



U.S. Marine Corps Map

After 10 days of acclimatization in Kuwait and final training, the expeditionary unit deployed in seven vehicle convoys to the an-Najaf/al-Qadisiyah area. The Marines soon observed the area's volatility as they moved to their respective bases of operation. Militia fighters fired on several of the convoys, with a few of these incidents leading to minor engagements that resulted in several enemy casualties and a number of prisoners. First Lieutenant Michael J. Borneo, commander of Combined Antiarmor Team A, recalled how militia fighters

ambushed his team within 10 minutes after it arrived in the Najaf area. Borneo referred to them simply as a few "farmers," and after a short firefight, his team captured four men who participated in the attack. In the same area, he reported numerous men carrying rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers "all over" the city. These Iraqis exchanged hostile looks and gestures with the Marines.¹¹ In another incident just south of Najaf, Captain Stephen A. Kintzley's reconnaissance platoon took fire, dismounted, cleared the house where the

shooting came from, and captured three Iraqis. By the time the Marines arrived at their destination, none needed to be told that danger lived on the streets they would soon patrol.

Despite these incidents, the 11th MEU's movement went smoothly from debarkation in Kuwait to its forward operating bases in an-Najaf and al-Qadisiyah Provinces. Its responsibility of securing more than 35,000 square kilometers made for a formidable task, both operationally and logistically. The expeditionary unit planned to operate out of four key forward operating bases (FOB)—Hotel, Duke, Echo, and al-Asad—and several smaller bases around Najaf. Forward Operating Base Hotel, located only three kilometers north of Najaf's government, commercial, and religious centers, served as the landing team's primary operational base.

Colonel Haslam made the decision that containing the militia was to be the 11th MEU's primary operational focus. While the Marines guarded places like police stations and the provincial government headquarters, they had to keep close watch on militia activity,



Photo by Cpl Daniel J. Fosco
Col Anthony M. Haslam, commanding officer of 11th MEU, describes the fighting that occurred in the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery to MajGen Richard F. Natonski, commanding general of 1st Marine Division.

particularly at the Imam Ali Mosque.¹² In addition to the mosque, the expeditionary unit also closely monitored the nearby home of al-Sadr and his clerical school, which, besides his leadership base in the Imam Ali Mosque, served as a logistical base and militia strongpoint.

Although BLT 1/4 used FOB Hotel as its primary base of operations, the Marine expeditionary unit's commanding officer, Colonel Haslam, chose FOB Duke as his headquarters, approximately 20 kilometers northwest of Najaf. Duke's large size and geographic isolation made it an ideal choice for security, administration, and logistics storage.¹³ The size of the facility also provided adequate room for the expeditionary unit's helicopters—UH-1N Huey, AH-1J Cobra, and CH-46 Sea Knight—for casualty evacuation, resupply, and small-unit troop movements between forward operating bases.

Theater commanders stationed Lieutenant Colonel Mayer's Company A at FOB Echo in the city of ad-Diwaniyah, about 50 kilometers east of FOB Hotel. From here the "Alpha Raiders," as they called themselves, led local security and stability operations in the area. The 11th MEU also used al-Asad, an enormous Hussein-era Iraqi airbase west of Baghdad, to house several of the unit's air assets. It took three to four hours via ground transport to reach Najaf from al-Asad, but it only took 20 minutes by air.

Battalion Landing Team 1/4 selected another site, FOB Baker, for Kufa operations because of its location near the city's central district. Colonel Haslam stationed a platoon of Company B at the Najaf provincial governor's compound to supplement Iraqi security, only a short distance from al-Sadr's headquarters and militia strong points. The 11th MEU's executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Eugene N. Apicella, initially stationed at FOB Echo, would be stationed at the governor's compound to serve as permanent liaison to an-Najaf Provincial Governor Adnan al-Zurufi.

The restrictions of movement imposed by the May truce complicated the already arduous task of contending with al-Sadr's militia. Once Mayer's battalion arrived in the Najaf area, the militia's flagrant acts of oppression and its aggressive attitude immediately caught the Marines' attention. Plans and policies for dealing with the militias, first developed before the expeditionary unit landed in Iraq, now took a more solid shape as the battalion received more situational awareness and intelligence once in the city.¹⁴ The militiamen's practice of coming out of the exclusion areas, committing acts of coercion and intimidation, and then slipping back into their safety

zones to avoid arrest or decisive engagement with U.S. forces presented a litany of tactical as well as legal problems for the 11th MEU staff. The local Iraqi political authority's inability to assert any control in the city further frustrated the situation.¹⁵

Before initiating its own plans, however, the expeditionary unit needed the transfer of authority in the Najaf-Kufa area from the U.S. Army's Task Force Dragon, which had engaged in caretaking operations in the cities since the truce. Upon arrival in the vicinity on 21 July, Colonel Haslam's unit began a 10-day transition that resulted in the Marines assuming control of both cities but still technically under the authority of the Polish-led Multi-National Division Central-South.¹⁶ While the transition progressed, Army commanders shared their concerns about al-Sadr's activity in the area. They viewed the situation as tense and rapidly nearing the boiling point. Company C platoon commander First Lieutenant Jeremy T. Sellars agreed. In retrospect, he said, he believed that the Army operations had been only "holding a finger in the dike."¹⁷ A more forthright unnamed officer commented that aggressive patrolling, such as the Marines had in mind, would be "like kicking a hornet nest."¹⁸

As the transition began, the Marines saw first hand the boldness of al-Sadr's militia. The very first Army-led transition patrol, intended only to orient its Marine counterparts, set the operational tone for future dealings with the militia.¹⁹ The Humvee patrol ran into a militia roadblock. There, according to Lieutenant Sellars, a militiaman stood nearby carrying an AK-47. Another al-Sadr fighter wielded a rocket launcher, causing a Humvee's turret gunner to cautiously turn his .50-caliber machine gun in the rocket-bearer's direction.²⁰ The resulting stare-down portended more hostility to come, perhaps even a firefight. The Army lieutenant leading the patrol expressed complete surprise, adding that he had "never seen this before." Reflecting on the same moment, Lieutenant Sellars related that the militiaman with the rifle appeared absolutely astonished at this perceived American transgression and had the angriest look that Sellars had ever seen.²¹

As the small convoy moved on, more fighters appeared carrying rifles and rockets. The 28 May truce forbade the militia from possessing such weapons, but plans for disarming the militiamen had never developed. The routine orientation patrol had inadvertently driven by al-Sadr's house and a women's maternity hospital, locales that the militia considered off limits to Coalition presence. Although these locations were technically not in the exclusion zone, Coalition forces had stayed out of



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read
Marines from BLT 1/4 begin their patrolling of an-Najaf, which led to the confrontation with al-Sadr's militia during the Borneo patrol.

the area to avoid possible incident.²² Why the Army chose to take the transition patrol into this area is unclear, but the decision to drive through the roadblock ignited righteous anger among the militia and began a chain of events that led to confrontation with the Marines shortly afterward and contributed to the hostilities that became the larger battle of Najaf.²³

The Army patrol incident reinforced policy already in the making by Lieutenant Colonel Mayer and his staff. At an 11th MEU command element meeting shortly before completing the transition, the MEU staff committed to a tentative 90-day militia ejection plan. Once the Marines assumed authority over the area of operations, BLT 1/4 began its mission immediately, setting in motion aggressive patrolling, eventually culminating in a decisive engagement.²⁴

Borneo Patrol

The Army commanding officer of Task Force Dragon ceremonially handed over responsibility for the entire an-Najaf and al-Qadisiyah region to Colonel Haslam and the 11th Marine Expeditionary Force on 31 July 2004. Haslam decided to begin patrolling immediately, so on 1 August, the 11th MEU staff formulated a plan, giving careful consideration to the continuing reports of the militia openly carrying weapons. The Coalition allowed Iraqi citizens to own AK-47s, but intelligence revealed that militiamen had stockpiled various caches of illegal arms, including machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortars. Captain Kintzley's reconnaissance platoon had confirmed these intelligence reports when Kintzley's roving patrols reported many men brandishing the full range of banned weapons.²⁵

Colonel Haslam committed to the concept of avoiding an immediate fight, acceding to the wishes of Adnan al-Zurufi, interim governor of an-Najaf Province. Haslam had warned al-Zurufi of militia provocations, but the governor preferred a peaceful solution. He wanted to co-opt al-Sadr into the political process, so he counseled patience to the Marine commander. Haslam wanted to have ample preparation time before confronting al-Sadr's forces anyway, in large part to have a chance to train the Iraqi National Guard troops and to ensure that his unit was combat-ready. Haslam emphasized, however, the need to demonstrate to al-Sadr that the Marines controlled the city and would "not put up with any nonsense."²⁶

Recognizing both the dangerous potential of aggressive patrolling by Marines and the assertiveness the militia displayed with its weapons buildup, Colonel Haslam sought to construct an appropriate policy of "flexible engagement." This task fell to Lieutenant Colonel Gary S. Johnston, 11th MEU operations officer, a capable officer profoundly aware of the slippery nature of his new undertaking. According to Johnston, "We knew based on our intel that the al-Sadr residences were hot spots regardless if they were in the exclusion zone. The hospital was nearby al-Sadr's chief residence. . . . If you went to check out the hospital . . . you were in his front yard."²⁷ Coalition forces venturing into these areas, Johnston recalled, would require special clearance and, most likely, additional firepower to deal with whatever they might find.²⁸

Patrolling began on the morning of 2 August as scheduled, consisting of Combined Antiarmor Team A from Weapons Company in eight armored Humvees with a total of 36 to 41 men riding four to five in each vehicle.²⁹ The patrol also included a radio battalion element and a small Iraqi National Guard complement. The vehicles carried an array of weaponry, including wire-guided antitank missiles (TOW), 7.62mm machine guns, 40mm automatic grenade launchers, and .50-caliber machine guns. First Lieutenant Michael Borneo led this first patrol in the Najaf area since the Marine Corps took control.

While commanders felt confident in their Marines and their equipment, they did not hold the same certainty that the militia would submit to Coalition control. Small uprisings that previous spring and the militia's recent display of recalcitrance demonstrated a resistance to cooperating with the Marines. In particular, Lieutenant Colonel Johnston, who warily drew up the new exclusion zones plan, had doubts. He recalled that after the 0800 intelligence briefing that preceded Lieutenant Borneo's patrol, he had a "gut feeling that the



Photo by CWO-2 Matthew D. Middleton

Some of the many weapons the explosive ordnance disposal teams collected from the militia in the Old City of an-Najaf during the fighting in August 2004.

patrol was going to be tested." He told fellow officers that his "spider hair was tingling."³⁰

Johnston had given Borneo's platoon its mission: investigate several sites that intelligence identified as "places of interest."³¹ These included police stations, gas stations, power plants, and hospitals around downtown Najaf as well as other sites likely to have militia patrols or roadblocks. He ordered Borneo to take special care to respect exclusion areas but to demonstrate to the militia leadership that anything outside those areas was under Marine authority and "game for us."³² With that guidance, Borneo's patrol departed Forward Operating Base Hotel on the morning of 2 August. The patrol maintained a simple route, with most of the checkpoints and "places of interest" on or near Route Miami, a four-lane principal thoroughfare in Najaf. The list of checkpoints included the hospital, site of the Army-led patrol face-off two weeks earlier. Despite this incident, this checkpoint received no special significance or notice from the patrol, which treated it as just another point on the list.³³

The combined antiarmor patrol left Route Miami, turned east on Route Brady, then north on Route Elway, arriving at the women's hospital.³⁴ Within moments, the fears that made Lieutenant Colonel Johnston's "spider hairs" tingle began to materialize. As Lieutenant Borneo's team approached the hospital, he observed a few Iraqi National Guardsmen posted as sentries. They crouched behind a car and stared across the street at a walled compound consisting of the private al-Sadr family hospital (more like a clinic), al-Sadr's religious school, and his father's house. There, adjacent to the Army-led patrol



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

A Marine under attack by 60mm and 82mm mortars while conducting operations at al-Sadr's house, which sat in an open compound where multiple obstacles, including large trucks and buses, provided excellent cover.

face-off site, stood several militiamen outside the walls carrying AK-47s. Since carrying these rifles did not violate the law, the Borneo patrol could do nothing to these men.

Moments later, however, the Iraqi troops accompanying the patrol pointed out more militiamen inside the al-Sadr compound hauling machine guns, rocket launchers, 82mm mortar tubes, and loading them onto a truck. The Marines could not ignore this movement, which was a clear violation of the weapons restrictions clause of the truce. Lieutenant Borneo ordered a five-man team to investigate, with the intention of arresting the militia leaders and confiscating the illegal weapons.³⁵ As the Marines moved across the street, they heard a shot fired from the compound. The militia sentries, apparently perceiving themselves under attack, opened fire across Route Elway on the approaching Marines.

Although no one actually knew where the shot originated (someone later identified it as an accidental discharge from an Iraqi National Guard soldier), as quickly as it sounded, the Marines' expectations of

avoiding an engagement with al-Sadr's troops evaporated. The shooting changed everything in the Marines' plans. The impending skirmish would become a catalyst for a much larger battle that lay ahead. The battalion landing team's operations officer, Major Coby M. Moran, later called the incident "the shot heard 'round the world," comparing it to the shot at Concord, Massachusetts, that initiated the American Revolution.³⁶

The Weapons Company patrol responded to the militia with a textbook maneuver. Borneo brought the dismounts back and surrounded the side of the al-Sadr clinic located in an open area a few hundred meters square. He effectively cordoned the compound by positioning two Humvees to the north and two to the south. The other four vehicles remained in place for the time being. Once al-Sadr's fighters, an estimated 40-man element, realized that the Marines had surrounded their position, they responded with all their small arms. What had started with rifle fire suddenly escalated to machine guns, rocket launchers, and mortars—both 60mm and 82mm—and at a significant volume. Sensing the seriousness of the situation, Borneo immediately called



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines of Company C, BLT 1/4, prepare for a raid on al-Sadr's compound. The Marines contended with militiamen shooting from multiple locations, using mortars, machine guns, and small arms.

battalion headquarters and requested the quick-reaction force stationed at the governor's compound, about 30 minutes away.³⁷

The al-Sadr compound stood in an open area, but its perimeter wall and other obstacles provided cover and concealment for the enemy. Borneo could see 60mm mortar rounds going over buildings but could not see the firing point. Storage containers, a junkyard, long berms, and vehicles also separated the Marines and the militia fighters, making the battle terrain difficult. The lack of adequate troops to maneuver also increased the difficulty of the fight. Some rocket-propelled grenades nearly hit several Humvees deployed in the section to the south. Borneo counted fifteen 82mm mortar rounds hitting on what appeared to be pre-registered targets.³⁸ About 25 more followed during the length of the engagement.

Al-Sadr's guards fought the Marines primarily from an open lot outside the compound but discharged their mortars from inside the walls. The Marines engaged whatever targets they could find, firing from the cover of various obstacles that also restricted their fields of fire. Borneo's platoon sergeant, Gunnery Sergeant Jeffery M. Godfredson, located to the south of the militia position,

used the large storage containers that dotted the battle area to his advantage. While awaiting permission to fire, he used the container for cover, but once the Marines began returning fire, Godfredson pulled his armed Humvee out of cover to fire, then returned to cover for reloading. While he remained under cover, the other vehicle from his section assumed the firing position until its automatic weapons ran low, then they switched again. About the same time, two more Humvees maneuvered midway between Borneo's and Godfredson's sites to a position that offered the best fields of fire. But the position offered no cover and quickly drew enemy fire.

The battlefield now extended to 360 degrees. At this stage of the firefight, Gunnery Sergeant Godfredson grew frustrated by the several earth berms that crisscrossed the lot and obstructed the fields of fire. Lance Corporal Eric Johnson and the platoon corpsman climbed one of the berms to observe the enemy. Once on top, they immediately noticed a militiaman about 100 meters away preparing to fire a rocket launcher. Johnson and the corpsman held their fire because the platoon still awaited battalion headquarters' permission to return fire. When permission finally came, the corpsman immediately took



Photo by Cpl Matthew S. Richards

Marines of the 11th MEU used their Humvees for cover while fighting al-Sadr's militia during the Borneo patrol.

a shot at the militiaman but missed. At the same time, the rest of the patrol opened fire, causing the volume of fire to pick up enormously. Godfredson's Humvees pulled back and forth delivering ferocious fire on al-Sadr's militia, escalating the once-small skirmish into an increasingly violent engagement.

The dismounted Marines also joined the fight. Sergeant Eric W. Clayton took a team consisting of Lance Corporals Johnson (who had come back down the berm), Richard L. Sweetman, and Cedar Esquivel up the berm and laid suppressing fire on a dug-in militia position. This allowed Gunnery Sergeant Godfredson to maneuver his Humvee section into a better firing position. From there, Corporal Daniel W. Barker aimed his mounted 7.62mm machine gun on the enemy mortar position that Sergeant Clayton and his team had engaged with their M16 rifles. Using Godfredson's alternating fire and cover tactic, when Barker had to reload, Corporal Brent M. Boden drove his vehicle into the position vacated by Godfredson, all the while under heavy machine gun and rocket fire. Boden's vehicle, equipped with an MK19 automatic grenade launcher manned by Lance Corporal Kyle W. Burns, continued suppressing the enemy mortar while avoiding

an increasingly heavy fire from the enemy. Lance Corporal Johnson spotted two militiamen on top of a school bus inside the compound attempting to launch rocket propelled grenades and killed both of them with his rifle.

From the berm, Sergeant Clayton's team observed militia rocket teams crouching behind one of the other dirt berms. Lance Corporal Sweetman fired an AT-4 antitank rocket that either killed the militiamen or scared them away. Meanwhile, Corporal Weaver's rear security element had its own fight on its hands. While his .50-caliber machine gunner, Private First Class Edward Roacho, suppressed sniper fire from a building inside the compound, Corporal Weaver maneuvered to engage the new enemy attackers. Using his M16, he killed a militiaman attempting to flank his vehicle. Then, exposing himself to heavy enemy fire, Weaver ran back and forth between his position and the Iraqi National Guard forces accompanying the patrol, encouraging them to get in the fight. Inspired by Weaver, the Iraqis deployed a strong rear security that freed the Marines to fight forward.³⁹

On the north side of the compound, the fighting increased in its intensity. When Lieutenant Borneo and Corporal Justin M. Madsymowski needed to move past a

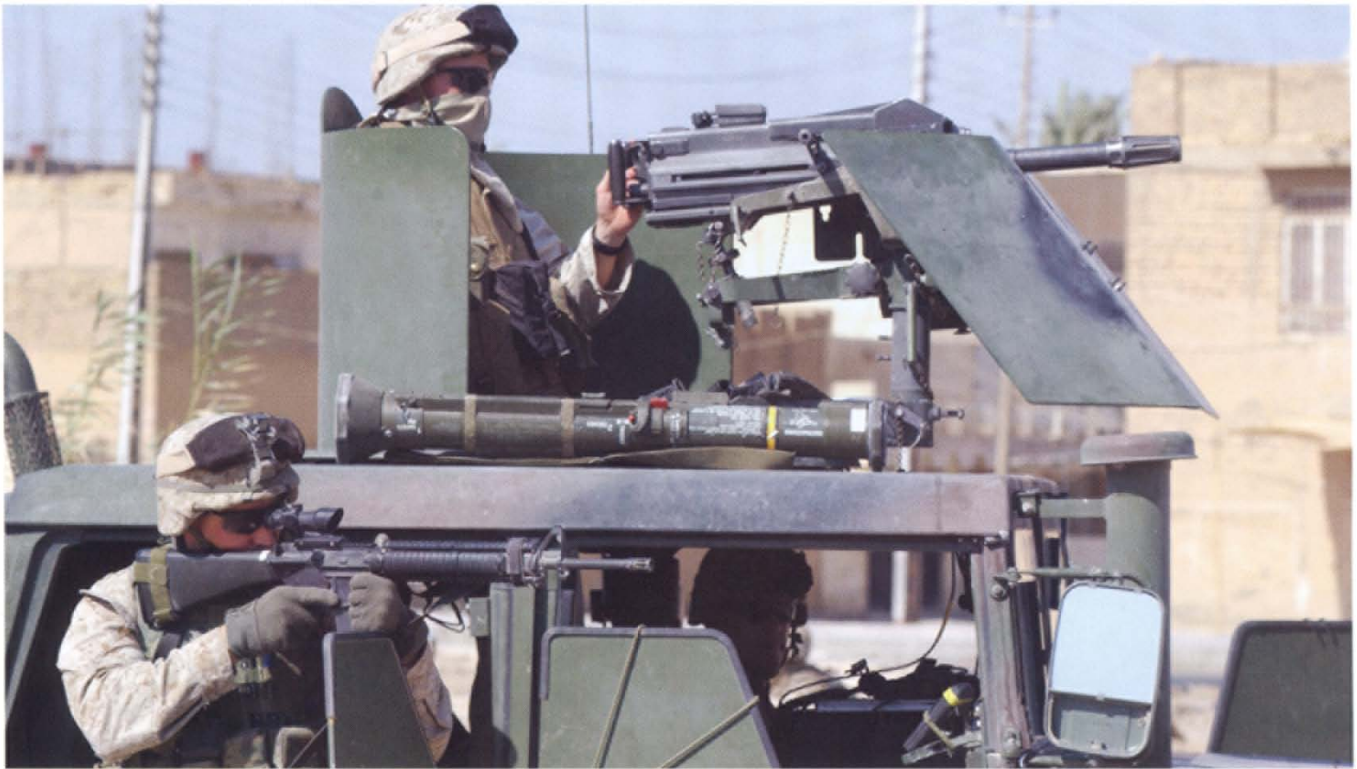


Photo by Cpl Matthew S. Richards

The Humvees of BLT 1/4 carried a wide assortment of weapons, including TOW missiles, AT-4 rocket launchers, .50-caliber machine guns, 7.62mm M240G machine guns, and MK19 automatic grenade launchers.

building from which enemy fire emanated, Sergeant William C. Niemeyer II and Corporal Baltazar Aguayo-Sierra poured rifle rounds into the building, suppressing the fire substantially and killing two militia fighters. This maneuver allowed Borneo and Maksymowski to acquire a better shooting position at a soccer field just north of the al-Sadr compound. Meanwhile, Sergeant Mark A. Contrerez and Lance Corporal Jamie M. Herman engaged a fire-team-sized militia element, killing two. Nearby, a group of enemy snipers, who entered a building inside the compound, also drew the attention of Marine riflemen. Lance Corporal Brad A. Kidder neutralized at least two of the positions, among windows and rooftops, with his M16 rifle and M203 40mm grenade launcher, and Lance Corporal Christopher B. Abner killed a sniper at 150 meters with his M16.⁴⁰ Despite the high volume of fire from enemy snipers and machine gunners pouring from the compound, not a single Marine was hit.⁴¹

The Marine crew-served weapons proved equally effective in suppressing the enemy attacks. When antiarmor team members spotted two militia soldiers with a rocket launcher under a fuel tanker 400 meters away. Lance Corporal Brandon W. Shaw fired several 40mm rounds from his MK19 and destroyed the tanker, killing the two rocket men. An AT-4 shot from 200 meters by Lance Corporal Christopher M. Jackalone

destroyed a dirt berm and the two militiamen behind it.⁴²

While observing the enemy from the berm, Johnson came up with an idea of using the MK19 rounds like mortars since the militia's mortars were out of direct line of fire. He hurried down the berm to explain his plan to Gunnery Sergeant Godfredson, who agreed to it. Johnson climbed back up the berm and, as part of Sergeant Clayton's team, directed fire as best he could on the enemy mortar locations. Johnson soon realized that he could not see well enough from this position and decided to move closer. He sprinted across open, exposed ground until he reached the relative cover of a nearby tractor trailer. Climbing to the top of the truck's trailer, he forfeited his cover in exchange for an elevated position that allowed him to see straight into the al-Sadr compound. From this vantage point, Johnson saw the militiamen behind the wall, where four of them manned an 82mm mortar. He killed two of them with his rifle but quickly drew the attention of enemy. He stayed in the perilous spot, ignoring the gunfire and shrapnel. From the trailer roof, he directed MK19 fire, arcing 40mm grenades over buildings. Johnson observed the impacts and called back to his section, which relayed the information by radio. The plan worked flawlessly, and after several well-placed rounds, the Marines eliminated the mortar position. Graced not only with a clever plan and effective fire from

his comrades, Johnson was also the beneficiary of good fortune for his own safety. Despite the heavy enemy fire, he suffered only a small shrapnel wound to his right arm, which required minimal attention.⁴³

As the fight developed, Lieutenant Colonel Johnston monitored the action closely. He controlled the operations that day as Colonel Haslam and Lieutenant Colonel Mayer were several hours away at FOB Echo in ad-Diwaniyah. As the quick reaction force neared the battle site, Johnston had to decide how long to remain engaged with the enemy. He had three primary factors to consider. First, Lieutenant Borneo's patrol was running low on ammunition. The reaction force could carry on the battle for a while, but its deployment could not guarantee a decisive end to the engagement. A second consideration was Governor al-Zurufi's desire to avoid fighting. Johnston understood this, and his own exclusion zone plan demonstrated his commitment to that idea. Third, as the engagement progressed, Johnston received reports that the militia leadership kept sending in reinforcements. These updates led Johnston to a nightmare vision—hundreds of black-clad militiamen descending on the patrol and overwhelming his Marines by sheer numbers.⁴⁴ Johnston knew the call he had to make.

When the reaction force arrived on the scene, First Lieutenants Andrew R. Jones and David C. Lewis quickly appraised conditions, deployed their Marines, and laid down overwhelming fire, which caught the militiamen off guard. The militia fighters increased their rate of fire, but it could not compete with the volume delivered by the reaction force. Ten minutes after the reaction force's arrival, Johnston issued the order he knew he had to give: disengage and withdraw. The patrol promptly began breaking contact. With the help of the reaction force's suppressing fire, along with another A-4 rocket blast that kept the enemy's heads down, Borneo's platoon slipped out smoothly, although not quietly, as their guns blazed. Air support arrived on station about the same time—a UH-1N Huey and AH-1 Cobra gunship—but too late to support the withdrawal, so they returned to FOB Duke. Borneo's platoon finished breaking off and made its way back to FOB Hotel with the quick reaction force not far behind.⁴⁵

The withdrawal came after nearly an hour of intense fighting. The enemy had fired a dozen 60mm and 82mm mortar rounds, about 15 rockets, and great numbers of rifle and machine gun rounds. In response, the patrol had fired more than 600 MK19 grenades, 3 AT-4 rockets, 400 .50-caliber machine gun rounds, 20 grenades from M203s, thousands of 5.56mm rounds from M16s and

light machine guns, as well as 7.62mm rounds from M240G machine guns. The reaction force expended more than 1,300 rounds in its short engagement.⁴⁶ Lieutenant Borneo's unit reported 15 enemy killed and an undetermined number of wounded.⁴⁷ Lance Corporal Johnson's slight wound was the total Marine casualty list. The militia's inadequate fighting skills had kept Marine casualties to a minimum.

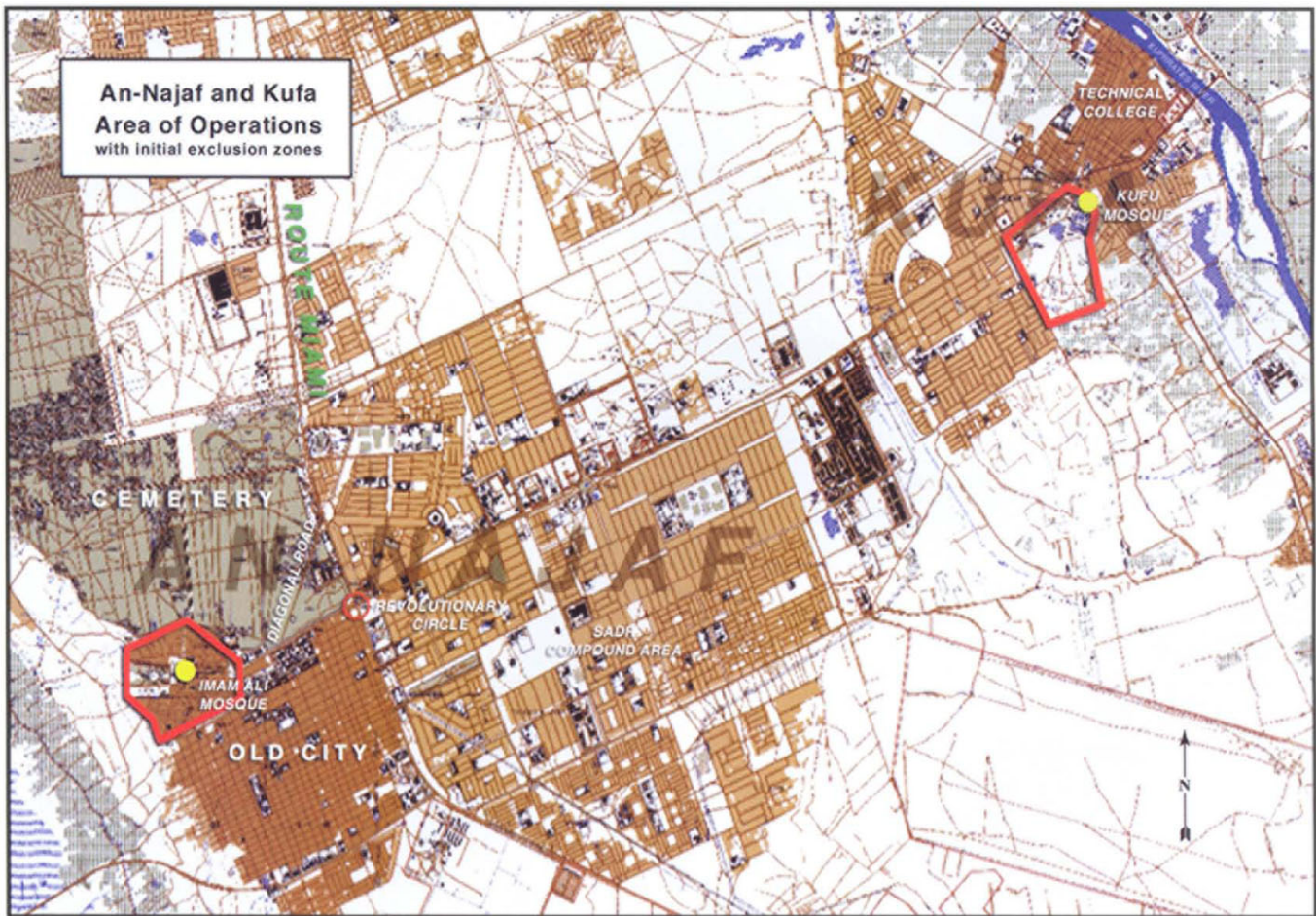
The battalion landing team's first engagement with al-Sadr's militia ended as a tactical draw. Anticipating more such engagements, Lieutenant Colonel Mayer ordered forward his Weapons Company 81mm Mortar Platoon and the light armored reconnaissance unit, whose four Cadillac Gauge LAV-25s provided more formidable firepower as each carried a M38 25mm automatic cannon and an M240G machine gun. Mayer could not predict what the future held, but he wanted his Marines to be ready for anything. As it turned out, this fight was the first of several that would evolve over the next 25 days into a battle for Najaf.

Revolutionary Circle

A short period of calm followed the Borneo patrol. After the ferocious firefight of 2 August, the BLT 1/4 patrols of 3 and 4 August encountered only hostile stares, with each side exchanging what Major Moran described as "dirty looks."⁴⁸ The situation remained tense but quiet as the last patrol on the night of 4 August concluded without incident, returning at 0030 on 5 August, allowing the Marines a few hours of sleep.

The calm in and around Forward Operating Base Hotel quietly deceived the relaxed Marines, as only a few kilometers south of their location, al-Sadr's militia prepared for another battle. Apparently embarrassed by the failure to defeat the Marine patrol a few days earlier, the militia decided to redeem itself by attacking the Iraqi government, the hated American ally. The militia plan called for an assault on Najaf's police station at the city's main intersection of routes Hartford and Miami, Revolutionary Circle. During the lawlessness of the cease-fire, al-Sadr's men had habitually harassed the Iraqi police. On 5 August, the militia attacked the police station with a platoon-sized element using small arms and mortars. They met surprising resistance from the Iraq police, who succeeded in fighting back the enemy's probing attack.

The 11th MEU had a liaison team at the governor's compound near the police station and learned of the attack immediately. The battalion landing team's forward communications and joint coordination center also was



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close to the police station, placed there during the transition with the Army. The attack alarmed the team, but its leaders determined that it did not require action on the Marines' part. In fact, most of the officers were pleased that the policemen handled the attack on their own, demonstrating progress in the Coalition's ultimate mission of making the Iraqis self-sufficient.

These good omens disappeared quickly. At 0300 on 5 August, the militia attacked again with a larger and more determined force. This new assault badly shook Governor al-Zurufi's confidence. Fearing that the militia might overrun the police station, he called on the Marines for assistance. Responding immediately, the 11th MEU commander, Colonel Haslam, deployed a reaction force. It consisted of Lieutenant Borneo's Combined Antiarmor Team A, Captain Matthew T. Morrissey's reinforced Company C, and part of the BLT 1/4 command element consisting of the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Mayer; the operations officer, Major Moran; and the battalion air officer, Captain Carl M. Lowe.⁴⁹ When the relief force from FOB Hotel reached the Iraqi police station a short time later, however, it found that the police

once again had repulsed the attack. The relief force remained at the station per the governor's request but soon returned to base when all seemed quiet enough.

Lieutenant Colonel Mayer's decision to return to base disappointed many of the Marines who arrived ready for a fight. Several implored him to stay in case the militia returned. Since the altercation at the al-Sadra compound, when told that there might be 2,000 or more militia fighters with ill intentions in the area, Lance Corporal James T. Jenkins remembered thinking, "let's go." His friend Lance Corporal Calvert C. Wallace recalled being "fired up" when the relief force mounted up.⁵⁰ As the Marines ate breakfast later that morning around 0630, the call came to mount up again. Because of the prior evening's "false alarm," few responded with the same enthusiasm. Several Marines did not top off the water in their canteens, thinking they would return in a few hours.

As the militia mounted the third attack of 5 August on the police station, the Iraqi police were running low on ammunition and rapidly approaching a critical situation. Governor al-Zurufi telephoned Colonel Haslam again, reporting that the militia had massed in large numbers,



Photo by Cpl Dick Kotecki

Marines assigned to the 11th MEU and Iraqi policemen battled militiamen during three attacks on the police station in the city of an-Najaf, Iraq.

perhaps in the hundreds, near the police station and around Revolutionary Circle.⁵¹ Haslam detected the urgency of the governor's plea and mobilized his relief force once again. At about 0730 on 5 August, Lieutenant Colonel Mayer redeployed the original task force reinforced with more firepower. The force consisted of Combined Antiarmor Team A, First Lieutenant John F. MacDonald's light armored reconnaissance platoon, First Lieutenant Lamar D. Breshears' mortar platoon acting as a provisional infantry unit, and two rifle platoons from Company C.⁵²

Colonel Haslam ordered these units to reinforce the Iraqi police station and to secure Revolutionary Circle, which stood at the center of Najaf's downtown district and adjacent to the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery. With the Imam Ali Mosque about 1,500 meters to the west, these historic and religious sites increased the significance of the mission. Lieutenant Colonel Mayer's plan called for Lieutenant Borneo's combined weapons team and Lieutenant Breshears' platoon to secure the north and east side of Revolutionary Circle, Lieutenant MacDonald's light armored platoon to picket west of the traffic circle, and the platoons from Company C to hold the south part

of the circle and secure the endangered Iraqi police station. Mayer believed his force ample enough to execute the mission, although he did not have clear intelligence about the size of al-Sadr's force.

As the task force approached the target area, ominous signs of upcoming trouble appeared along the route. First of all, the behavior of the Iraqi people and traffic on the streets troubled the Marines. As they drove toward the objective, local townspeople waved and gestured good wishes. Once the Marines neared the Old City (the section around the objective area), however, the supportive crowds disappeared.⁵³ The Marines also noticed "busloads" of young men driving past them toward the cemetery and feared they were likely militia reinforcements.⁵⁴ First Lieutenant Russell L. Thomas, the supporting tank platoon commander, recalled seeing "at least 25 vehicles of all sorts carrying at least 200 men." He remembered wanting to attack them on the spot rather than wait until they positioned themselves to attack him. He restrained himself, acknowledging that an unprovoked attack at this point might cause greater problems.

Once inside the Old City, the militia launched their attack. The whole cemetery side of Route Miami erupted in hostile fire, including small arms, machine guns, mortars, and rockets. The Marine convoy encountered such heavy fire that Lieutenant Colonel Mayer called immediately for reinforcements. He contacted FOB Echo in Diwaniyah and ordered First Lieutenant Scott A. Cuomo's Combined Antiarmor Team B, Captain Robert B. Sotire's Company A (Alpha Raiders), and Captain Steven O. Wallace's Weapons Company headquarters to come forward. The deployment of this relief force left FOB Echo nearly empty. Only a small security force of service support troops remained to defend the base as the rest of the battalion landing team sped toward Revolutionary Circle.

The terrain of the Revolutionary Circle area made the relief force's mission that much more difficult. The area consisted of an urban mix of two- to five-story buildings, complicated by open areas around the traffic circle and the police compound. The proximity of the cemetery, the militia stronghold in the northwest quadrant of the traffic circle, and its 1,200-meter border with Route Miami made movement on the road difficult as the enemy could cover the crucial part of the route with deadly fire for nearly a mile.

A five-foot wall on the entire perimeter of the cemetery further defined the already challenging battle space. It provided cover for the Marines from enemy fire, but it also presented an obstacle to negotiate when returning fire or attacking the militia. Hundreds of militiamen swarmed and scurried within the confines of the graveyard, free to engage any of their available weapons



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines in a firefight with al-Sadr's militia at the Revolutionary Circle. The Marines on the ground are firing through "peep holes" in the wall while the Marines in the Humvee are firing a .50-caliber machine gun.

without restriction. In this environment, BLT 1/4 Marines confronted a maelstrom of enemy fire, including a steady and voluminous stream of 60mm and 82mm mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades.

The intensity of the fighting at Revolutionary Circle soon outpaced that around the Iraqi police station as the militia refocused their efforts on the arriving Americans. The initial clustering of units in and around the traffic circle ended quickly as Marines saw that the militia had registered their mortars directly on that spot. Most elements of the relief force took cover in buildings and behind vehicles and the cemetery wall. Despite the havoc, Company C suffered only one wounded during the scramble away from the circle.⁵⁵ Lieutenant Borneo's Combined Antiarmor Team A responded swiftly to the enemy firestorm as well, positioning its vehicles against the cemetery wall. At the same time, Section B of Lieutenant MacDonald's platoon of armored LAV-25s relocated to the north of the traffic circle for a better firing position. Section A's LAV-25s had a rougher time. They stayed inside the traffic circle, slugging away with 25mm automatic cannons at targets of opportunity, which abounded. As intense as the enemy fire was, the buildings around the circle provided adequate cover for the vehicles against most mortar blasts and rifle fire while allowing plenty of room to spread out to avoid dangerous clustering.

The cover and concealment exercised by the Marines minimized casualties, but it did not eliminate danger. Company C's platoons, which had been lucky at the traffic circle, ran into more trouble as they secured the Iraqi police station. In only a matter of minutes, enemy mortar fire inflicted several fragmentation wounds among the Marines.⁵⁶ The battle raged as incoming enemy fire spread from beyond the cemetery. Shooting came from virtually every building the Marines did not immediately occupy in the Old City. Each building provided a potential position for militia sharpshooters. No sooner had Lieutenant Breshears' platoon taken up position in the traffic circle than his troops began taking fire from militia fighters on top of a four-story building. This structure was just south of the circle, north of the Iraqi police station, and across the street from the Revolutionary Circle on the cemetery side. The militia soldiers fired straight down on the Marines as they scrambled to take cover. All reached safety except for Corporal Jesus E. Alveres-Garcia, who received a serious wound from enemy fire. The intensity of the fighting forced Breshears to order the entire 2d Section of the platoon to escort the wounded Marine to the medical aid station at FOB Hotel.⁵⁷



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Though the temperatures reached as high 125 degrees Fahrenheit, fully-loaded Marines would carry their wounded brethren on their backs in order to deliver them to the corpsmen for medical treatment.

Both sides quickly realized the necessity of securing rooftops for observation and firing. As soon as they entered the battle area, Marines dismounted and cleared several buildings around Revolutionary Circle. They occupied the rooftops across from the cemetery, where they could fire directly on the militiamen and into surrounding buildings. Forward air controller Captain Peter N. Gibbons accompanied Company C Marines to the top of a hotel, where he could view the entire battlefield and call for air support as needed.

Getting permission to acquire supporting fire, however, presented a dilemma. The exclusion zones, drawn by Lieutenant Colonel Mayer weeks before, included the cemetery and the Old City on the same side of Route Miami. Since the enemy attacked from within that area, the Marines had to get permission to bring supporting fires anywhere inside, making it a cumbersome and time-consuming process. Every target had to be approved, which sometimes took 20 to 30 minutes. The wait for permission became more of a burden as the fighting moved closer to the Imam Ali Mosque.⁵⁸ Two initial helicopter sorties of UH-1N Huey and AH-1J Cobras on the morning of 5 August destroyed

several key mortar positions and killed several militia fighters. The “birds” then returned to FOB Duke to rearm and await new missions.⁵⁹

Both sides used all the weapons at their disposal during the engagement, but not in direct attacks. The militia apparently understood the futility of attacking the Marines straight on and facing the full impact of their firepower. On the Coalition side, Lieutenant Colonel Mayer fought cautiously, awaiting the obvious advantage of reinforcements before taking the offensive. A largely static battle ensued, with each side firing at the other without advance or withdrawal. The Marines occasionally did engage in fire and maneuver to take out enemy positions or to gain better firing positions. In the LAV-25 platoon, Section A's designated marksman, Lance Corporal Michael P. Ball, climbed to an elevated firing position, where he targeted and killed three militiamen at 400 meters as they moved about the cemetery.⁶⁰

While the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, struggled for control on the ground, disaster struck in the air above them. About 0930 as the mortar platoon moved toward a warehouse facility a few hundred meters north of Revolutionary Circle, its members watched a rocket hit

one of the expeditionary unit's Hueys (Number 631, call sign Rock Three One) in the tail section. The helicopter went down for a hard landing about 400 meters north of the mortar platoon just next to Route Miami.⁶¹ Reacting quickly, Lieutenant Borneo and his Weapons Team A moved to the site along with a section of LAV-25s. Lieutenant Breshears' platoon hurried to the crash site on foot, and a section of Lieutenant Russell Thomas' M1A1 Abrams tanks rolled in the same direction. The 1st Platoon of Captain Samuel H. Carrasco's Company B, the battalion's designated quick reaction force, arrived on the scene in two P7 amphibious assault vehicles. All the forces at the site immediately executed a full-scale tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel on the downed helicopter. Thoughts of the 1993 Mogadishu "Blackhawk Down" incident haunted the Marines as they hastened to evacuate the damaged Huey.⁶² The situation degenerated into a footrace between the Marines and the militia fighters attempting to get to the crash site first.

Borneo's motorized team and MacDonald's LAV-25s arrived in the first few minutes. They immediately delivered a high volume of fire on large numbers of militiamen trying to reach the downed helicopter. Lieutenant Borneo used his rifle to kill one militiaman trying to fire a rocket at the rescue party. Three of Borneo's Marines took down a group of five attackers rushing toward the spot where the helicopter crew had taken refuge.⁶³

Only one of the helicopter's crew members was seriously wounded, taking a rifle shot to the face. In a twist of good fortune for the Marines, the Huey had



Photo courtesy of 1stLt Eric Taylor

The remains of the Huey helicopter (call sign Rock Three One) that was brought down by a rocket on 5 August during the initial stages of the fight with al-Sadr's militia.

landed next to a medical clinic. The pilot, Captain Stephen H. Mount, needed attention for a facial wound, so his copilot, Captain Andrew Turner, ran into the clinic and came out with an Iraqi physician. Mount had been holding a compress to his wound while trying to chamber a round in his pistol with his teeth. His crew chief, Staff Sergeant Patrick O. Burgess, finally gave him a needed hand in loading.⁶⁴

The Marines arriving at the crash site found the aircraft empty. Some put out the fire in the burning engine while others shouted for the Huey crew. Mount and his men returned the calls from their position in a courtyard adjacent to the medical clinic. Borneo's and MacDonald's teams, with the help of the recently arrived reaction force, soon suppressed militia fire, leaving only sporadic gunfire from militiamen in hiding.⁶⁵

Borneo and his team found Captain Mount already bandaged by the Iraqi physician and decided he could be moved safely. After searching the grounds of the clinic, Borneo identified an unattended ambulance and commandeered it. His Marines placed Mount in the ambulance and drove him to the battalion aid station at FOB Hotel, escorted by a combined antiarmor section of heavily armed Humvees, which carried the other Huey crew members. Staff Sergeant Burgess remained behind to supervise recovery of the helicopter.

With the crew safely evacuated, the remaining members of the rescue party focused on the aircraft. The lessons of Mogadishu drove the Marines to try to keep from leaving anything of real or propaganda value at the crash site.⁶⁶ Arrangements for the helicopter's recovery fell to the landing team's logistics officer, Captain Duane T. Fosberg. The recovery convoy left FOB Hotel at 1100, and upon arrival at the crash site, carried on necessary work under intermittent enemy fire. The process took three to four hours, with contributions from the battalion's engineer platoon, a civilian crane, and an M88 tank recovery vehicle.⁶⁷ Even the crane operator, who ran a civilian machine for the first time, took sporadic small-arms fire as his machine lifted the helicopter parts onto truck beds for transport back to FOB Hotel. The recovery convoy suffered only one fatality when Sergeant Moses D. Rocha was killed by enemy fire while reloading his Humvee mounted machine gun on the way to the crash site.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, the fight at Revolutionary Circle and the Iraqi police station continued. Most Marines along Route Miami had propped themselves against the cemetery wall

* The October 1993 incident in Mogadishu, Somalia, involved a foiled raid by U.S. Army Rangers in which 18 soldiers were killed.



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines of the 11th MEU battle al-Sadr's militia from positions in the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery. The multi-story buildings (in the distance) provided excellent positions for militia snipers.

for protection against the intense fire coming from inside the grounds. Although the battle remained static, the Marines continued to maneuver individually and in small teams among buildings and along rooftops adjacent to enemy positions in search of better fields of fire. Air and artillery support maintained by Captain Randy Gibbons with Company C and Captain Carl M. Lowe with the command element proved crucial for the ground forces in suppressing militia movements and eliminating several of their positions.⁶⁹

The return of the antiarmor team and the light armored reconnaissance unit to the engagement helped turn the fight in favor of the units that had remained engaged at the cemetery. The firepower from their vehicles kept the enemy off balance, allowing the infantrymen to execute what little movement they could. Marines from these units demonstrated exceptional fighting skills. In one instance, Sergeant William C. Niemeyer II took Lance Corporals Christopher Jackalone and Smith to a five-story rooftop to use the indirect fire spotting technique for his vehicle's MK19 automatic grenade launcher to neutralize enemy emplacements. From that position, they also used their

rifles to kill several militia fighters.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the gunners of the LAV-25s, as their after action report noted, "continued to use their cannon to destroy two mortar positions, a fortified machine gun bunker, and at least four rocket-propelled grenade teams."⁷¹

Combined Antiarmor Team B arrived later in the afternoon under the leadership of Lieutenant Scott Cuomo to support the Marines fighting around the cemetery as part of the reinforcement convoy Lieutenant Colonel Mayer had ordered in the morning. Later in the afternoon, Cuomo's unit and Lieutenant Thomas' tanks patrolled the length of Route Miami, firing at targets of opportunity on both sides of the road. For the Marines of Cuomo's Team B, the trip to Revolutionary Circle proved just as harrowing as the fighting at their destination. The militia fighters tried to ambush them at 1430 as the force entered Najaf on Route Miami, about 1,500 meters south of the battle area.⁷² Militiamen opened fire with rifles and machine guns from three- and four-story buildings on the west side of the road. The two Team B Humvees leading the convoy turned straight into the enemy fire and attacked. The gunners of the vehicles, Corporal Anthony

C. Mazzola and Lance Corporal William O. Stoffers III, saved the convoy by aggressively delivering accurate fire. Their actions allowed the convoy to escape the ambush and continue its reinforcement mission.

Back at the cemetery, the Marines continued to trade fire with al-Sadr's militia in the stifling 115-degree heat.⁷³ After finishing at the helicopter crash site, the mortar platoon returned to Revolutionary Circle to engage enemy firing from the cemetery. Gun squads acquired rooftop positions to fire at targets of opportunity in the cemetery using the same tactics employed earlier by a Combined Antiarmor Team A group. Both units killed and wounded numerous militiamen and destroyed several fighting positions.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, LAV-25 Section B killed several more militiamen with its cannons while section leader Staff Sergeant Jason G. Smith used a spotter and the indirect MK19 fire technique to eliminate another mortar position inside the cemetery.



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines maneuver for better tactical position during the fight at the Revolutionary Circle and the cemetery surrounding the Imam Ali Mosque.

By mid-afternoon, as four of Lieutenant Cuomo's Team B vehicles relieved the LAV-25 and 81mm platoons at Revolutionary Circle, a maelstrom of firing ensued as the enemy launched a ferocious attack. In the hours that followed, the newly arrived combined antiarmor team destroyed several enemy snipers and their firing emplacements using the team's formidable array of weapons, including wire-guided antitank missiles, MK19 automatic grenade launchers, and medium machine guns. The Marines also enjoyed several episodes of good luck. A Marine section leader, Sergeant David R. Stegall, had a rocket-propelled grenade hit the ground less than 10 meters in front of him, but it did not detonate. It

skipped right over his head and bounced down the road past an entire line of Weapons Company positions.⁷⁵

By late afternoon, all reinforcements had arrived and the engagement had taken on a definite shape. The fight had been intense, but by now most of the enemy positions along Route Miami opposite the cemetery had been eliminated. That left one principal problem area—the cemetery itself. The militia had used it all day as a base of operations against the Marines along Route Miami, but Lieutenant Colonel Mayer could not clear it as he wanted to because of its location in the exclusion zone.⁷⁶ The ability to get into the cemetery would determine the fate of the battle and, potentially, the city.

The Cemetery Fight

The intense fight that developed at Revolutionary Circle on 5 August 2004 convinced Lieutenant Colonel Mayer that BLT 1/4 faced a determined foe. The militiamen did not fight effectively, but they fought hard, and their sheer numbers largely offset their lack of tactical prowess. Hundreds of militia fighters crowded rooftops, windows, and doorways, seemingly anywhere a fighter could hide, all trying to kill as many Marines as possible. The growing casualty list demonstrated the intensity of battle. Within hours, Mayer's Marines had killed and wounded dozens, if not hundreds, of al-Sadr's militiamen. But the militia replaced their losses faster than the Marines could eliminate them. The Marines observed militia reinforcements streaming back and forth unrestricted from the cemetery to new fighting positions.

Mayer understood that he had to stop this continual movement. He consulted with Colonel Haslam, who in turn conferred with the I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) commander, Lieutenant General James T. Conway, in order to get approval to attack the cemetery. Conway forwarded the request to the commander of Multi-National Forces Iraq, Army General George W. Casey Jr. Casey's advisors suggested seeking permission from both the Pentagon and the White House. Although a time-consuming and bureaucratic process, Mayer left nothing to chance on such a politically and culturally sensitive decision.⁷⁷

In the plan that Mayer proposed, he sought to create a buffer between the militiamen and the Iraqi police station—and the civilian population caught between them. To forge this buffer, the Marines would attack through the militia's haven, the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery, and eventually assault the headquarters of al-Sadr's fighters in the area of the Imam Ali Mosque. Intelligence reports indicated that the mosque contained several

Battle of An-Najaf



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines of BLT 1/4 crossing a rubble-strewn field in an-Najaf. The urban environment of the city presented the Marines with challenges in confronting militiamen who could be hiding in rubble just about anywhere.

hundred militiamen as well as their commander, Muqtada al-Sadr.⁷⁸

Mayer proposed a frontal attack: simple, direct, and violent. Assigning the mosque as the ultimate objective, with supplementary and intermediate objectives, BLT 1/4 would assault and clear the militia defending it. The attack would move east to west paralleling Route Hartford to its intersection with Ring Road, a street tracing the perimeter of the mosque and part of the Old City surrounding it. The Hartford/Ring Road intersection was about 1,000 meters from Revolutionary Circle and about 500 meters east of the mosque. The militia was concentrated both inside and around Ring Road and the mosque. But the militia fighters moved constantly, creating numerous militia strong points in several locations inside the cemetery and all along Route Hartford south of the attack route. Additionally, large numbers of militia fighters surrounded the Iraqi police station and the area adjacent to it.⁷⁹

Having clarified the enemy situation by around 1400, and receiving approval from the high command for the attack, Mayer solidified his plan. The assault would take place along a front stretching along Route Miami from

Revolutionary Circle to the lower end of the amusement park on the north side of Route Favre on about a 1,200-meter front. The attack would move in a westerly direction through the cemetery with the goal of clearing the southeast sector of the cemetery along with the northeast quadrant of the Old City inside Ring Road. At a designated point, the lower end of the attack force would pivot toward Ring Road and the cemetery. Mayer's Marines would then clear the remainder of the cemetery and attendant built-up areas. The plan concentrated the forces on the southern end of the attack, where the militia had consolidated most of its fighters.⁸⁰ Mayer also hoped that the assault might result in al-Sadr's capture.

The assault force concentrated around and projected from Revolutionary Circle. It was anchored by two platoons of Captain Matthew T. Morrissey's Company C and reinforced by Company B's quick reaction force platoon, which provided security on the left flank (Route Hartford). Lieutenant Breshears' mortarmen, now designated as a provisional rifle platoon, took up Company C's right (north) flank. Company C's sector stretched 700 meters north from the traffic circle to a point on Route Miami where a principal cemetery road

(dubbed Diagonal Road) intersected. This road ran in a southwesterly direction from that point until it intersected Hartford about 700 meters west of Revolutionary Circle. Diagonal Road would become the most important avenue in the battle that followed.

Captain Sotire's Company A, accompanied by forward air controller Captain Randy J. Staab, came next in the assault line. Company A lined up north on Route Miami from Diagonal Road to Route Favre. Captain Kintzley's reconnaissance platoon guarded Company A's right flank in the amusement park on the north side of Route Favre and constituted the end of the line as the northern-most unit. The command, consisting of Lieutenant Colonel Mayer, his operations officer, Major Coby Moran, and battalion air officer, Captain Lowe, was positioned on Route Miami near the traffic circle. Only 1,500 meters separated the point of departure from the final objective.⁸¹

With the plan set, Mayer's men started lining up units around 1530 for the cemetery assault. The air temperature had soared to a mid-afternoon peak of around 125 degrees. Even so, the assault formation period provided a much-needed break for the Marines as they lined up with their backs against the cemetery wall, comforted by a little shade. Most had been fighting for more than six hours already. Some of the troops felt relaxed enough to take photos.⁸²

Not all of the fighting had stopped, and the antiarmor teams and tank sections continued to patrol Route Miami from the Iraqi police station and Revolutionary Circle northward.⁸³ The noise of battle—rifle fire, machine guns, mortars, rockets, tank guns, and occasional close air support missions—persisted during the assault preparation. The resting Marines marveled at their calm among the fighting, occurring just short distances away. "We'd been taking fire all day," recalled Corporal Calvert C. Wallace of Company C, who noted that after a while, "you don't even mind." Heat and thirst occupied a higher priority at that point for many of the Marines, as some parched troops ran up to 400 meters under fire to bring water back to their positions.⁸⁴

The cemetery assault began at 1800, but the battalion's Marines found themselves with challenges beyond just the hostile militia fighters. In addition to the extreme heat, they had to contend with the terrain of the 15-square-mile cemetery, an extremely congested and disorganized array of brick-and-mortar crypts, mausoleums, and catacombs, ranging from subterranean to 10 feet tall or more, and in all shapes and sizes. The tightly arranged tombstones often prevented individual Marines from maneuvering in between them in their full



Photo by LtCol John R. Way

The closely-spaced catacombs and tombs of the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery provided excellent cover for the defending militia. The cemetery is reputed to be the largest and oldest cemetery in the world.

battle packs. The Marine expeditionary unit executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Apicella, aptly described the terrain as "a New Orleans cemetery on steroids." Often, troops had to move laterally by several crypts before being able to move forward.⁸⁵

The attack began smoothly despite the adverse conditions. Company C swept two factories, although the tombs around them impeded their advance. The 81mm platoon and Company A made good progress as well, moving several hundred meters and meeting only sporadic resistance. The reconnaissance platoon also encountered very light fire while moving through the amusement park. Even the platoon from Company B, assigned to Company C's left flank and astride the enemy-held buildings across Route Hartford, experienced little action. The infantry crept forward supported by tanks, combined antiarmor units, P7 amphibious assault vehicles, and Lieutenant MacDonald's LAV-25 light armored vehicles.⁸⁶

As Company C continued to move a few hundred yards forward, the unit began taking sporadic fire, which quickly escalated into sniper fire coming from seemingly all directions. Heavy mortars and rockets whizzed by the Marines, transforming the quiet cemetery into a raging battlefield. The supporting weapons vehicles followed behind the infantry and began engaging the enemy targets with their heavy weapons, eliminating some of their positions. The proximity of the militia fighters to the infantry increased the danger of the Marines hitting "friendly." Meanwhile, the militiamen along the south side of Route Hartford opened fire, pinning down the Marines there. The cemetery fighting quickly became chaotic as small units lost contact with each other as they



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Tightly arranged tombstones, tombs, and catacombs often prevented Marines from maneuvering in between them in full battle gear.

tried to maneuver around the terrain, encumbered by a seeming forest of crypts and tombs.

Individual Marines found themselves adjusting to the rapidly changing tactical conditions. Earlier in the day, Private First Class Heladio Zuniga had mentioned he and his fellow Marines were just “happy . . . to do something.” Then reality struck, as Lance Corporal Nathaniel A. Ziobro recalled: “Whoa, I’m getting shot at.” Lance Corporal Sanick P. Delacruz remembered suddenly firing madly in the “same direction” as everyone else.⁸⁷ In a short time they adapted and even became inured to the conditions around them as rounds whizzed by their heads. Lance Corporal Delacruz spoke of becoming accustomed to incoming mortar and small arms fire: “After a while you just get used to it,” and “you’re just standing by a tomb as rounds fly by your head.”⁸⁸ This did not imply that the Marines took the danger lightly. Delacruz also spoke of his profound concern for his men in the battle ahead, as well as the possibility of them becoming heat casualties, but it does help explain how they adapted to their environment and went about their job.⁸⁹

Company B’s 2d Platoon, while inflicting heavy casualties on the militia fighters on the south side of Route Hartford, took several casualties of their own. Their suppression, but not attack assignment, subjected them to several shrapnel and sniper casualties, more than any other platoon on 5 August.⁹⁰ Lieutenant Russell Thomas’ tank platoon proved indispensable by delivering a steady flow of deadly high explosive rounds into the enemy-held buildings on Route Hartford. At the hot corner of the battle, the command center positioned itself close to the action and monitored the situation closely. Lieutenant Colonel Mayer, his operations officer, Major Moran, and forward air controller, Captain Lowe, oversaw the action

from just a few hundred meters away, near Revolutionary Circle, from a specially equipped C7 amphibious vehicle.⁹¹

The most remarkable action of the cemetery fight on 5 August belonged to Lieutenant Breshears’ mortar platoon. Breshears knew that by launching his attack early to keep up with Company C, he might expose his own north flank as Company A waited to launch. But Company C needed its flank protected more because it had the most hazardous sector of the assault. The mortar platoon made good progress until it reached Diagonal Road, about 200 meters from its starting point. There the platoon began taking small-arms fire that increased in intensity as the platoon moved forward. Then, within the next 150 meters, the platoon encountered a well-prepared 40-man enemy force. A pitched battle quickly developed as Breshears’ platoon found itself in close combat—so close that his Marines exchanged insults with the enemy as they tossed hand grenades at each other. After several minutes of hard fighting, the militiamen scattered, removing a major obstruction to Company C’s advance to the south. Breshears’ Marines later learned that they had engaged the westernmost element of a militia defensive line that originated in Company C’s objective area.⁹²

As nightfall came, the cemetery fighting remained intense. Lieutenant Colonel Mayer called for a halt to the attack as the darkness prevented the Marines from fighting effectively. He ordered the mortar platoon to fall back to Diagonal Road and set up a defensive perimeter. The Marines would continue the assault in the morning. However, the lack of small unit radio contact and the difficult cemetery terrain led to problems disseminating the order. Due to these communications problems and the intensity of the battle, the order to halt the attack did not get to Lieutenant Breshears’ section, which lay between his 2d Section and Company A. Consequently, when his 2d Section and Company A pulled back, Breshears’ 1st Section was left exposed on three sides. The militia quickly discovered the unit’s accidental isolation and launched attacks from all three directions. Breshears called in an artillery mission to relieve the beleaguered element, but the fire control center denied the mission because of the unit’s location in an exclusion zone.⁹³

The missing order and denial of fire support resulted in lethal consequences for those involved on the ground. With no alternative, 1st Section withdrew under heavy fire. One of its squad leaders, Sergeant Yadir Reynoso, died in the rear-guard action. The section leader, Staff Sergeant Ian W. Bonnell, ordered an advance by the section to retrieve Reynoso’s body. Not hearing the order and acting on his initiative, Lance Corporal Justin C. Vaughn made two



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines carrying out wounded during the fighting in Wadi al-Salam Cemetery. Though the initial casualties of 6 August were 2 killed and 20 wounded, al-Sadr's militiamen sustained substantially higher casualty rates, estimated by the Marines in the hundreds.

dashes under fire to retrieve Reynoso's body and gear before the section could organize. Vaughn carried Reynoso 150 meters to the rear before collapsing from exhaustion. From that point, Vaughn's fellow Marines helped him reach the perimeter on Diagonal Road with the deceased Marine.⁹⁴

Many 11th MEU Marines believed that the fire restrictions caused Sergeant Reynoso's death. The incident created lingering bitterness, but it also reinforced resolve. More importantly, it brought about a quick easing of restrictions, a development that led to almost immediate facilitation of fire mission approval and reduction of restricted areas from 1,000 meters around the mosque to 300 meters. The tragedy had a profound effect on some higher-ranking officers as well. Lieutenant Colonel Gary Johnston, the 11th MEU's operations officer, said that after the Reynoso incident, he made sure that if higher headquarters delayed approving a critical fire mission, he approved it himself.⁹⁵

With the exception of this incident, the battle proceeded according to Marine expectations, even with the battalion's

underestimation of the number of militia fighters. The day's casualties amounted to two killed and about 20 wounded, mostly minor shrapnel wounds, with only a handful of those serious. The militia endured much heavier losses in both the morning battle and the struggle for the cemetery. Corporal James T. Jenkins of Company C estimated that his unit alone killed 100 in the cemetery and claimed to have counted more than 50 of them himself.⁹⁶

Marine small arms accounted for many of the enemy casualties, but the majority of the militia killed and wounded resulted from the battalion's heavier weapons: M1A1 tanks, antiarmor teams, LAV-25s, and P7s. In one case, Lance Corporal Michael J. Novak killed 15 to 25 militia fighters with the LAV-25's 25mm cannon. As the cemetery assault began, Novak spotted militia teams 800 meters down Route Hartford crossing the road and moving into the cemetery, attempting to reinforce militia fighters in Company C's objective area. Novak took advantage of their exposed position and recorded kills with accurate, deadly fire until nightfall halted the fighting.⁹⁷

Close air support also contributed to the high enemy casualty count. Led by the air control triumvirate of Captain Gibbons (Company C), Captain Lowe (battalion command post), and Captain Staab (Company A), Marine air support inflicted hundreds of militia casualties. Bringing in both helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft, the air controllers directed scores of air strikes, a remarkable feat considering the area restrictions and delays pending strike approvals that they encountered.



Official U.S. Marine Corps Photo

A U.S. Air Force AC-130 Spectre gunship raining massive fire on entrenched militia with its 25mm Gatling gun, firing 1,800 rounds per minute. The gunship also carried a 40mm grenade machine gun and 105mm howitzer.

That night, the “crown jewel” of air support arrived—the U.S. Air Force Lockheed AC-130 Spectre gunship, which offered astounding firepower from an altitude of 2,000 meters. The plane carried a 25mm Gatling gun, which fired 1,800 rounds per minute; a 40mm grenade machine gun; and 105mm howitzer. Once given coordinates, the plane targeted the enemy using infrared and heat sensors. Marines on the ground could identify a target, call an AC-130 strike, and the pilot could destroy entire buildings filled with hostile fighters by picking out the enemy’s heat signatures. Throughout the night of 5 August, the Marines in the cemetery huddled underneath tombs and crypts trying to catch some rest. The Marines got excited at the sound of the AC-130, which they called the “mad jackass” because of the signature sound it made as it engaged its awesome firepower on a target.⁹⁸

Anticipating and planning the next day’s battle or taking turns on perimeter watch, few of the officers, like their enlisted Marines, got much sleep that night. They maintained overwatch outside the perimeter from P7 amphibious vehicles, the motorized antiarmor teams, and the LAV-25 armored cars while their leaders planned the next day from inside the perimeter. The company

commanders, Captains Morrissey and Sotire, accompanied by air control officer Captain Gibbons, met to plan the coming day’s course of action.⁹⁹

At 0500 the next morning (6 August), the militia fighters began the day with mortar barrages, signaling to the Marines in the cemetery that the fighting had begun. As the morning progressed, the mortar fire intensified. Amid the same blistering heat as the day before, the battle raged with palpable intensity. Under the constant roar of mortars, small arms, machine gun fire, and rockets, the Marines attempted to match the enemy fire shot for shot. But the mortar activity from that morning fixed itself in the memories of the Marines. “It was literally raining shrapnel,” recalled tanker Lieutenant Thomas.¹⁰⁰ As his Abrams section advanced to support the infantry along Diagonal Road, the shrapnel was so thick that he had his tanks “buttoned up,” not allowing vision slits to remain open for ventilation. The dust from the explosions and debris made sight practically impossible. “I was 50 meters from the tank in front of me and I couldn’t see it,” he said.¹⁰¹

That experience notwithstanding, the 6 August engagement in the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery favored the Marine tanks. Their success began the previous day on Route Hartford, where Thomas recalled a horrific scene, one that lingered in his mind and influenced the cemetery battle’s outcome. Stationed on Route Hartford and patrolling from Revolutionary Square westward about 300 meters from the Imam Ali Mosque, Thomas observed how the “badly outnumbered” Marines struggled to engage the militia fighters “shooting out of every window.”¹⁰² The tank platoon (call sign Tiger), assigned to Company C when the cemetery assault began, supported the unit in its mission to clear the cemetery. Thomas focused his effort on the concentrated militia strongholds, several three- to five-story buildings occupied by enemy fighters. These structures, coupled with the never-ending flow of reinforcements, prevented Marines from advancing past the eastern edge of their day’s objective—the built-up area in the southwest corner of the cemetery.¹⁰³

Anticipating the substantial task before Company C on the 6th, Lieutenant Colonel Mayer placed the quick reaction force and mortar platoons on its flanks and ordered the tank platoon in the middle of the Company C line near the intersection of Route Hartford and the Diagonal Road.¹⁰⁴ The buildings in the immediate area were the focus of intense fighting during the whole battle. In the heat and intensity of this combat, the Abrams tanks fired scores of rounds into enemy positions. As the Major Moran put it, “Thomas earned his pay that day.”¹⁰⁵

With the outside temperature often exceeding 120 degrees, the inside of the tanks approached cooking temperature, making heat stroke a constant threat. Thomas' Marines made it through 5 August without incident because they arrived fresh and "pumped" with adrenalin. But with little rest that night and the grueling work in the same heat conditions on 6 August, the threat of heat injuries dramatically increased. Thomas realized that he could not keep his crews in fighting condition at this pace. He convinced Lieutenant Colonel Mayer to approve putting one section of tanks on line at a time. While two tanks engaged in battle, the other section moved to the rear for two to three hours to recuperate, rest, rehydrate, and eat while the tank received needed maintenance. This rotation provided some relief but did not entirely solve the problems. Section B's commander, Gunnery Sergeant Michael S. Philley, became a heat casualty, succumbing to delirium for a time and driving his tank up and down Route Miami in an erratic manner.¹⁰⁶

Lieutenant Thomas conceived another idea to help his troops recover from the debilitating heat. He remembered having read that professional athletes had used intravenous hydration to revitalize during hot endurance events to fend off heat exhaustion. Thomas had his platoon corpsman, Hospitalman Charles Skeggs, administer fluids through multiple intravenous (IV) injections to tank crewmen during their recuperation periods.¹⁰⁷ The crews came back from their rest periods in much better condition, often with IVs still in their arms. With their revitalized crews, Tiger fired on the enemy for the remainder of the day, delivering punishing blasts on militia positions with impressive consistency. Thomas' IV innovation was adopted by several Marines who fought in the battle.

While Company C's sector endured most of the enemy action, strong fighting continued along the entire battalion front. More accurate intelligence on militia strength revealed that the Marines had vastly underestimated the enemy's numbers. Original assessments indicated a few hundred militia fighters in and around the cemetery, but as updates placed the militia force at closer to 1,000 fighters, operations planners reevaluated the entire assault plan and approach.¹⁰⁸ The militia force estimates increased as the day progressed.

The mortar platoon moved forward toward its new objective, which proved more achievable as the planners halved the original battalion objective. While the mortar platoon made a pivot toward Company C in support of the latter's mission, Company A proceeded toward its own objective using "blast and pounce" tactics. On

multiple occasions, Captain Staab brought in close air support to soften a target before the Alpha Raiders made their assault.

Captain Kintzley's reconnaissance platoon also continued to advance. After a successful mission on 5 August, the platoon linked with Company A's north flank to help narrow the company's front after the mortar platoon began its pivot toward Company C on its move toward its objective. After the connection, Kintzley's platoon came under fire on several occasions. Each time, however, enemy resistance quickly dissolved after close air support strikes. Kintzley's platoon reached its objective and set up a defensive position around the intersection of Routes Favre and Nova. While settling into his defensive position, Sergeant John G. Avak noticed what appeared to be a gun tube behind a wall. After he shot a 40mm grenade from his M203 launcher and disabled the weapon, he saw a SPG-9 recoilless rifle, which could have caused severe damage to Marine units. A few more 40mm rounds eliminated the enemy firing team, and the reconnaissance platoon moved forward to capture the gun as a prize, as well as the one militiaman who remained from the firing team.¹⁰⁹

While Company A and the reconnaissance platoon advanced, Company C and Company B's 2d Platoon stalled around the intersection of Hartford and Diagonal Road, enduring steady casualties. It was here that Company C suffered its first death.¹¹⁰ The Marines took shelter under and between tombs and crypts or against the cemetery wall, only coming up to fight and for resupply. On one of these occasions, Lance Corporal Larry Wells took a fatal sniper shot.¹¹¹

The engagement grew so intense that Lieutenant Thomas' tanks could not move west of Diagonal Road. Although stymied, tank platoon Tiger continued to deploy its weapons effectively against enemy positions, blasting the hotels and other four- and five-story buildings as they became targets. One notable incident that afternoon brought a morale boost. While firing at the roof of a six-story hotel, one of Gunnery Sergeant Philley's tank rounds hit an air conditioning unit. The blast sent a huge fireball several stories into the air. The explosion was so large that it scared Thomas, who thought he might get in trouble and recalled thinking that he "was going to be relieved." Instead, there came a rousing cheer from the troops all around, and Lieutenant Colonel Mayer radioed Thomas a hearty "good shot."

Despite the moderate Marine success, the surprisingly strong resistance of the militia forced Lieutenant Colonel Mayer to reevaluate his plan. His Marines had advanced



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines used heavy weapons, such as the 120mm main gun of the M1A1 Abrams tank, TOW missiles, and AT4 rocket launchers to eliminate pockets of militia resistance in large multi-story buildings in an-Najaf. These multi-story buildings and garages around the cemetery gave al-Sadr's militiamen excellent observation and firing positions that many times could only be eliminated by heavy weapons or close air support.

as far as the hotels at the edge of Ring Road, but they could go no farther. By this time, Mayer had reports that there were as many as 2,000 to 4,000 of al-Sadr's militia fighters in the area. The original plan of clearing the cemetery and possibly reaching the Imam Ali Mosque could not succeed against an enemy of that size. Mayer halted the assault and asked for reinforcements. Colonel Haslam agreed, and with the concurrence of I MEF's General Conway and Multi-National Forces Iraq, the Army sent two cavalry battalions to help wrest Najaf and the Imam Ali Mosque area from al-Sadr's control.¹¹²

In the meantime, Company C's attack on its objective continued with the support tanks, gun vehicles, and air. The Marines stood by while tanks and the vehicles of the antiarmor teams and LAV-25s stayed, using their heavy weapons to clear resistance on Routes Hartford and Miami. The militia fighters launched several small-scale attacks against the governor's compound as well, but Captain Samuel H. Carrasco's Company B, 1st and 3d Platoons, handled them easily, killing several enemy fighters while his Marines only suffered a few minor injuries.

Captains Gibbons and Lowe in the Company C objective area continued their close air support coordination in conjunction with the ground attack. Gibbons called in 20 sorties with combined artillery missions, and Lowe logged an equal number of missions.¹¹³ They, along with Captain Staab, coordinated the rotary and fixed-wing aircraft that inflicted the heaviest damage and casualties of the entire battle.¹¹⁴

The climax of the day's air activity came with the decision to drop large general-purpose bombs on a key enemy position. A tip from an Iraqi civilian at the governor's compound informed the Marines that a certain building in the cemetery served as a militia command center and supply point. Fixed-wing aircraft delivered four 1,000-pound bombs on the target, completely destroying the building. The bombing elicited "a lot of cheers and wows" from the troops, according to Captain Sellars.¹¹⁵ An estimated 15 to 20 members of the militia high command perished in the bombing, which seriously disrupted militia command and control of the cemetery defense.