

the relative priorities for moving Army and Marine Corps assets, with the Army generally wanting to lift more than the Marine Corps. Various forms of these disputes continued for some time, leading one anonymous “wag” to comment: “[W]ar is simply the continuation of service politics by other means.” In the end the core dispute was not resolved as much as sidestepped. In the diplomatic words of Fort Leavenworth’s detailed look at the Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom, the deployment data “lacked the flexibility and responsiveness required by senior leaders,” which meant the Pentagon decided not to use it.⁸⁴ In early 2003, CentCom would use another process to flow troops to theater. Whatever CentCom or the Pentagon decided, the Marine Corps always had the advantage of being able to fall back on its habitual relationship with the Navy and the maritime prepositioning ships, preloaded with heavy equipment, in order to get to a fight, not to mention the fact that the Marine air-ground task force was by its very nature designed for deployment even before the first planner sharpened the first pencil.

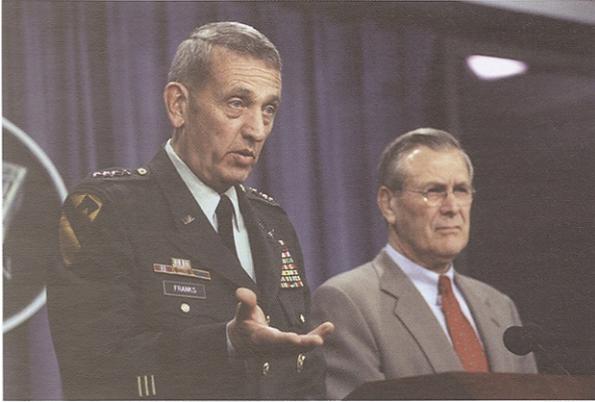
Yet another important part of the planning process was intertwined with the disputes about the timing of the offensive and the use of the deployment data. This was perhaps the most important piece of the interlocking puzzle for the Marines, the base plan for the ground war. Throughout 2002 the plan went through a number of major and minor changes, approximately five of the former and some two dozen of the latter.⁸⁵ There are a number of complementary explanations for this. One is relatively simple, so simple that it seems almost trivial. It falls into the “for want of a nail” school of historical writing, meaning that some small details can matter a great deal. It was Benjamin Franklin who said, “for want of a nail, the shoe was lost; for want of a shoe, the horse was lost; for want of a horse, the rider was lost.” This explanation has to do with the U.S. military’s near-obsession with “bulletized” PowerPoint briefings, which are easy to prepare on a computer and then transmit over the internet. The “bullets” in a briefing may summarize months of careful work, or they may stand alone with nothing to back them up. What often happened in 2002 was that one PowerPoint briefing led to another, a planner would come up with a carefully reasoned course of action and summarize it in a brief. Then a commander, perhaps two or three echelons higher, or even in another Service, would ask a question or order a change. The result could be a course of action that looked good on a PowerPoint slide but had not been thoroughly staffed. That part of the plan would be “one PowerPoint brief” deep, and would

either collapse of its own weight or have to be rescued by planners scrambling to do the staff work to back up the change.^{86*}

The Marines often thought the other Services pressed for too much detail too early, which they resisted on the grounds that once something was on a PowerPoint slide it could look more final than it was. The bottom line is that the SIPRnet was sometimes a double-edged sword. It usually made concurrent planning easier, but it also made it easier to circulate half-formed ideas, which could, and did, lead to extra work for planners who were already so busy that they were close to forgetting the names of their children.

Another explanation for the nature of the process is that Secretary Rumsfeld had a particular vision he wanted to implement. He was nothing if not an advocate of transformation, and he often made it clear that the military establishment was moving too slowly in the direction that he, and many military thinkers, wanted to go. He certainly did not want to approve a plan anything like Desert Storm. There was simply no need for it, especially after the Afghan operation had demonstrated the potential for the new way of war, with its innovative and very joint lines of operation. There was also the use of “smart” munitions that were both efficient and effective; five bombs from one aircraft could now achieve the same effects that all the bombs from five aircraft had tried to achieve in 1991. Complementing the transformational argument was the military-political argument identified with the neoconservative movement, which had a long-standing policy on Iraq. Bolstered by inside information from Iraqi exiles around Ahmed Chalabi, senior Pentagon officials focused on the fact that the Iraqi Army was a shadow of its former self; it was about one-third the size it had been when Saddam invaded Kuwait and would crumble under an American assault. In addition, the Iraqi people were dissatisfied with the regime, and the majority of them would welcome the invaders as liberators. After the invasion, the United States and its Coalition partners could soon draw their forces down, and the Iraqi opposition could step in to run the country. The bottom line for the Pentagon was that the United States did

*Maj Evan A. Huelfer, USA, was CFLCC’s lead planner and a great source for historical data. He and LtCol Smith, 1 MEF’s lead planner, used almost identical wording in discussing this phenomenon. Similar ideas about how PowerPoint can have the effect of “dumbing down” debates have been developed by the prominent academic Edward Tufte. See, for example, his whimsically titled but quite serious article “PowerPoint Is Evil” in the September 2003 issue of *Wired* magazine.



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Gen Tommy R. Franks, Commander in Chief, Central Command, and Donald R. Rumsfeld, Secretary of Defense, brief reporters at the Pentagon. Gen Franks and Secretary Rumsfeld worked closely in planning the ground campaign in Iraq.

not need to send 500,000 troops across the line of departure to do the job.⁸⁷

Secretary Rumsfeld and General Tommy Franks worked closely on the development of the plan, which stemmed in part from the fact that the combatant commanders reported to the Secretary of Defense (and certainly not to any of the Service chiefs, as General Franks made very clear in his memoirs, with its colorful, “aw, shucks, I am just a country boy” language.) It was also a function of Rumsfeld’s hands-on style and his determination to implement his vision. In his memoirs, General Franks described frequent personal meetings, and almost daily telephone contact, between the two men. Franks would propose a course of action. The secretary would react to the proposal and ask him to come up with a new course of action in a few days, at most a week or two, or to provide additional details. This set a grueling pace. Although General Franks concluded that the final product was all the more robust on account of the process, the short-term effect of the secretary’s input was to place additional burdens on the planning staffs at CentCom and its subordinate commands like MarCent and I MEF.⁸⁸

Even without PowerPoint or the secretary’s input, planning the ground war would have not have been easy. Joint planning on a large scale is just plain hard, and it is not something that happens often, especially for Marines. Most Marine deployments and exercises (with the notable exception of Ulchi Focus Lens in Korea) were on a much smaller scale, which was fine with the Marine leaders who believed that the Corps should focus its efforts on preparing for real-world, Marine expeditionary brigade-sized commitments

while the expeditionary force performed the Title 10, U.S. Code functions (of organizing, equipping, and training the force).⁸⁹ Not that it was much easier for Army officers. They were certainly more used to operating on a large scale—the Army was still preparing its officers to staff and fight at the corps level, as it had since before World War II—but as General McKiernan pointed out, this was the first time in decades that a CFLCC would plan and fight a combined/joint operation above the corps level.

The starting point for understanding the plan for the ground war was Desert Storm in early 1991, when General H. Norman Schwarzkopf had painstakingly assembled a Coalition of over 500,000 troops in and around Saudi Arabia to expel the Iraq invaders from Kuwait. No one moved north until all of the troops were in theater, equipped and ready to attack. After the air campaign that lasted over a month, more than 15 United States and allied divisions advanced into Kuwait and Iraq. The ground war lasted only some 100 hours before the United States announced a ceasefire, Kuwait having been liberated. With the exception of the Kurds in northern Iraq, who came under the protection of a combined/joint task force in Operation Provide Comfort in the spring of 1991, the Iraqis were more or less left to their own devices. This had devastating consequences for the Shi’ite rebels, especially those in the South, who had dared to rise up against Saddam in the confusing days that followed the ground war.⁹⁰ It was Saddam’s suppression of the Kurds and the Shia that had led to Operations Southern Watch and, later, Northern Watch, to enforce the no-fly zones in the southern and northern thirds of Iraq through 2003 and keep the Iraqi military in check.

The planners of Desert Storm would have been comfortable with the CentCom plan that was on the shelf for war with Iraq, Operations Plan (OPLAN) 1003-98. The premise of the plan was that Iraq had once again attacked Kuwait, and that CentCom had come to its defense and counterattacked, its objective being the removal of Saddam Hussein and his regime. It was a relatively heavy plan, with five divisions crossing the line of departure with I MEF supplying the command element.⁹¹ In late 2001, before focusing on Afghanistan, CFLCC planners had considered a limited objective plan, an attack to seize the oil fields in southern Iraq, which did not take as its starting point OPLAN 1003. After they were tasked in early 2002 to come up with a more ambitious plan, they still did not use 1003 as the starting point but developed new courses of action. The course of action favored by General Mikolashek, the CFLCC com-



Photo courtesy of VMFA(AW)-121

A Lockheed KC-130 from Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 352 refuels two McDonnell Douglas F/A-18s from Marine All-Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 121 as they soar high over Kuwait during one of the many 3d Marine Aircraft Wing deployments to the Middle East in support of Operation Southern Watch.

mander at the time, was in line with CentCom's concept of "shock and awe," emphasizing speed and surprise. It was an audacious plan calling for the force to avoid the lengthy build-up that would announce United States intentions and, using prepositioned equipment, launch one division deep into Iraq with a view to reaching Baghdad within 10 days.⁹²

Coalition Forces Land Component Command took this plan on the road and through all of the various personal and impersonal contacts, including the planning conferences of various sorts, it evolved into something not more but less audacious that came to be known by the rather nonmilitary phrase "generated start." This was a throwback to Desert Storm and OPLAN 1003 in that it called for a deliberate build-up of decisive strength before anyone crossed the line of departure. The build-up would take approximately ninety days, and the simultaneous attack by two corps would take up to ninety more days to get to Baghdad.⁹³ The results of the first I MEF operational planning team, which ran from 13-19 March at Camp Pendleton, further illustrate both the plan's general outlines and I MEF's role in it. The planning team as-

sumed that I MEF would be a supporting effort, with the Army's V Corps (usually based in Germany) as the main effort. I MEF would deploy 1st Marine Division, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing, 1st Force Service Support Group, and a regimental combat team out of II Marine Expeditionary Force (II MEF) to serve as "Task Force South." The team came up with a concept that called for the division to attack northwest from Kuwait to seize the airfield at Jalibah, which would become a support area, including a forward arming and refueling point, before proceeding to seize the airfields in the vicinity of Qalat Sikar and Al Kut to the northeast, much closer to Baghdad. At this point they expected CFLCC to order a significant pause to allow the Army to flow additional forces and supplies before continuing the attack toward Baghdad. The pause was an idea that never sat well with the Marines. In the meantime, Task Force South would resume responsibility for southern Iraq, addressing any threats the division had bypassed and in general securing support areas and lines of communication.⁹⁴

This did not play well in Washington. Considering

the possible scenarios that could lead to war with Iraq, few at the Pentagon were willing to accept a plan that took 90 days to launch. The word came down that Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld was unhappy with the ponderous nature of the “generated start,” which would not only be logistics intensive but would also sacrifice any hopes of surprising the enemy. The result was that CentCom felt pressure to develop ever lighter, more creative scenarios.⁹⁵

The warfighters moved the plan in the direction that Rumsfeld indicated. By early summer, the pendulum had swung so far to the “light” that there was a plan under consideration for something like two brigades, perhaps one Army and one Marine, to cross the line of departure soon after a *casus belli* had occurred. To be sure, this would be a “running start”; this small force would be reinforced by heavier forces from the Army and Marine Corps as soon as they could get to the fight. The running start seemed to mean starting early but finishing late, since the force would once again have to wait for reinforcements before moving north for the decisive battle of Baghdad. Marine planners pointed out that there was no need for two corps headquarters to control the running start, and argued that I MEF could provide command

and control for the initial phase of the operation. It would be better suited for the task, because, unlike V Corps, it not only had organic subordinate commands, but it was also experienced in running and controlling air operations, which V Corps was not. At least initially, the Army was reluctant to accept this argument.⁹⁶

The pendulum started to arc back toward the middle in the second half of 2002, toward the ultimate, or “hybrid,” version of the plan, a mix of elements from the “generated start” and the “running start.” One of the problems with the running start turned out to be that it was very difficult to come up with an optimal time to attack, considering the trade-offs between strength and surprise. When would the mix be right, early enough for surprise but “late” enough to allow CFLCC to build up the strength that it needed to do the job? Over the summer, some of the planners considered deploying a stronger initial force, perhaps two Army brigades and two Marine regimental combat teams that could attack 30 days after the force flow started. An attractive feature of the stronger force was that with it CFLCC could attack simultaneously in two directions, with the Army attacking to the northwest, toward the city of An Nasiriyah, and

East Coast Marines in a West Coast Plan

What became Task Force Tarawa started as Task Force South. The concept for a task force to follow in trace of a division, to be charged with neutralizing any threats that division had bypassed and then securing I MEF’s lines of communication, was certainly on the table by March 2002. At a time when the Pentagon wanted to keep the force light and Headquarters Marine Corps was thinking in terms of “global sourcing,” that is, pulling assets from all over the world to meet the potential need for Marines in CentCom, it made sense for “the Commandant’s G-3” at headquarters to look to II MEF in Camp Lejeune, North Carolina, to supply something like a brigade-sized force to float to theater on the amphibious task force that was based on the East Coast. The location and capacity of amphibious shipping helped to determine where the forces would come from and how big they would be. Since there was another amphibious task force on the West Coast, the Marine Corps could use the task forces to get two separate elements to the fight quickly and securely. The East Coast Marines could mount out of Morehead City,

North Carolina, on to their own amphibious task force without adding to the long list of units for deployment from the West Coast, and the two forces could travel by different routes. Another reason to look to Camp Lejeune was that the only other remaining brigade-sized force was in Okinawa. That force needed to stay there in case it was needed in Korea. At this point the planners were looking at a brigade-sized unit that would not fight as a Marine air-ground task force. It might deploy without the expeditionary brigade command element. If that happened, all of its parts could be parceled out after arrival in theater. Whether to include a command element with the East Coast contingent was a matter mostly for the I MEF commander to decide. This would happen only after General Conway took the helm in the fall of 2002.*

*LtCol George W. Smith, Jr., intvw, 8Jun04 (MCHC, Quantico, VA); Col Nicholas E. Reynolds, “OIF Field History Journal,” 2003, entry for 1Jul04, reporting the comments of Col Ronald J. Johnson, Headquarters Marine Corps (PPO) current operations officer and Task Force Tarawa operations officer.

the Marines attacking to the northeast, toward Basrah, Iraq's second city, and the nearby southern oil fields.⁹⁷ The Marines had mixed feelings about Basrah, especially the suggestion that they seize and run Basrah International Airport, no doubt an important symbolic target but one that could become a "force sump," because to run the airport they would have to protect it from portable anti-aircraft rockets, and that would mean controlling the city, which could take a regimental combat team a long time.⁹⁸ By late July, the Army had accepted the proposition that I MEF would control the initial phase of the war, roughly the first 75 days, and that the 3d Infantry Division would be under I MEF control at least for that period. There was further discussion of a lengthy (30-45 days) pause in the middle of the campaign to build up supplies for the final assault, a proposition that had not become any more attractive to the Marines. Finally, there was discussion about another large city, Baghdad, but there would not be anything like a final decision about how to tackle the capital until much later.^{99*}

September saw a declaration by General Franks that President Bush wanted CentCom to be prepared for war within 60 to 90 days and that CFLCC needed to be prepared to execute across the continuum of force, with either a heavy or a light plan. During the same month, I MEF began to work with British Royal Marine planners on their potential role in an offensive; initial plans called for one Royal Marine commando (the rough equivalent of a Marine Corps battalion) to fight under I MEF. The Royal Marines appeared ideally suited for an amphibious assault against targets on the Al Faw Peninsula in southeastern Iraq.¹⁰⁰

The American Marines took an immediate liking to their British counterparts, as individuals and as warriors, and welcomed them as reinforcements. This was eventually to lead Colonel Christopher J. Gunther, who became the I MEF plans officer in the second half of 2002, to take advantage of a brief to the British high command to ask for a second Royal Marine commando, tossing in as a sweetener the possibility that a U.S. Marine expeditionary unit might work under British command.¹⁰¹

Most versions of the plan included a healthy dose of "deep" and special operations against carefully selected targets, like those seen in Afghanistan, which had impressed General Franks favorably. There would be two joint special operations task forces,

*Both I MEF and V Corps planned extensively for the fight even after CFLCC decided in September that Baghdad planning would fall to V Corps.



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Newly arrived Marines prepare a bivouac area near the command post center at Camp Commando, Kuwait.

Joint Special Operations Task Force North and Joint Special Operations Task Force South, the first to work with the anti-Saddam militias in Iraqi Kurdistan in the northeast part of the country, and the second to secure any potential launch sites for Scud missiles in the western desert between Baghdad and the Jordanian border (which had been used by the Iraqis in Desert Storm to attack Israel). But that was not to be the extent of special operations; there would be special operations force elements at work throughout the country, adding their capabilities to the force mix in all areas of operation. Marine expeditionary force planners took the initiative to coordinate with special operations forces, for example, by traveling to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, for an unexpectedly cordial and productive session. Once again, the Marines found that they continued to get good results when they reached out to other communities.¹⁰²

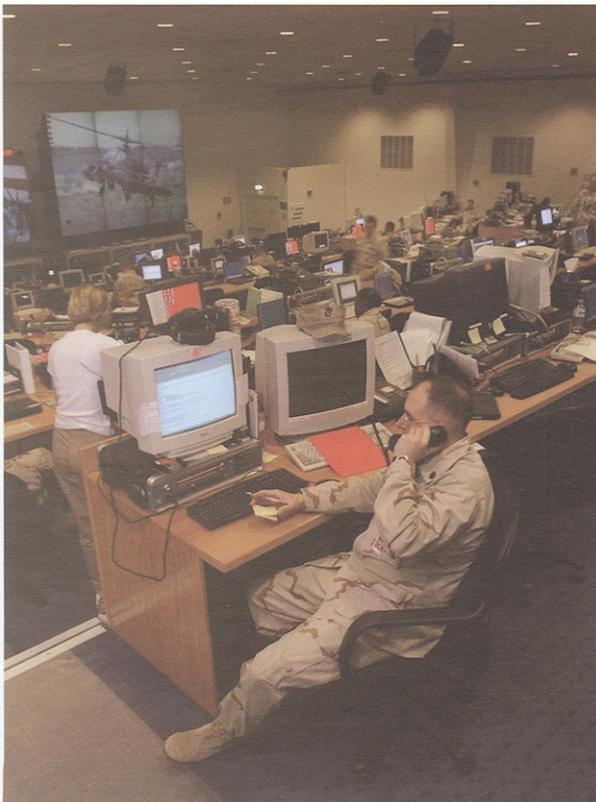
In October, I MEF held a general officer symposium to develop "a common understanding of the . . . operation plan." It would have been more accurate to say the state of "operational planning," since "the" plan did not yet exist—even though it was now beginning to be known as Operations Plan 1003V. During the same month, there was a I MEF exercise based on an invasion of Iraq, and advance parties from I MEF began to deploy to Kuwait to stand up a command post, soon followed by the I MEF command element, which deployed to Camp Commando, a few miles west and north of Kuwait City, and prepared to participate in CFLCC exercises. By late November there were approximately 850 members of the force staff in Kuwait, along with approximately 100 members of the 1st Marine Division staff.¹⁰³

As the commanders and their staffs began to settle in, or at least try to settle in, during December, they realized they could be living in the desert for quite some time. Despite the pronouncements from CentCom, there was still nothing like a timeline, no one knew for sure when the war would start, or even if it would start. On 9 December, General Conway spoke to his officers at Camp Commando and told them they might be in Kuwait for the long haul. He wanted to dispel rumors that the Marines were going home after the current round of exercises. He did not know if there would be a war but ventured the guess that it might come “as late as February,” which was still during the “cool” season, the “right” time to go to war. But he concluded that if the Marines had to fight in the heat, they would fight in the heat.¹⁰⁴

Around the same time, senior Marine officers debated whether they should push for a large-scale deployment. The issue was this: if I MEF arrived early, in force, a large number of Marines might spend a number of months in Kuwait waiting for a war that

GySgt Jay R. Joder, an intelligence specialist, works in the Coalition Forces Land Component Command's operations and intelligence center at Camp Doha, Kuwait. Ground operations within Central Command's area of responsibility would be controlled from here.

Photo courtesy of CFLCC



might never come. On the other hand, if the troops stayed home until the situation gelled, they might not be able to get to theater in time if the pace of events were to speed up and the war started on short notice. General Mattis, supported by Colonel Gunther, is said to have pleaded the case for flowing the forces in the near future. Colonel Gunther pointed out that at worst the Marines would get some good training; it would be like going to a very big series of combined arms exercises in a desert other than the Mojave at Twentynine Palms, California.¹⁰⁵

In the meantime, General McKiernan, who had replaced General Mikolashek in September, was working to turn CFLCC into a more joint command. McKiernan liked to say that CFLCC was made up of a number of “tribes” and “sub tribes,” that is members of different Services, American and allied, as well as members of different branches of the Army. Many Marines forget the extent to which Army officers often identify with their military occupational specialty. His method was to do “a lot of training and tribal team building.” One McKiernan initiative was to reorganize the staff along functional lines in order to break down the old-fashioned “G-1, G-2, G-3, G-4” stovepipes and encourage cross talk among the various disciplines. Virtually every day in late 2002 and early 2003 the CFLCC staff held some sort of exercise, in addition to participating in CentCom exercises and various rehearsals. This may turn out to have been one of the most extensively rehearsed wars in U.S. history. In short, the point was to change the original tribal identity, to make CFLCC into a joint tribe, a headquarters with a joint outlook.¹⁰⁶

General McKiernan did not just want to change the tribe’s way of thinking, he also wanted to change its makeup. In the fall of 2002 there was also a push to get the other Services, especially the Marine Corps, to send more officers to CFLCC. The long-standing joint manning document called for a complement of some 90 Marines; in the early fall there was only a handful of Marines at Camp Doha, ordered to CFLCC by MarCent. One or two had even been at Doha since the fall of 2001 and were filling key billets. Two of these officers were Colonel Gregory J. Plush whose title was MarCent liaison but who functioned for months more or less as the senior Marine on the staff, and Colonel Marc A. Workman, chief of the deep operations coordination cell in the C-3. General McKiernan relied heavily on Workman to plan what was known as the “deep fight,” operational fire support well beyond the frontlines, which at CFLCC in 2002 and 2003 was about “creating desired effects,” not just destroying targets.¹⁰⁷

What Marines do for Christmas: 25 December at Camp Commando

Commando sat at the base of Mutla Ridge, one of the few parcels of distinguishable terrain in an otherwise flat and largely treeless country. In August 1990, the Iraqis had used the ridge to shell the camp below; there were still shell holes and shattered buildings here and there within its confines. For a Christmas treat, I MEF Headquarters Group gave its members a rare opportunity to venture outside Camp Commando on a 10-kilometer run to the ridge and back and to find out that they were not in the same shape that they had been in at Camp Pendleton. Armed guards were posted along the route to defend against possible terrorist attacks. Even with the terrorist threat, and the sand that offered little traction, it was an enjoyable outing. Back at Camp Commando, Generals Amos and Mattis spent their time talking about Baghdad with a handful of I MEF officers. General Mattis said he wanted to get north of the Tigris as quickly as pos-

sible to minimize the time his division would be susceptible to weapons of mass destruction; General Amos said he wanted to put the wing on a “JDAM [or “smart” bomb] diet” so that he would have enough precision munitions for the big fight in the city. Then they ranged over a variety of issues—from where to place boundaries between Army and Marines; how to coordinate fires and control air space; the integration of information and covert operations on the one hand and conventional operations on the other; and general techniques, tactics, and procedures for fighting in urban terrain. One of the participants, Lieutenant Colonel George Smith, remembered thinking that this “pure warfighting” talk was the ultimate professional military education session.*

*Col Nicholas E. Reynolds, “OIF Field History Journal,” 2003, entry for 19Jul04; LtCol George W. Smith, Jr., intvw, 8Jun04 (MCHC, Quantico, VA).

Photo courtesy of Field History Branch





Photo courtesy of CFLCC

MajGen Robert R. Blackman, Jr., chief of staff for the Coalition Forces Land Component Command, talks with the command's logistical officer following one of many updates at the Coalition Operations and Intelligence Center, Camp Doha, Kuwait.

McKiernan was so pleased with Workman, in particular his experience as a Marine air-ground task force planner able to coordinate a range of effects, that he resisted any moves to replace Workman, who wound up serving at CFLCC for the duration, working up to 18 hours a day for months on end. It was only after they had been working together for some time that Workman mentioned he was a rancher by profession, and not a regular officer, which McKiernan at first refused to believe, a backhanded compliment to the professionalism of this Reserve artilleryman who literally had to sell the farm in order to stay on active duty.¹⁰⁸ In October, reinforcements for Plush and Workman began to trickle in. General McKiernan asked for the best Marine general that Headquarters Marine Corps could find, and Major General Robert L. Blackman soon received orders to serve as the chief of staff at CFLCC. General Blackman, who had commanded the 2d Marine Division and most recently served at CentCom headquarters in Tampa, was respected both as a Marine and as a team player in the joint arena.¹⁰⁹ After his arrival in country, General Blackman repeatedly urged Headquarters Marine Corps to provide more officers for

the staff. In late November, Colonel Patrick J. Burger arrived at Doha to serve as the senior I MEF liaison officer and began to coordinate the activities of the growing number of Marine liaison officers who were not technically part of the CFLCC staff but who in most cases might as well have been.¹¹⁰ In January, during a trip to Washington, D.C., General McKiernan himself again requested Marine augmentation for the CFLCC staff. It is hard to escape the conclusion that if CFLCC was short of Marines, it was a reflection of Marine manpower constraints and certainly not of a desire by "Big Army" to limit the number of Marines at CFLCC or the influence of Marine doctrine.¹¹¹ In the end there were some 70 Marines at CFLCC, still short of the number in the joint manning document that the Army and the Marine Corps had long since agreed to, but certainly at a level where the liaison officers could effectively represent the Marine point of view. More importantly, the staff became even more joint in the interests of putting the common interest ahead of any one Service or nationality. In February 2003 there would be some 1,300 members of the CFLCC staff.¹¹²

By November both the CFLCC and the I MEF staffs



Photo courtesy of Field History Branch

Marine Lieutenant Colonels Robert L. Sartor, current files officer, and Brian D. Kerl, assistant current files officer, both with the operations section, I Marine Expeditionary Force, exchange information during Exercise Internal Look 03. The bi-annual exercise was designed to evaluate the command and control capabilities of Central Command headquarters and its component commands.

were ready to exercise the most recent version of the CFLCC portion of the CentCom plan, which now bore the name “Cobra II” and still called for a relatively small force to advance from Kuwait into southern Iraq. Major Evan A. Huelfer, USA, FLCC’s lead planner, commented that although there were some changes, the outlines of the “four brigade” initial attack had not changed markedly over the intervening months.^{113*}

What was somewhat different in the fall was the hope that the U.S. Army’s 4th Infantry Division, augmented by a British division, would advance from Turkey into northern Iraq, toward Baghdad, at roughly the same time.¹¹⁴ Generals Franks, Mikolashek, and McKiernan all wanted near-simultaneous attacks into Iraq from north and south, the main attack coming from Kuwait, with a supporting attack by Coalition forces from Turkey. This was an idea

*Both Gen McKiernan and his special assistant, Terry Moran, remembered a version of the plan in the fall of 2003 around the time of their arrival at Camp Doha. The general termed it “a very small force . . . a brigade combat team from the 3d ID and a MEU from the Marines.” Moran used more or less the same terms: “Early on, there was some discussion of that start force being no more than a brigade of the 3d ID, reinforced out of the MEU . . . so the thought was that we would cross the LD with that very small force, and it would be rapidly reinforced by the MEF and by the V Corps. That was probably a bit . . . imprudent.” (LtGen David D. McKiernan intvw, 30Jun03 [U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, DC]; Terry Moran intvw, 23Aug03 [U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, DC])

that certainly sat well with the outgoing commandant of the Marine Corps and incoming head of European Command, General James L. Jones, Jr., who wanted to do what he could to make it happen, and was willing to commit Marine units if it made sense to do so.¹¹⁵ The attack from the north would be able to secure important targets in the north such as the oil fields around Kirkuk and Saddam’s “hometown,” Tikrit, which was considered to be one of his bases of power.*

“Lucky Warrior 03-1” was a CFLCC exercise testing command and control, including the links between CFLCC and I MEF, and focusing on the initial phases of war. It began on 24 November, just in time for Thanksgiving, and was a precursor to the CentCom exercise “Internal Look 03,” which tested three scenarios from Operations Plan 1003V at the next higher level and occurred in early December with I MEF participation. General Blackman remembered later that the scenario at the time was for CFLCC elements to cross the line of departure with two brigade com-

*The history of this idea goes back to the spring of 2002, when Gen Mikolashek proposed it to Gen Franks, who accepted it. However, it was not actively pursued until the summer of 2002, when it was briefed to the British, who were very enthusiastic about the idea and played a key role in resurrecting it. British sources are consistent with Huelfer’s memory. (Maj Evan A. Huelfer intvw, 16Mar03 [U.S. Army Center of Military History, Washington, DC]; House of Commons Defense Committee, *Lessons of Iraq* [London, UK: Stationary Office, 2004] v. 1, p. 45.)

bat teams from 3d Infantry Division and one Marine expeditionary unit, all under I MEF. The expeditionary unit would take the southern city of Umm Qasr, while the two brigade combat teams would take the oil fields. There would of course be follow-on forces under this “running start” scenario.^{116*}

After these exercises, General McKiernan decided he needed a stronger force that could move fast; unless CFLCC were stronger from the outset, he would not be able to accomplish all of the set tasks at the same time. It seemed, for example, that CFLCC would have to choose between maintaining security on the southern oil fields and moving north. As McKiernan put it on 19 December 2002: “We do not have enough combat power to simultaneously penetrate [Iraq] and move straightaway . . . to Baghdad and do all the other tasks we have to do in southern Iraq . . . secure the oil fields, keep Basrah out of the fight, develop our logistic support areas, deal with displaced civilians, deal with enemy prisoners of war, cross the Euphrates.”¹¹⁷

After the war, on 1 May 2003 General McKiernan made the comment that this was “probably the most critical decision I made [during Operation Iraqi Freedom] . . . I made a case for additional forces . . . that were ready to conduct ground operations . . . [for a] two-corps operation, with a penetration as a form of maneuver by the main effort, and a [simultaneous] supporting attack by the MEF to fix everything over on the east side.”¹¹⁸

Next there was a series of video teleconferences between General McKiernan and CentCom so that General McKiernan could make his case. In Major Huelfer’s words, it went something like this:

Lieutenant General McKiernan made a plea to General Franks, and said, “Hey, look, you are asking to attack at C+15 [15 days after starting the force flow], but we won’t have enough forces on the ground to do both of those operations simultaneously. We cannot go out to Nasiriyah and toward Basrah at the same time.” . . . So . . . I think the light went on, he [General Franks] said, “Okay.” . . . The very next day, General Hailston [the MarCent commander]

came up . . . to Kuwait, and the next thing you know . . . [Marine] regiments were flowing into Kuwait.¹¹⁹

In fact, there was an intermediate step. The talks between McKiernan and Franks led to talks between theater and the Pentagon, a sometimes painful process described by McKiernan’s assistant, Terry Moran (no doubt with tongue in cheek), as a “tug-of-war”: “We had a series of VTCs [video teleconferences] where we were asking to move the force posture from X to X plus Y. We were in a tug-of-war with CentCom and with OSD [Office of the Secretary of Defense] on how big Y could be.” It seemed that whatever increase CFLCC requested, “they would try to skinny [it] . . . down.”¹²⁰ Nevertheless, the end result was that CFLCC came to develop the heavier, two-corps plan, which the 3d Infantry Division reverted to V Corps.¹²¹

This plan was truly a hybrid, a good combination of the “generated start” and the “running start.” The force was by far smaller, and more agile, than the force with which General Schwarzkopf crossed the line of departure in 1991, but it was developing a respectable amount of combat power. Where Schwarzkopf had had two Marine divisions at his disposal, it was now fairly official that if and when the order was given, I MEF would bring its entire division-wing-force service support group team along with some 7,100 Marines from Camp Lejeune. General Conway decided he wanted them to come with the 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade command element; he wanted a second Marine command element in country to take on the distinct security and stability missions in southern Iraq that had originally been foreseen for Task Force South a few months earlier.^{122*} I Marine Expeditionary Force’s subordinate el-

*The exercise was “McKiernan’s first opportunity to . . . conduct operations with his new staff and new general officers and to exercise the new [CFLCC] organization . . . [as well as] the first opportunity for CFLCC’s major subordinate elements . . . to practice operations under . . . CFLCC. Much of the exercise focused on team building and establishing [joint] standard operating procedures.” (Gregory Fontenot, et al., *On Point: The U.S. Army in Operation Iraqi Freedom* [Fort Leavenworth, KS: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004], p. 53)

*Part of the explanation for the selection of 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade as opposed to 2d Marine Division may have been that much of the division staff was already committed to an ongoing CentCom operation in the Horn of Africa and was simply not available. The 7,100 Marines would include the three infantry battalions of Regimental Combat Team 2 (RCT 2), something less than 1,000 Marines in the brigade headquarters, a combat service support element, and 81 aircraft. Apart from the units that were organic to 2d Marines, the larger units earmarked for deployment with the brigade were 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, which replaced the already deployed 2d Battalion, 2d Marines; 1st Battalion, 10th Marines; 2d Force Reconnaissance Company; Company A, 8th Tanks; Company A, 2d Assault Amphibious Battalion; and Company C, 2d Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion. Upon arrival in Kuwait, the aviation and support elements would transfer to the wing and the force service support group, but later on other units came under Tarawa’s control, such as 15th Marine Expeditionary Unit, enabling it to reach a maximum strength of some 15,000 Marines and sailors.

How Task Force Tarawa Got Its Name

General Conway did not like the colorless designation “Task Force South” for 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade, and he asked Brigadier General Richard F. Natonski, its commander, to come up with something better. A Marine with a good sense of history, General Natonski wanted to think the matter through and began by asking the History and Museums Division for help in naming the task force. The head of Reference section, Danny J. Crawford, reviewed the names of the task forces in Desert Storm, such as Grizzly, Papa Bear, and Ripper, and made a few suggestions for the new task force—Mameluke, from the name of the sword; Fortitude, one of the Corps’ earliest mottoes; Chosin or Chosen Few, to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Korean War (which had ended in 1953). Crawford added the incidental note that the Navy’s codename for Iraq

in World War II had been “Plughole,” clearly a non-starter but an interesting bit of historical trivia. General Natonski agreed and said he would consider Crawford’s other suggestions along with the idea that he pick the name of a mythical creature from the Arab world that his future opponents would recognize. In the end, Tarawa seemed to fit best. General Natonski happened to be looking at some artifacts from World War II in the Pacific, a reminder that Tarawa was a famous battle associated with 2d Marines and therefore a good name for a task force with that regiment as its infantry. When 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade landed in Kuwait, it became known by that illustrious place name.*

*BGen Richard F. Natonski intvw, 26Mar04 (MCHC, Quantico, VA); Natonski-Crawford e-mail msg, 18Dec02 (RefSec, MCHC, Quantico, VA)

ements, then, were to be 1st Marine Division, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing, 1st Force Service Support Group, Task Force Tarawa, and I MEF Engineer Group, a force-level engineering asset. The last was a concept that was unfamiliar to many Marines. Made up of Marine engineers and Navy Seabees under the command of a rear admiral, the engineer group was an initiative that dated back to the days when General Zinni was the force commander. The point was for I MEF to be able to do “one-stop shopping” for its engineering needs, especially in major deployments.¹²³

In December 2002 and January 2003, the rough outline of the “hybrid” plan was for the Army’s V Corps to move north through the western desert of Iraq with at least one full division, with the ultimate goal of capturing Baghdad. Meanwhile, I MEF would move north on a more central axis, the “obvious” route to Baghdad, which leads into and through the heart of Iraq, the Fertile Crescent between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The Army remained the main effort, the Marines were the supporting effort, which meant they would pick as many fights as they could, as General Conway put it, in order to deflect pressure from the Army and to make the Iraqis think the Marines were the main effort. In effect, the Marines would defend the Army’s flanks by rapidly defeating enemy forces in its zone. I Marine Expeditionary Forces’ spearhead division, would have the city of Al Kut as its aiming point, while Task Force Tarawa would seize and hold objectives in the south, secur-

ing the division’s rear from potential threats.¹²⁴ A quick look at the map reveals that Task Force Tarawa was to assume responsibility for at least one major city, Basrah, the surrounding oil fields, and thousands of square miles of territory, much of it inhabited—a breathtakingly ambitious mission that could succeed only if the optimistic assumptions about the nature of the opposition (or the lack thereof) were correct.

Exactly what the Marine Corps would do in Baghdad was once again unclear. Along with the elite forces that would most likely try to keep the Coalition away from the capital, Baghdad had long been recognized as the enemy’s center of gravity. The Marines wanted to play a role in the fight for Baghdad and argued for a simple boundary, like the Tigris River, between Marine and Army units in the zone. By late summer 2002, the CFLCC commander, General Mikolashek, appeared ready to accept that approach. Then, in September his successor, General McKiernan, decided to change course and designated the V Corps staff as the lead on Baghdad. The Army was the main effort and it had the heavier force. It would fight in the city; the Marines would support the attack but remain outside the city limits. To be sure, there was always the possibility that this would change, both in General McKiernan’s mind and in the minds of the Marine planners. To the general’s way of thinking, the “base plan” was for V Corps to command the tactical fight for Baghdad. But “there was a branch plan that said, if . . . it makes sense . . . bring forces



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A graduate of the University of Louisville with a degree in history, BGen Richard F. Natonski, following a tour with Plans, Policies, and Operations Division of Headquarters Marine Corps, assumed command of 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade (Task Force Tarawa) in June 2002.

into Baghdad from both the . . . MEF . . . [and] . . . V Corps, . . . we ought to be sure that we can do that."^{125*} The bottom line was that both V Corps and I MEF continued to think about Baghdad and to try to come up with the right way to subdue and control the Iraqi capital.

The prospect of a joint British-American attack from the north lasted through most of December 2002, when it became increasingly clear that the Turks were not likely to allow the British to pass through their country. It was only later that the Turks also refused to allow an American division to pass through Turkey.^{**} In January 2003 it was easy for CentCom and CFLCC to decide to redirect as many British forces as possible to Kuwait and to I MEF,

*This is one of the few instances when there was a whiff of Service politics in Gen McKiernan's basic policy decisions. There was no compelling reason to assign Baghdad exclusively to V Corps.

**It would not become clear until mid-March 2003 that the 4th was not welcome in Turkey either. By then the U.S. Army's 4th Infantry Division and its equipment were in ships floating off the coast of Turkey. But this was not all bad. It enabled Gen Franks to bolster a deception plan that pointed to an attack from the north, which may have found its mark. (Tommy Franks, *American Soldier* [New York, NY: Regan Books, 2004], p. 429)

which did what it could to encourage this development. The reinforcements came in the form of the 1 United Kingdom Division (Armored), a composite made up of three more or less independent brigades, which began to flow into Kuwait in early 2003. Marine expeditionary force planners happily proceeded to include the British division in their plans, along with the 15th MEU (SOC), which was now officially slated to reinforce the British.¹²⁶

With a full division at their disposal, the British could assume responsibility for Basrah and its surroundings. In the words of one staff officer, Lieutenant Colonel Richard T. Johnson, who worked on the plan at CFLCC, the Marines "hit the right numbers" (like a lucky gambler) when the British joined their team. Johnson's thinking, in retrospect, was that without the British, the Marines would have been hard pressed to control the powder keg that was Basrah and accomplish their other assigned missions.*

*LtCol Richard T. Johnson noted that in December 2002 the senior British advisor at CFLCC, BGen Albert Whitley, met with Gen James Conway to discuss whether and how the British Army and I MEF could work together. (LtCol Richard T. Johnson intvw, 26Apr03 [MCHC, Quantico, VA])



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Marines assigned to the 24th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable) disembark from an amphibious assault vehicle to conduct a live fire training exercise while on their six-month training deployment in the Central Command area of responsibility.

Another planner, Lieutenant Colonel Smith, said the British were I MEF's "slingshot," propelling it much farther and faster than it could otherwise have gone.¹²⁷ With the British in I MEF, Task Force Tarawa's mission changed; its focus could shift westward, away from Basrah and the southern oil fields. But the type of mission remained similar—it was to secure crossing sites over the waterways in the south and to preserve combat power. General Natonski stated that he became aware of this change on approximately 17 January 2003.¹²⁸

There were similarities, and dramatic differences, between the battle space assigned to the Marines and that assigned to the Army. Most of the Army's battle space was trackless desert, at least until it reached the cities of Najaf, Karbala, and Hillah, which lay

southeast of Baghdad. Being heavily mechanized, the Army was, arguably, well suited for the desert. The Marine battle space, on the other hand, started off as desert but soon became a varied and complex mix of desert, scrub brush, agricultural land, rivers, and canals. It was defined, and largely contained, by the two great rivers, the Euphrates and the Tigris, and anchored in the south by Basrah, which lay on the Shatt al Arab waterway not far from the border with Iran, and in the north by Baghdad, some 300 miles to the northwest. A small number of highways ran through the area, varying in quality from a good superhighway to two-lane local highways to dirt roads. Like the rivers, the highways mostly ran on a northwest to southeast axis. There was a prominent chokepoint at An Nasiriyah in the south of Iraq, some 90