



Photo by LCpl Bryan J. Nealy

An aerial view of Nasiriyah, looking southwest from the north side of the Saddam Canal, crossed by 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, on 23 March 2003. The buildings in the center of the photo, to the right (west) of the southern end of the bridge, made up the “Martyr’s District,” a neighborhood occupied by large numbers of fedayeen fighters.

Marine rifle company was far different. The soldiers of the 507th had fought back bravely but had only been able to respond with sporadic fire from a few rifles and one M249 squad automatic weapon. The Marines’ response was much heavier, better directed, and more deadly. Another significant factor was that the company’s vehicles neither bunched up nor got too separated from one another, maintaining an interval of 50 to 250 meters between each track or Humvee. The convoy never lost its momentum and proceeded through the kill zone as rapidly as possible.

Roughly halfway through the gauntlet between the two bridges, one of the tracks of 3d Platoon was hit by a rocket, and five Marines were wounded, some critically. Commanding the vehicle was First Lieutenant Michael S. Seely, a former sergeant who had earned the Purple Heart and Bronze Star in the first Gulf War. Seely saw that he had wounded aboard and that part of the right side of the track had caught fire. He knew, however, that it would be fatal either to dismount or stop. Once he realized that the track still had some power left, he commanded the driver, Sergeant Michael E. Bitz, to “push, push, push” and “get us the hell out of here.” The damaged track sped toward the Saddam Canal bridge without taking further casualties.⁶⁰

Every vehicle of Company C reached the Saddam Canal bridge and continued north for several hundred meters. Captain Wittnam and his platoon commanders began parking their tracks in a “herringbone” formation and dismounting to form a perimeter that was elongated from north to south, with the lead track and the last one separated by at least a kilometer. The Marines of Company C had established a bridgehead without the planned supporting fire from Company B, but their situation was extremely perilous. Wittnam did have all the organic firepower (that which was inherent to the unit) belonging to a Marine rifle company, as well as the .50-caliber machine guns and MK19 grenade launchers on his tracks. Other than that, though, Company C was on its own and had ventured into the teeth of the defenses of the 23d Brigade of the 11th Infantry Division.

Captain Wittnam’s Marines were taking machine-gun, rocket, recoilless rifle, and mortar fire from the north, east, and west. Heavy fire was also coming from the Martyr’s District, a military complex to the company’s southwest that was on the southern bank of the Saddam Canal. Wittnam had no forward air controller to call in air support. He had a 60mm mortar platoon, but he could not

get radio contact with either the battalion's 81mm mortars or with the artillery of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines. Nor could he establish effective communications with his battalion commander to advise him of his situation. Sometime around 1300, the two had established contact long enough for Wittnam to communicate that he had secured the Saddam Canal bridge. Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski was elated. Immediately after this, however, Grabowski and Wittnam lost communications again. Worse, few besides Grabowski had heard Wittnam's report, and those who did were all colocated with him and had little or no radio contact with Company B. That company's commander, Captain Timothy A. Newland, and his forward air controller, Captain Santare, continued to believe that Company B was still the forward element of the battalion, thinking that no Marines were north of the Saddam Canal.⁶¹

Company C returned fire with all its organic weapons. Occasionally the company commander; the artillery forward observer, Second Lieutenant Frederick E. Pokorney Jr.; and the mortar platoon commander, First Lieutenant James "Ben" Reid, got atop the elevated roadway in the center of the position to gain situational awareness and identify targets. Reid's mortarmen were able to deliver effective fire for awhile. Pokorney at long last established contact with the artillery, the 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, and called in a fire mission. Shortly afterward, however, Iraqi mortar rounds began crashing into Company C's position, killing Pokorney and killing and wounding several mortarmen. Marines on the left side of the road began to advance westward toward the enemy, employing fire and maneuver while using small drainage canals and ditches for cover. They too soon began to receive accurate mortar fire, although much of the blast from the rounds was absorbed by the soggy ground around them. One track was loaded with casualties and sent back south (although no one seems to know who gave this order). It dashed back down Ambush Alley, through Company A's position at the southeastern bridge, safely delivered the wounded to the battalion aid station, and then returned to Company A's position. The loading of wounded Marines into tracked vehicles continued, as that was the only way to evacuate them. The volume of fire Company C was receiving made evacuation by helicopters impossible.⁶²

While Company C was desperately holding on north of the Canal, Company B Marines continued working their way north through streets and alleys to the eastern Saddam Canal bridge. Advancing northward on foot and in soft-skinned vehicles, they were in the midst of the urban fight they had hoped to avoid. Behind them, the AAV-7 and tank personnel were doing all they could to

extract their mired vehicles, occasionally getting others stuck in the process.

When Task Force Tarawa went into combat, each of its rifle battalions had one air officer attached to the battalion headquarters and two forward air controllers, so that two of the three rifle companies had their own forward air controller. When 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, went into battle, Company A's forward air controller was Captain James Jones. Company B was assigned Captain Santare (call sign "Mouth"). Company C, as the last company in the column, did not have its own forward air controller. Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski's battalion air officer was Captain Greene.

As the battalion advanced up the highway toward Nasiriyah throughout the morning, Captain Santare had been busy coordinating Cobra attacks against targets identified by Company B. These Cobra strikes continued as Company B crossed the Euphrates bridge, turned east, and began moving north toward the Saddam Canal, with Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski's command vehicle several blocks away. Poor communications affected Santare and Greene as much as anyone in Nasiriyah. For most of this time, Greene had virtually no working radios and was effectively out of the battle. He therefore passed control to the two company forward air controllers, allowing them to direct their own air attacks at the company level. Santare, meanwhile, had good communications with the AH-1 Cobra helicopters, but his communications with ground components outside of Company B were tenuous at best.⁶³

Captain Santare and the Company B commander, Captain Newland, still believed that Company B was the most forward element of the regimental combat team. They continued in this belief even after Wittnam was able to report to Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski that he had crossed the Saddam Canal bridge because, as indicated earlier, no one in Company B had heard that transmission. Neither had the air officer, Captain Greene, who was no longer located with Grabowski. What Newland, Santare, and Greene did know was that Company B was receiving a tremendous volume of fire from north of the Saddam Canal. In fact, Newland had already told Santare that as soon as he could get support from A-10 Thunderbolt aircraft, he wanted him to start running missions north of the Saddam Canal. For an instant, Santare and Greene managed to establish radio contact. Greene told Santare, "Mouth, I need you to get on guard and get any air support you can get!"⁶⁴ Santare understood that the situation was dire; the "guard" frequency was normally used only for flight emergencies.⁶⁵



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peebles

Marines shield an injured comrade while pinned down in a firefight in Nasiriyah on 23 March 2003. Numerous Task Force Tarawa Marines were wounded, but none killed, between 24 March and the end of the battle.

Santare got on his radio and announced, “On guard, on guard, this is Mouth in the vicinity of Nasiriyah. We have troops in contact and need immediate air support.”⁶⁶ Within seconds, fixed-wing aircraft began checking in with Santare. Santare waited for a Navy or Marine jet with an airborne forward air controller to answer, but none did. Instead, he began working with two A-10s from the Pennsylvania Air National Guard, “Gyrate-73” and “Gyrate-74.” Circling high over the battlefield and communicating with Santare, the Air Force jets attempted to get a fix on his position in Nasiriyah east of Ambush Alley and identify targets.⁶⁷

The A-10s identified vehicular targets north of the Saddam Canal’s eastern bridge and passed the locations to Captain Santare. Santare in turn verified with Captain Newland that Company B was still the forward-most friendly unit. Santare’s problem now was that he could see neither the A-10s nor the targets that they were identifying to him. Both the pilots and Santare did see the smoke coming from a burning vehicle on the highway north of the Saddam Canal bridge and used that as a reference point. None of them knew that the vehicle was actually the destroyed truck that had transported First Lieutenant Seely and his other Marines from Company C.⁶⁸

The preferred type of air control that Captain Santare would have liked to use was Type I close air support [CAS], in which the forward air controller can see both the attacking aircraft and the target. The next preferred method was Type II close air support, where the forward air controller either cannot see the aircraft or the target, or when the attacking aircraft cannot acquire the target prior to release or launch of the weapon. Santare’s situation was even more uncertain, and he ended up using Type III close air support, which is when the controller can observe neither the target nor the aircraft.

The battalion operations order then in effect prohibited the use of Type III CAS without the clearance of the battalion commander. With a good visual of either the aircrafts’ intended targets or of the A-10s themselves, Captain Santare authorized Gyrate-73 and Gyrate-74 to attack anything north of the Saddam Canal. Based on how poor communications had been, Santare believed that it would take a very long time for himself or Captain Newland to reach Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski—if he could be reached at all. Air support is a “use it or lose it” asset and cannot be kept on hold forever. Moreover, Company B was in the middle of an ambush and taking heavy fire. Based on the overall commander’s intent,



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peebles

Marines of Task Force Tarawa search the hulk of a destroyed AAV-7A1 "track" in Nasiriyah in late March 2003. This vehicle, attached to 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, was destroyed while traversing "Ambush Alley."

therefore, Santare felt that the best thing to do would be to authorize the A-10 attacks. He later explained that "I felt that if I did not act, Marines would die."⁶⁹

Meanwhile, Company C was still under fire from the 23d Brigade's mortars, artillery, rockets, and small arms. On their own initiative, some small unit leaders began loading more wounded Marines onto tracks so they could be evacuated back down Ambush Alley to the southern bridge. Other Marines who had been methodically advancing by fire and movement to the west began returning to the highway in the vicinity of where some of the tracks were positioned.

It is unclear why Marines were returning to the highway, or who ordered this action. First Lieutenant Seely, Company C's 3d Platoon commander, remembered only that Marines on the AAVs on the highway began waving and shouting to him and his Marines to come to them. He asked what was going on, only to be told "We're loading up." Before he could make sense of the situation, the A-10s began their strafing runs on Company C. Second Lieutenant Scott M. Swantner, too, was unsure who gave these orders. He later surmised that it was

"multiple people giving multiple orders." The company executive officer, First Lieutenant Eric A. Meador, and 3d Platoon platoon sergeant Staff Sergeant Anthony J. Pompos thought that they would be headed north when they boarded the vehicles. The company first sergeant, First Sergeant Jose G. Henao, also did not know who ordered the AAVs to head south.⁷⁰

First Lieutenant Seely had just returned to the highway and was trying to discover why Marines were returning there when the first A-10 strafing run occurred. At that moment, one Marine was struck in the chest and killed, and at least four other Marines were wounded. Seely had been strafed by A-10s in Desert Storm. He knew immediately what had happened; the sound of 30mm rounds hitting the deck followed immediately by that of the armament itself was unforgettable and unmistakable to him. He yelled to Second Lieutenant Swantner, the 1st Platoon Commander, to fire pyrotechnics. Within

* Apparently, earlier the A-10s had dropped several MK82 bombs. "U.S. Central Command Investigation of Suspected Friendly Fire Incident Near Nasiriyah, Iraq, 23 March 03," Capt Dennis A. Santare testimony, p. H-33; Tab A-H, p. 20.

seconds, Swantner popped two red star clusters, the signal to cease-fire. Seely yelled to nearby Marines for a radio, hoping for a chance to call off the attack, and also helped other Marines load the wounded onto the tracks. While Marines were struggling with this task, the A-10s made several more strafing runs.⁷¹

Soon a convoy of four Company C tracks loaded with dead and wounded Marines began speeding south. As the vehicles crossed back over the Saddam Canal bridge and progressed down Ambush Alley, they were hit again by rockets. The A-10s also attacked them with AGM-65 Maverick air-to-surface missiles. The A-10 pilots, seeing armored vehicles moving south, believed they were part of an enemy armored column and reported them to Captain Santare. Because intelligence reports had warned of an Iraqi armored column headed south, Santare authorized the aircraft to attack them.⁷²

At one point, Captain Santare, who was moving west with the rest of Company B toward the Saddam Canal bridge, thought he saw Humvees in front of him. He radioed the A-10s to abort the mission while he again attempted to verify with other officers that Company B

was the lead element of the regimental combat team. Informed by Captain Newland that was still the case, he cleared the A-10s for further runs.⁷³ Only two of the four tracks made it back to Company A's position at the southeastern bridge. In all, Company C had 18 Marines killed, between 14 to 19 wounded, 5 tracks destroyed, and 2 damaged so badly that they were abandoned. Given the fog of war, it is difficult to know which of these losses were directly attributable to friendly fire, enemy fire, or a combination of both.⁷⁴

** There is some confusion over how many Marines from Company C and its attached elements were wounded, but not killed, on 23 March. The Final Report of the CentCom investigation says that 19 Marines from Company C were wounded. Elsewhere in the CentCom investigation, an "Executive Summary" of the findings gives the figure of 17. The battalion's narrative summary claims that a total of 15 Marines were wounded, including Marines attached to Company C from the AAV Company and LAAD section. Perhaps the most authoritative figure comes from Company C's own command chronology, which lists 14 Marines by name and the platoon or attachment to which each belonged.*

Company C Casualties on 23 March at Nasiriyah

A lengthy investigation by U.S. Central Command was unable to determine conclusively how much of the damage and loss of life was the result of Air Force A-10 fire and how much resulted from enemy rockets. (A few Marines attacked south of the canal thought they were hit by mortars, not rockets.) For instance, in the most catastrophic event, vehicle C208 was destroyed by a terrific explosion, killing all nine Marines riding in the back. Some of these Marines had already been wounded north of the canal. The others were riding on the track after volunteering to load wounded comrades on it while under fire themselves. Based on an analysis of the wreckage and the human remains, the investigators could only conclude that C208 had been struck both by enemy rockets and American aircraft.

The Investigating Board concluded that of the 18 Marines from Company C killed on 23 March, 8 were definitely killed by enemy fire. It further stated that of the remaining 10, forensic evidence and the mixture of intense fire received made it impossible to tell how many were killed by enemy fire and how many by friendly fire. This document stated that 17 Marines were wounded. Of those, 15 received wounds from a combination of friendly and enemy fire, and two from sources "which the Board cannot determine." This addendum in itself was a revision of an earlier set of conclusions, which had originally attributed more of the casualties to friendly fire.

Marines who were present on the ground would likely disagree with these findings. Their subsequent testimony and interviews indicate that several Marines were definitely wounded or killed at the precise instant that an A-10 strafing run or AGM-65 Maverick strike occurred on their position. At least eight Marines testified that they saw this occur.⁷⁵ As for the seven destroyed or abandoned tracks, the investigation was only able to determine that two of the vehicles were positively destroyed by friendly fire.⁷⁶

** "U.S. Central Command Investigation of Suspected Friendly Fire Incident Near Nasiriyah, Iraq, 23 March 03," Memorandum for USCENCOM/CS, "Addendum to Friendly Fire Investigation Board," p. A-4. This addendum was in itself a revision of an earlier set of conclusions of the Board, which had originally attributed more of the casualties to friendly fire. This addendum contradicts statements in Tab A-H, Final Report, p. 11, such as "The first pass of the A-10 killed the Marine with which the 1stSgt had been conversing just minutes before, and after the A-10's second pass, all 3 Marines at the mortar position lay dead on the ground."*

Once the survivors of the convoy arrived at Company A's position, the wounded were evacuated to the battalion rear. The unwounded survivors would eventually return to their company's position with Company A once Captain Brooks led the entire group north to the Saddam Canal bridge. Additionally, nearly a dozen other Marines who escaped the destroyed tracks had taken shelter in a building on the west side of Ambush Alley. They held out for hours until Major Peeples, and then Gunnery Sergeant Jason K. Doran and Lieutenant Letendre, led two forays into the city to retrieve them.⁷⁷

North of the bridge, Captain Wittnam was left with two lieutenants and roughly half of his company. First Lieutenant Seely eventually found a radio with a 10-foot whip antenna and managed to reach the battalion fire support coordinator on the battalion tactical net and inform him that Company C was being attacked by friendly aircraft. Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski and his fire support coordinator could not reach Captain Santare but apparently managed to reach the headquarters of RCT-2. Santare received word somehow and passed the "abort" signal to the A-10 pilots. Within a few minutes of Seely's report, the attacks ceased.⁷⁸

Reflections on the A-10 Friendly Fire Incident

Everyone involved in the A-10 friendly fire incident and the investigation that followed attempted to make sense of what happened. Many tried to draw some "lessons learned." Marines on the ground initially were angry with the pilots for failing to recognize the distinctive outline of a U.S. Marine Corps AAV-7 assault amphibian vehicle. At one point, one of the pilots recognized white pickup trucks and "cab over" flatbed trucks, but he later failed to recognize other targets as Marine Corps AAV-7s. For others, the incident reinforced their distrust of any pilots who were not from the Marine Corps or Navy.

Although these sentiments were understandable, they may or may not be valid. The A-10s were receiving heavy antiaircraft fire and had to attack from a high altitude, making target recognition difficult during most of their time flying above the target area. Thus, they had to rely primarily on the forward air controller, who cleared them to attack any target north of the Saddam Canal and then cleared them to attack what was thought to be an enemy armored column south of the canal moving south. Another event that exacerbated the severity of the incident but did not cause it was the pilots' failure to recognize several flares launched by Company C's Marines to signal the command to "cease fire." Those flares, however, easily could have been mistaken for tracers.⁷⁹

There were many other contributing factors, including the need to depart from the battalion's original attack plan in the city and the urban terrain that precluded visibility of friendly units and impaired communications with them. Because of poor communications, when the forward air controller made several attempts to verify that his unit was the lead trace of friendly units, he had to rely on another officer located near him who had no more information than he did. It also would have been helpful if every company had had its own forward air controller; Company C did not. Additionally, instructions from higher headquarters precluded the use of American flags and orange air panels on vehicles.⁸⁰

Finally, there was no preplanned air support for the attack into Nasiriyah. The city itself was a restricted fire area prior to the attack, and no one wanted to risk harming civilians if the Iraqis were expected to retreat or capitulate quickly anyway. Task Force Tarawa was not the I MEF's focus of effort and did not have priority of fires. However, there were numerous targets north of the canal that could have been attacked earlier; instead, forward air controllers with 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, had to improvise and scramble throughout the day to provide air support.

The Central Command Friendly Fire Incident Investigation logically concluded that the cause of the incident was the forward air controller's violation of a standing order not to use Type III close air support without approval from higher headquarters. If he had contacted the battalion commander, he would have known that friendly forces were north of the Saddam Canal. Even if he failed to make contact with the battalion commander but still adhered to the standing order, the incident would not have occurred.⁸¹

Few believed that the incident reflected poorly on the character or professionalism of Captain Dennis A. Santare. The Friendly Fire Investigation Board at U.S. Central Command observed that Santare "performed admirably and with bravery" for days after the incident until recalled for official questioning. Moreover, based on Santare's "awareness of the battle space, he was acting in what he perceived to be in the best interest of saving lives of his fellow Marines." Still, it was "indisputable," the board concluded, that Santare's violation of a standing order was the direct cause of the tragic friendly fire incident.⁸²

One lesson from the incident is that ground forces must remain extremely cautious about using Type III close air support. Specifically, in a situation in which there are significant communications problems, they should not employ Type III close air support at all, regardless of commander's intent or perceived intent. The incident is also a reminder of the importance of target identification. This point, too, is related to the danger of using Type III close air support since part of the definition of Type III close air support gives "blanket" weapons release clearance to aircraft without positive target identification.

23 March—Securing the Eastern Bridges

Back at the southeastern bridge, Captain Brooks of Company A, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, was wondering when he would be released to go help Company C at the Saddam Canal bridge. Brooks was growing frustrated, knowing that he was needed at the Saddam Canal bridge and believing, based on prior conversations and informal planning back at Camp Shoup, that a physical relief in place was supposed to occur. According to prior planning and discussions, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was supposed to conduct a relief in place with Company A, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, at the southeastern bridge. Although 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, did reach the southeastern bridge on the afternoon of the 23d, an actual relief in place never occurred.

What happened instead is that Company C's executive officer, First Lieutenant Eric Meador, finally reached Company A's position after surviving the run down Ambush Alley and A-10 strikes and told Captain Brooks that Company A was needed north of the canal. Brooks knew that he was supposed to hold the southern bridge until relieved, but Major Peebles dashed up Ambush Alley with two of the four tanks to help Company C.⁸³

Apparently, elements of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, namely Company F, had actually reached the southern end of the bridge before Captain Brooks left the northern end to go to the Saddam Canal bridge. The official "Chronicle of Actions of Task Force Tarawa" records that 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, "relieved" 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, at the southern bridge at 1403.⁸⁴ However, Brooks, on the northern end of the bridge, was not aware of Company F's presence on the southern end. As late as 1530, Brooks was trying to contact his superiors and wondering where his relief was. Around 1530, he was able to establish contact with the battalion assistant operations officer, Captain Joel D. Hernley, and asked impatiently when he was going to be relieved so that he could move north to support Company C. Hernley responded that he had just communicated with 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and that they were at the bridge. Brooks looked at the bridge span and saw that it was empty. He asked Hernley to find out if and when 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was actually coming. Without a clear answer, Brooks decided that it was time to leave the Euphrates bridge and make a dash up Ambush Alley to assist Company C on the north side of the canal. Informing Hernley of his decision, he ordered all of his Marines, the 81mm mortars that had arrived to support him, the squad from the Combined Anti-Armor Team platoon, and the two remaining tanks to mount up. According to Brooks, his orders to the

Marines with him were to "suppress any enemy that you see, make best possible speed, and don't stop until you push to Charlie Company's position." He recalled that "I looked at my GPS (Global Positioning System) afterwards, and it recorded that we were going about 43 miles an hour in the AAVs, which is pretty darn fast. . . . We took fire the whole way through, but we made it through without losing a . . . single man."⁸⁵ Sometime around 1600, Brooks crossed the Saddam Canal bridge and into Company C's position.⁸⁶

The Relief at the Euphrates Bridge

The operations officer of RCT-2, Major Andrew R. Kennedy, said that he was unaware at the time that a physical link-up between 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, and 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, had not taken place at the southeastern bridge. He believed that events transpired the way they did "because we were branching from the Frag[mentary] O[rder] at that point and so it wasn't immediately clear that it would be executed precisely the way it had been planned."⁸⁷ Originally, once 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, relieved 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, at the southeastern bridge, the sector for 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was to become Ambush Alley. Because of the unexpected heavy resistance in the city, however, it did not make sense to have a dismounted force (2d Battalion, 8th Marines) trying to occupy Ambush Alley physically when it could protect the route just as well with artillery and direct fires from its position south of the bridge. In fact, Lieutenant Colonel Royal P. Mortenson of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, believed that by dominating the northern bank of the Euphrates by fire from the southern side, he had effectively relieved Company A and freed it to take its combat power to the north.⁸⁸ Additionally, the expanse of the southern bridge itself, especially the apex, was the most dangerous part of the sector of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and it made sense not to put Marines on it. Thus, the course of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was probably the correct one, but Captain Brooks of Company A was not aware of it and spent some time wondering when his relief would arrive. Brooks also made the right call in going north to help Company C.*

* *Company F's command chronology (section 2, p. II-2) states that some of its Marines crossed over the southern bridge; seeing no one from 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, they returned to the southern side. This must have occurred some time after Company F reached the southern side and after Captain Brooks departed the northern side. It is difficult to explain how the Marines of Company F could have crossed the bridge and not have noticed A Company's AAVs and the tanks with them.*



Photo by LCpl Bryan J. Nealy

An aerial view of the southeastern bridge over the Euphrates River in Nasiriyah, looking from northeast to southwest. Note the relatively thick vegetation along a portion of the southern side of the river. The 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, and elements of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, operated in this sector of the city.

Once Company A crossed the Saddam Canal bridge, Iraqi resistance north of the canal “just evaporated,” in Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski’s words.⁸⁹ It became clear later that the arrival of Company A north of the canal (Company B would also arrive shortly) convinced Iraqi forces there that the Marines were not going to quit or withdraw. The fight for the Saddam Canal bridge was over for the day.⁹⁰

While 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, had been slugging it out in Nasiriyah and north of the Euphrates, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, the next battalion in the regiment’s column, had been advancing toward the southeastern bridge, clearing resistance that had been bypassed by 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, as it drove north. Earlier, Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski had been able to reach the RCT-2 commander, Colonel Ronald Bailey, and request that 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, immediately relieve his own Company A at the southeastern bridge. Grabowski explained that he was taking casualties at the Saddam Canal bridge and needed to reinforce Company C there. Bailey passed the word to Lieutenant Colonel Royal Mortenson, commander of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines. However, it took a few hours for Mortenson’s Marines to get there since they were taking fire and trying to clear buildings and pockets of resistance.⁹¹

Mounted in seven-ton trucks, elements of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, proceeded to dismount points south of the southeastern bridge—“as close as possible,” Mortenson recalled, “because there was a certain sense of urgency” to relieve Company A so that they could move north.⁹² Company F reached the southern bridge sometime around 1400.⁹³ Shortly afterward, Company G arrived on its right flank, and Company E would soon come up on its left. Meanwhile, the battalion had been reinforced by a company of LAV-25s (light armored vehicles) from Lieutenant Colonel Eddie S. Ray’s 2d LAR Battalion. The 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, was receiving moderate, inaccurate small-arms, sniper, and mortar fire at this point. Its Marines began to dominate the northern side of the bridge with its own fire, and some of them were temporarily placed on the apex of the bridge, but, as explained above, did not link up with Company A on the north side of the bridge.⁹⁴

The artillerymen of 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, had had a busy day as well. Initially they were to be emplaced and ready to fire by 0700, and they had two batteries firing by about that time. The battalion “leapfrogged” its batteries forward during the day to continue to provide support for 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, and 2d Battalion, 8th Marines. At one point, Battery B received mortar fire

and conducted an emergency displacement. The battalion found one technique in particular that enhanced the timeliness and effectiveness of its fires. Throughout the day, the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Glenn Starnes, monitored the tactical nets of 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, and RCT-2 in an attempt to enhance his own situational awareness. This helped the battalion anticipate the approximate locations of targets and the kinds of missions that the infantry would need even before they called for them. By the end of 23 March, 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, along with the addition of Battery I, 3d Battalion, 10th Marines, on loan from 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, had fired numerous immediate suppression missions with rocket-assisted projectiles, fire for effect missions with M483A1 DPICM projectiles, and numerous counterbattery missions. The battalion's fires destroyed at least five Iraqi tanks and one artillery battery and silenced numerous enemy artillery and mortar positions with its counterbattery fires. Brigadier General Richard Natonski noted in his personal journal that night that the artillery had provided "superb counterbattery support."⁹⁵ By the end of the day, however, the battalion found itself running low on conventional M107 high-explosive projectiles, a problem that would plague the artillery throughout the battle of Nasiriyah. The shortage of high-explosive ammunition was largely due to the reluctance to use the more deadly DPICM projectiles in an urban environment, which would have caused more civilian casualties.⁹⁶

The fight for Nasiriyah on 23 March had turned out to be far tougher than anyone in Task Force Tarawa, or indeed the Marine Expeditionary Force, had expected. Inadequate intelligence had definitely played a role in the early part of the fight. Nearly everyone had expected resistance to be light. According to intelligence provided to Brigadier General Natonski from I MEF, the Army had "defeated" the *11th Infantry Division* in the vicinity of Nasiriyah, and intelligence sources had predicted that Iraqi forces remaining in the city would quickly surrender or withdraw. The on-order mission to secure the eastern bridges was therefore envisioned to occur against little or no resistance.⁹⁷ However, the *11th Infantry Division* was far from defeated, and other units, including elements of the *51st Mechanized Infantry Division*, *Fedayeen*, and *Ba'ath militia*, were also present and ready to fight.⁹⁸ It later turned out that, far from being ready to withdraw, the Iraqis had selected Nasiriyah as one of the places where they would make a determined fight. As Natonski noted several months later, "I don't think we read the Iraqis right."⁹⁹

It later became apparent that the engagement with the 507th Maintenance Company in the early morning hours had emboldened the Iraqis and made them think they could defeat the Americans. This information came out in a tactical discussion between Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski and the captured executive officer of the *23d Brigade*. The Iraqi officer confided to Grabowski that, as a result of the encounter with the 507th, the *Fedayeen* were encouraged to resist harder, and even some tribal elders decided they "might as well be on the winning team."¹⁰⁰ The regular Iraqi Army soldiers also fought with greater confidence. Later, when a second Marine rifle company reinforced with tanks crossed the Saddam Canal bridge, the Iraqi related, the *23d Brigade* was convinced that it could not stop the Marines in that sector of the battlefield.¹⁰¹

Other factors had contributed to friction and the fog of war and ultimately resulted in Marine casualties. Unexpectedly impassable terrain on the eastern outskirts of the city; poor communications due to high-tension power lines and excessive radio traffic on tactical nets; and nearly unavoidable difficulties in refueling the tanks had all created great difficulty for the task force. By the end of the day, Brigadier General Natonski was unsure how many casualties he had suffered. Due to double-reporting, he was told that there may have been as many as 50 dead Marines.¹⁰² Actually, 18 Marines had been killed.

What he did know was that his Marines had been in "a tough fight."¹⁰³ He also knew that the close air support, artillery support, and unexpected help from 2d LAR Battalion had literally been lifesavers. The presence of the tanks had also been critical. His battalion commanders were pleased with the performance of their company commanders and lieutenants, as well as with their troops. Small unit leaders from the company to the fire team level had made difficult decisions under extreme pressure and had held their units together. There had been plenty of heroism, including Marines risking or even giving their lives to rescue their wounded comrades, with others exposing themselves to fire in order to locate targets and lead their subordinates, and two forays into Ambush Alley to recover Company C Marines stranded in the city after the A-10 strikes south of the canal. "We had the two bridges in our possession," Natonski recalled. "We had accomplished our mission and in the process rescued [a number of] soldiers."¹⁰⁴

* Natonski believed at one point that Task Force Tarawa had rescued 16 soldiers. However, it was later confirmed that the Marines had rescued 10, as Natonski's own subsequent comments indicate.

Army-Marine Relations

While the ambush of the 507th Maintenance Company and capture of the American soldiers attracted international attention, a less-noticed result of the affair was the appreciation by Army personnel for the Marines who unhesitatingly advanced to rescue the stranded soldiers of the 507th. After the Army concluded an official investigation of the affair, the U.S. Army Chief of Staff, General Eric K. Shinseki, wrote a personal thank-you to the Commandant of the Marine Corps, General Michael W. Hagee:

United States Army
Chief of Staff
June 10, 2003

General Michael W. Hagee
Commandant, United States Marine Corps
2 Navy Annex
Washington, DC 20380-1775

Dear Mike,

I just received a briefing from my staff concerning the 23 March attack on elements of the 507th Maintenance Company and 3d Forward Support Battalion (FSB), by Iraqi forces at An Nasiriyah. Prominent among the findings was the immediate and unhesitating response of the Marines of Task Force Tarawa to the 507th's call for assistance.

As you may know, thirty-three Soldiers from the 507th and 3d FSB found themselves unwittingly in An Nasiriyah and under attack. Our Soldiers fought through a series of ambushes as they attempted to get out of the city. The Commander of the 507th and five soldiers met forward elements of Task Force Tarawa just south of the city. The Marines responded immediately, without hesitation, and in fact rescued ten Soldiers.

Please extend my deepest appreciation to the Marines who answered that call for help from Soldiers in difficulty—it was noble in the immediacy of response. I know that Marines died in battle that day in An Nasiriyah, joining those Soldiers who had shed blood there just hours before. May God bless each one of them and their families.

With warmest regards, and sincere gratitude,

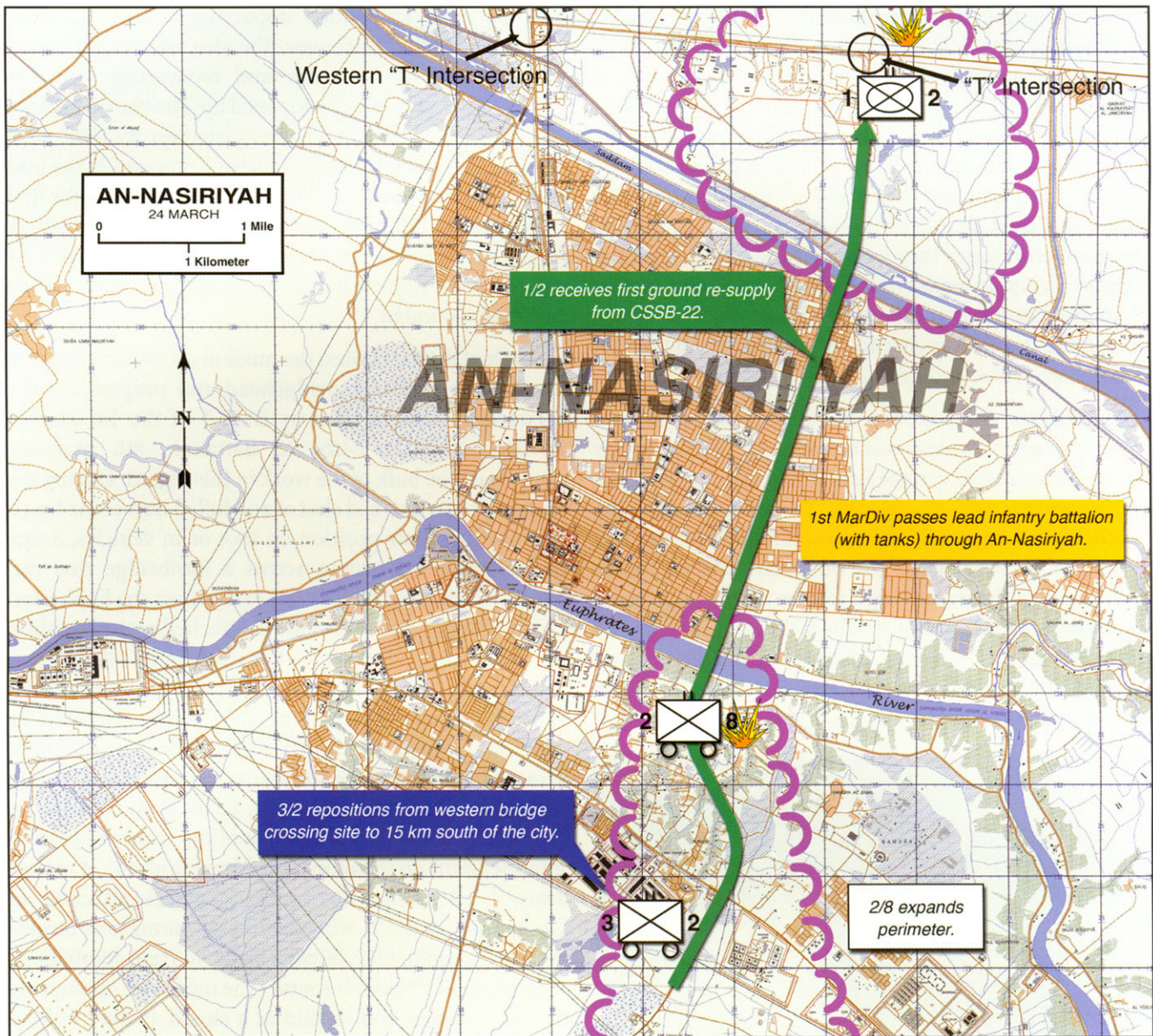
Eric K. Shinseki
General, United States Army¹⁰⁵

There were also some lessons learned. The most painful of them involved close air support. Efforts to provide much-needed close air support to the Marines of Company C north of the Saddam Canal had resulted in the deaths of several Marines due to poor communications, inadequate situational awareness, and the lack of direct observation of targets. The Marines also learned what kind of fighting to expect from their enemy. It appeared that the most significant source of enemy resistance might not be the uniformed Iraqi Army fighting with conventional tactics, but soldiers who changed into civilian clothes and paramilitaries who took advantage of American rules of engagement, American respect for the Geneva Convention, and American reluctance to harm civilians. They pushed women and children into the street to confuse the Marines, or even used them as shields. Often Iraqi fighters waved white flags and then fired on the Marines a moment later. These tactics created difficulty for the Marines, but after that first day, they now knew what to expect. They would still

attempt to follow the rules of engagement, but they would no longer be taken by surprise.¹⁰⁶

24 March—Expanding the Perimeter

During the night of 23-24 March, planning was directed toward three main goals: resupply 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, north of the Saddam Canal; use 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, to expand the bridgehead at the southeastern bridge, with the aim to eventually secure the eastern northbound approach to the river; and develop fire plans for indirect fires to suppress remaining resistance along Ambush Alley. As Major Andrew R. Kennedy said, planners and commanders considered this approach preferable to going “house to house, kicking down doors and throwing hand grenades.”¹⁰⁷ It did not seem to make sense to send either Lieutenant Colonel Mortenson's or Lieutenant Colonel Brent Dunahoe's Marines dismounted into the heart of the city to engage in a house-to-house fight.



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In the early morning hours north of the Saddam Canal, Lieutenant Colonel Grabowski placed Major Peoples's tank company along the canal facing south toward the city. Grabowski's 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, fought off an enemy counterattack with close air support and artillery. The rifle companies, along with the previously attached elements of 2d LAR Battalion and four tanks, moved north to the "T" intersection north of the eastern Saddam Canal bridge in order to further secure the route north. The battalion consolidated around the intersection and captured the Iraqi 23d Brigade headquarters. Then, around 1200, Company A attacked west to capture the "western T" intersection just north of the northwestern bridge over the Saddam Canal. After a brief firefight, the company secured the intersection and later established

control over the northwestern bridge itself. The elements of the LAR Battalion and four tanks supported Company A in its attack.

The Marines at the western "T" had to react quickly against Iraqi vehicles—often distinctive orange-and-white taxi cabs—that were used to transport Iraqi fighters or to probe the Marines' positions. Despite warning markers that were set up, some of these vehicles recklessly rushed the Marines' positions and were destroyed. Many of the Iraqis killed were wearing civilian clothes. Most of them were found with weapons or identification cards that showed them to be combatants, but occasionally women and children were found who had been traveling with the men. Captain Brooks had his Marines erect barriers so that they could more often stop the vehicles

without shooting, though some of the Marines were upset by thoughts of the civilians they had unavoidably killed. Meanwhile, Marines throughout the battalion received sporadic to moderate small-arms, mortar, and artillery fire during most of the day from all directions. The fire came from a mixture of *Fedayeen* militia and uniformed Iraqi soldiers, mortars, and artillery. One measure of the intensity of the fighting for 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, was the number of times they requested organic indirect fire support. A squad leader in the battalion's 81mm mortar platoon recorded that his squad alone fired 412 rounds during the day in response to calls for fire from the rifle companies, tanks, and LAV-25s.¹⁰⁸

Probably the company that had the most difficult time over these next few days was Company C. The company was shorthanded due to the loss of 7 tracks, 18 dead, and 14 wounded on 23 March. In addition to the psychological impact of these losses, many Marines had had their personal gear lost or destroyed due to the destruction of the tracks. Some were worried about facing a possible chemical attack when they no longer had protective masks. Still, the company held together and continued to perform well, and Marines shared their gear and equipment with their comrades.¹⁰⁹



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peeples
Marines guard Iraqi prisoners of war in Nasiriyah on 26 March 2003.

Not only was 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, able to expand and consolidate American presence north of the canal, the battalion also received vital logistical support. Boeing CH-46 Sea Knight helicopters brought supplies and evacuated friendly, civilian, and enemy casualties. The battalion's Marines processed 148 detainees and enemy prisoners. Most importantly, a convoy of soft-skinned vehicles, escorted by 2d LAR, brought vital supplies. To protect the convoy, 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, fired a series, "Code Red," along the length of Ambush Alley,

keeping artillery rounds impacting several hundred meters in front of the convoy. The idea was to have enemy fighters ducking for cover and recovering from the concussion just as the convoy sped by. The convoy arrived around 1500 without incident or casualties. By 1700, all of 2d LAR Battalion passed forward of Company A, the lead company of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, becoming the first Coalition battalion to traverse through the length of Nasiriyah and past the western "T" north of the city. By the end of the day, 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, had suffered one man wounded.¹¹⁰

South of the Euphrates, the mission on 24 March was to expand the southern bridgehead and prepare for the forward passage of lines by RCT-1 of the 1st Marine Division. On the 24th, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, performed the bulk of the work in this regard. During the night, the Marines had shot at and killed numerous Iraqis approaching their position on foot or in vehicles. Some had attempted to come across a footbridge that ran parallel to and east of the main bridge over the Euphrates. Often the light armored vehicles attached to the battalion delivered deadly fire across the river. Iraqi soldiers and militiamen continually moved about on foot and in vehicles, apparently thinking they were concealed by darkness. However, the thermal sights on the light armored vehicles made the Iraqis as visible as if it were broad daylight. Again and again, accurate and deadly fire erupted from the darkness south of the river and poured into the Iraqis on the other side from hundreds of meters away.¹¹¹ The same was true of snipers attached to Companies E and F, who eliminated numerous targets during the night. One sniper killed two Iraqi combatants with a single .50-caliber round. The men were attempting to use a woman and a child as a shield as they walked along the north bank of the Euphrates and tried to point out American positions. The sniper bided his time until he got just the right shot and killed both men without injuring the woman or the child. During the battle of Nasiriyah, the Scout-Sniper Platoon of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, had at least 34 kills.¹¹²

During the morning hours, Iraqi probes of the Marine positions continued. Company F took 15 to 20 Iraqi soldiers into custody at the southeastern bridge. The Iraqis had approached from the north, and a few were wounded. Also that morning, an Iraqi man approached Company G from the southeast. Several hundred meters away in that direction, there was a group of buildings that made up a hospital complex called the Tykar Hospital. The Iraqi man told the Marines of Company G, and then Captain Timothy R. Dremann of Company F, that he was a doctor. He claimed that the buildings, on which



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peebles

Marines of Task Force Tarawa guard Iraqi prisoners of war in Nasiriyah on 26 March 2003. Many Iraqi men who fought the Marines in Nasiriyah did so in civilian clothes, including members of the regular Iraqi army.

Marines had seen sandbag emplacements on the roof, were indeed part of a hospital complex. He said the hospital was only being used to treat sick and wounded people and implored the Marines not to fire on it. Additionally, he stated that he supported the U.S. cause. Finally he informed the Marines that there were four wounded Americans in the hospital, whom the Marines suspected might be survivors from the Army's 507th Maintenance Company. Company G sent a squad-sized patrol toward the hospital. The closer the patrol got to the complex, the more it looked like a military facility rather than a medical one. The squad withdrew, with Company G commander Captain Brian A. Ross announcing that more than a squad would be needed to sweep and clear the complex. In fact, it turned out that the Iraqi "doctor" was an Iraqi army officer, and the hospital was functioning as an enemy operations base, storage facility, and fighting position.¹¹³

Around 1700, Companies F and G began moving east and southeast, respectively, to expand the battalion perimeter. Company G, on the right, had been reinforced by two elements of the combined anti-armor platoon and a human exploitation team and had been ordered to conduct a cordon-and-search operation on the hospital

complex. Before the Marines reached the complex, however, they began taking fire from some buildings on its southern flank. The fire was heavy and was the most significant resistance the battalion had faced up to that point. Company F was also receiving indirect fire and direct fire from the hospital to the southeast, and from north of the river.

The Marines responded aggressively with mortars, artillery, and organic weapons of every caliber. After 15 minutes of overwhelming fire, Company G sent its 3d Platoon to sweep the buildings from which the company had received fire. The platoon found one enemy body, one captured rifle, and several blood trails. Company F, meanwhile, sent its 2d Platoon into part of the hospital complex. As dark was approaching, however, Lieutenant Colonel Mortenson decided that his hold on the hospital was too tenuous to occupy overnight. There was not enough time to complete the cordon and search and to consolidate possession of the complex. He withdrew his Marines from the buildings, kept them under observation with scout-snipers, and sealed them off with indirect fire. Around nightfall, some 80 individuals emerged from the complex and surrendered to the Marines after having been told to do so by a U.S. Army psychological

operations team and interpreter.¹¹⁴ Among them were an Iraqi general and a major wearing civilian clothes. In all, the Marines of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, had suffered four wounded from indirect fire, all of them belonging to Company F.¹¹⁵

The Marines of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, had made progress in consolidating their hold south of the southeastern bridge and had seriously damaged enemy forces. On the other hand, it had become clear to Colonel Ronald Bailey and Brigadier General Richard Natonski that Task Force Tarawa needed more combat power around the eastern bridges. For the time being, that help had to come from its own 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, led by Lieutenant Colonel Dunahoe. Late on the night of the 23d, Dunahoe received the order to reinforce 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, from the south, on the eastern side of Nasiriyah. At first, the RCT had given thought to sending 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, north of the city to reinforce 1st Battalion, 2d Marines. This aggressive plan would have strengthened the battalion that had suffered the most that day. However, it also would have placed two battalions at the outer limit of the task force's ability to provide fire support and logistical help.

Lieutenant Colonel Dunahoe and his operations officer, Major Daniel Canfield, had already begun planning for this operation, but the more they thought about it, the more they felt it was unwise. Dunahoe visited Colonel Bailey while Canfield spoke with the RCT operations officer, Major Kennedy. Many officers felt it more prudent to establish a strong base in the south, ensuring that the regimental combat team's line of supply would not be cut off. It also seemed risky to send a truck-mounted battalion into the heart of the city only a day after a mechanized battalion supported by tanks had had a difficult time advancing through it. Moreover, 3d Battalion would be conducting a forward passage of lines with 2d Battalion and a linkup with 1st Battalion at night, increasing the likelihood of fratricide. Canfield thought that 3d Battalion would be much more useful in the southern part of the city, most of which had not been secured. The 1st Battalion, 2d Marines, seemed confident of its ability to hold and expand its positions north of the canal as long as it received supplies. By the time Dunahoe reached Bailey's headquarters, Bailey had already begun reconsidering the plan. Shortly after Canfield's meeting with Kennedy, Canfield received word that 3d Battalion would not execute the plan after all.¹¹⁶

Instead, Lieutenant Colonel Dunahoe's 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, received new orders to occupy assault



Photo by Joe Raedle, courtesy of Maj William P. Peoples
Marines prepare to assault a walled compound in Nasiriyah. Marines of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, secured scores of such structures in the southern sector of the city.

positions 9 to 15 kilometers south of the city. This movement began at 0500, and by first light, the companies occupied their assault positions. Their next tasks were to relieve Company E, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, south of the southeastern bridge, occupy the western side of the road, and clear westward. Over the course of the day, members of the battalion staff made a reconnaissance and spent time coordinating with the key staff of RCT-2. Meanwhile, the rest of the 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, refueled and conducted pre-combat checks. The battalion did not receive the "execute" order until around 0100 on the 25th and began its attack later that day.¹¹⁷

Much had been accomplished on 24 March. By the end of the day, Lieutenant Colonel Ray's 2d LAR Battalion had made it through Ambush Alley and past Company A's position on Highway 7, becoming the first battalion-sized elements of 1st Marine Division to pass through Nasiriyah. Later, 1st Battalion, 10th Marines, fired a mission with long-range rocket-assisted projectiles in support of 2d LAR as it fought northwest of Company A. Late that night, or in the early morning hours of the 25th, the first infantry battalion of RCT-1 pushed through the city. Not a single Marine was wounded or killed between the two eastern bridges after the 23d. Task Force Tarawa was solidifying its grip on the main supply route running through Nasiriyah, and on the outskirts of the city itself. The forward passage of lines had occurred, and the first part of Task Force Tarawa's mission had been accomplished.¹¹⁸

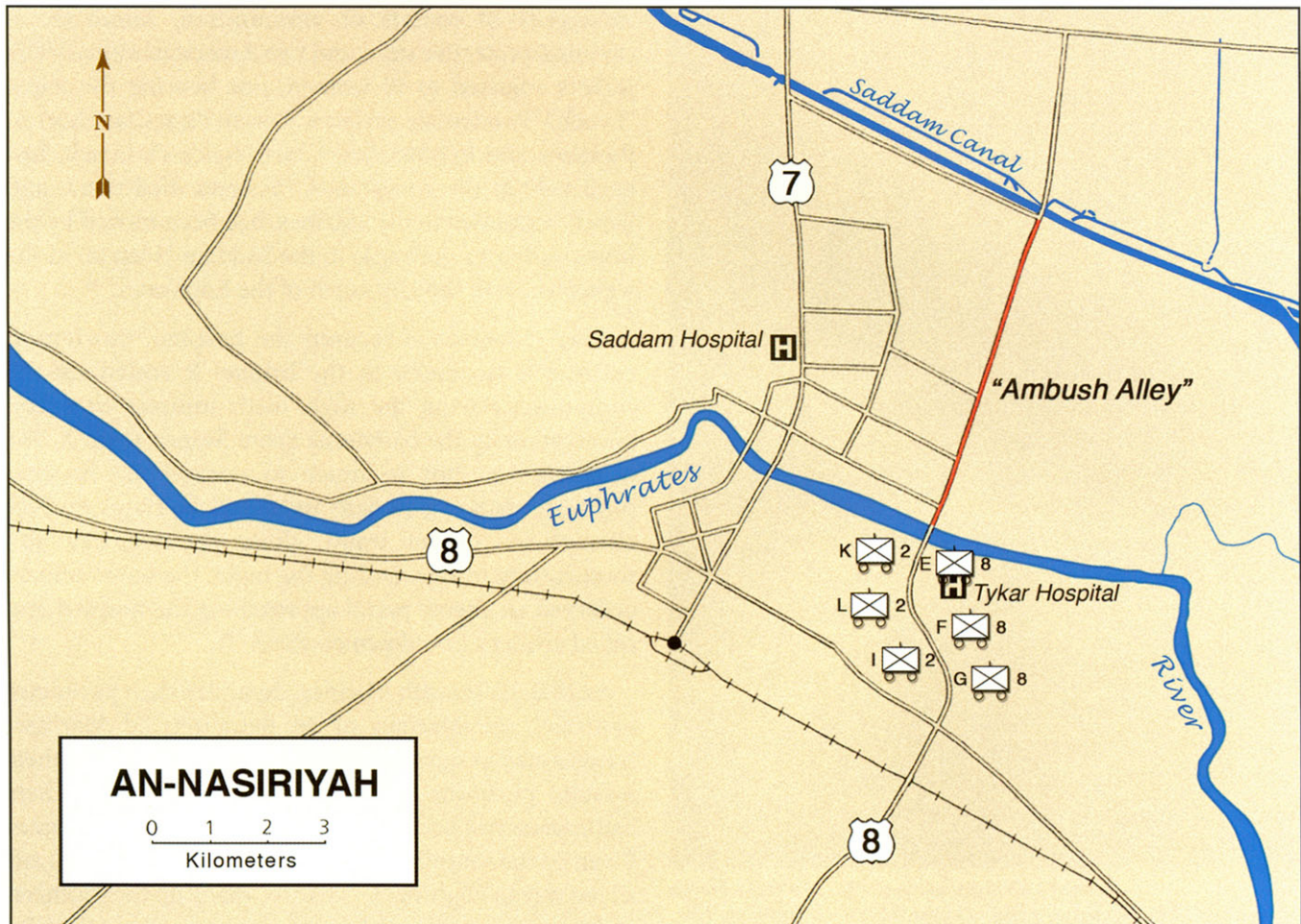
25-26 March—Tightening the Grip

Earlier on 24 March, Task Force Tarawa had received instructions from higher headquarters that would guide its activities over the following days. Fragmentary Order 023-03 from Lieutenant General James Conway directed the task force to consolidate in the vicinity of Nasiriyah and “protect highways 1 and 7 routes in zone in order to support throughput of follow-on personnel and equipment.” Conway and his staff agreed with the thinking of Brigadier General Natonski and planners within the regimental combat team that the task force should not engage in house-to-house urban fighting, advising that “activity in the built-up area of [Nasiriyah] should be limited to only that area required to ensure the security of soft-skinned vehicle convoys moving along Highways 1 and 7.”¹¹⁹ These orders shaped the work of Task Force Tarawa on the 25th.

By 1500 on 25 March, the companies of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, began to occupy their positions astride Highway 7 oriented west and south. Company K established contact with Company E, 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, and anchored

its right flank along the southern bank of the Euphrates. Company L was on Company K’s left, oriented west, and Company I held the southernmost flank, anchored along Route 8. Thus, 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, made up one half of a semicircle oriented south from the southern side of the southeastern bridge. The rifle companies of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, formed the eastern side of the semicircle. The terrain on the western side of the semicircle, in the sector of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, was decidedly different from anything its Marines had yet seen in Iraq. They found themselves in the midst of palm trees and thick vegetation, and the ground was muddy from a driving rain that had begun that afternoon. It felt more like being in a jungle than a desert.¹²⁰

While the rifle companies of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, were establishing their positions west and south of the southeastern bridge, a bizarre incident occurred in the battalion rear, about 10 kilometers to the south. Five buses arrived in the position of the advance logistics operations center and main command post. They were loaded with military-aged Iraqi males who claimed to have been with the *51st Mechanized Division* that had



Map illustration by Vincent J. Martinez