⁵ Reasserting their power came easily for the militia, as many Iraqi soldiers and policeman had been killed or disappeared during the two months of fighting. The new interim Iraqi government installed on 30 June struggled to find a firm footing in establishing security in the militia-dominated areas.⁶

In the Najaf-Kufa area, al-Sadr's militia demonstrated better structure and organization than the local government. They exploited this organization as well as the chaotic political climate to facilitate their oppressive practices. Militia intimidation included assassination, kidnapping, and torture of police and government officials. After committing these heinous acts, the militiamen would then retreat into an exclusion area, where Coalition forces could not pursue them.⁷ The militiamen roamed the streets, set up roadblocks, and

intimidated whomever they pleased. On one occasion, al-Sadr's men kidnapped an Iraqi policeman and tortured him while broadcasting the atrocity over a government radio frequency.⁸ Their abusive actions so disrupted the peoples' lives and the local economy that the militiamen quickly alienated most of Najaf's population. Najaf was largely a tourist destination because of the Imam Ali Mosque and the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery, but militia activities frightened away nearly all the tourists. City residents, particularly businessmen, resented the militiamen and their actions. A local store owner admitted that among the residents of Najaf, "90 percent of the people here hate him [al-Sadr]."⁹

As Lieutenant Colonel Mayer prepared the Battalion Landing Team and elements of his headquarters to move to his new area of operations, the militia weighed heavily on his decisions. Upon debarkation in Kuwait in early July, Mayer oversaw the hardening of the battalion landing team vehicles under contract by the Oshkosh Corporation of Wisconsin.¹⁰ Mayer also considered a more aggressive patrolling policy and the training of the Iraqi National Guard units that would be under his command. Additionally, 11th MEU headquarters guided the development of a resource and troop distribution plan at the various established bases in the area.

Battle of An-Najaf