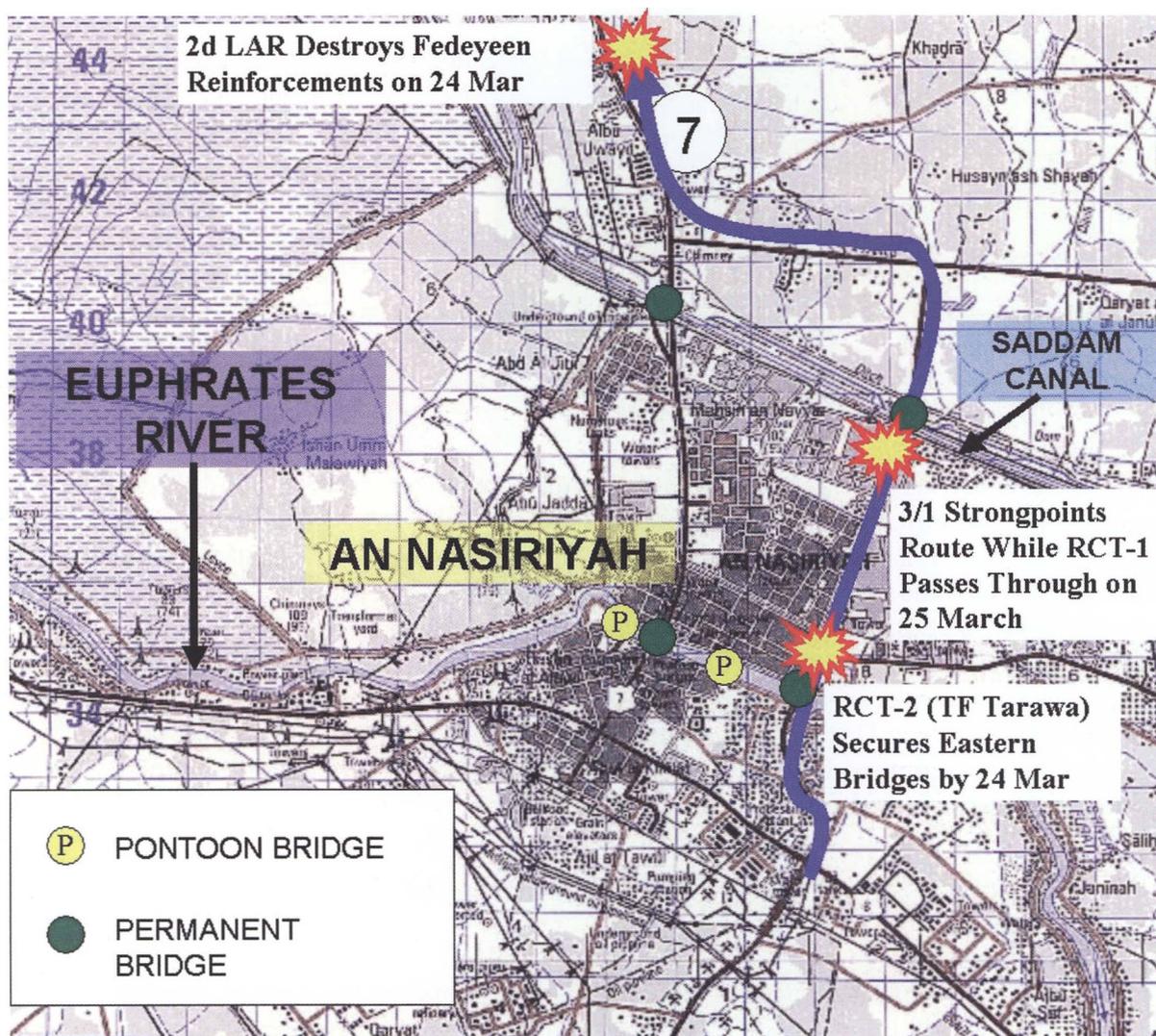


up the Highway 7 corridor, and decided there was still tactical advantage to be gained by sending RCT-1 along that route. The paramilitary had reportedly been using a number of the smaller cities just north of An Nasiriyah to rally their resistance fighters. Clearing the 'rat's nests' of Al Gharraf and Ash Shattrah, especially, would force the enemy fighters to focus their attention on saving their own skin, not contributing to mischief in An Nasiriyah and the other southern cities along Highway 7. In addition, the reported presence of chemical weapons in Ash Shattrah posed a significant risk to the Division and follow-on forces massed near the Highway 1 bridge crossing. The use of the eastern bridges in An Nasiriyah was recommended as a means to remove these threats and alleviate the pressure of forces moving up the Highway 1 corridor, dispersing the lucrative chemical target the Division would otherwise present. There was also a consistent tactical bias to use multiple avenues of approach where possible, to preserve flexibility and eliminate the need for a major friendly passage of lines (with the inherent friction that would entail.) Finally, the Baghdad RG Infantry Division in Al Kut would have to remain fixed if the Marines were to close rapidly on Baghdad, and RCT-1 moving up Highway 7 was planned to be this force.



*The action in and around An Nasiriyah on 24-25 March broke the back of the Fedeyeen hoping to defend along the Euphrates River line. to reach Highway 1.*

The Division had long looked at the bridges in eastern An Nasiriyah as highly desirable as a route of march. There were two key bridges at the eastern edge of the city, a southern one over the Euphrates River, and a northern one over the Saddam Canal. The intact seizure of the bridges by RCT-2 (the GCE of TF-Tarawa) was welcome news. RCT-1 was issued a FRAGO sending it over the newly seized bridges and up Highway 7. The other criterion for movement across these bridges, however, was a secure route that would support RCT-1's movement north through Tarawa's lines. This was to pose a major challenge, as the An Nasiriyah urban area was anything but benign. The 4 km stretch between the bridges was subject to the fires and direct attack of Regime fighters that continued to operate in the city.

In An Nasiriyah, the battle to hold the eastern bridges continued in earnest. RCT-2 had battled the enemy elements that had chosen to stand and fight in the city. Tasked with opening the bridges on the east side of An Nasiriyah, RCT-2 had encountered stiff enemy resistance and had taken many casualties. The Fedeyeen had rallied and massed themselves against the RCT-2 assault. Air assets from across the MEF had been concentrated in support of the sharp An Nasiriyah fight. From positions along Highway 1 south of the Euphrates, the columns of 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division waiting to cross the River could hear and see the air and artillery fires effects in the city. The Division Marines cheered their comrades, and reflected on the coming fights in Al Kut and Baghdad. As the rest of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division was pushing up Highway 1 to the west, RCT-1 poised itself to push through An Nasiriyah in order to gain access to Highway 7 and conduct its fixing attack on the Baghdad RG Division in Al Kut.

On 24 March, the Division's Reconnaissance Battalion was tasked to establish a support by fire position for RCT-1's planned river crossing over the eastern bridges. Recon Battalion set in their positions and engaged in a significant firefight with enemy elements on both sides of the Euphrates. De-conflicting the battlespace was difficult, as 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division forces were providing supporting fires in TF Tarawa's zone. The Marines of 1<sup>st</sup> Recon Battalion poured withering fire across the river in support of the RCT-2 attack. At sunset, they were ordered to fall back and make their preparation for their movement north on the next day.

That evening, 2<sup>d</sup> LAR Battalion ('Barbarian'), led by Lieutenant Colonel Ed Ray, the Division's lead element in the attack up Highway 7, passed through An Nasiriyah and over the two eastern bridges. Barbarian pushed through with blinding speed. Their impetuous attack allowed a swift passage to the northern bridge but not without some significant fighting along the way. As soon as they crossed the southern bridge, they began taking fire from the Fedeyeen fighters firing AK-47s and RPGs from windows and alleyways. Barbarian returned fire against the enemy while continuing their movement towards the northern bridge. They could see the enemy fighters on top, between, and inside the multitude of buildings and alleyways. In the darkness, Barbarian returned fire at the sight of muzzle flashes or rocket trails as they rapidly moved through the urban terrain. The aggressiveness, speed, and tenacity of the Marines was an awesome display of sheer will to accomplish the mission and take the fight directly to the enemy. Once across the northern bridge the TF pushed north up Highway 7 as sporadic fighting continued. Second LAR Battalion was able to push up as far as Al Gharraf (15 km north of An Nasiriyah) that evening. The desire was to get as far north as possible to make room for the remainder of RCT-1 to pass through An Nasiriyah and onto the Highway 7 route in the morning.

During the night, intelligence reports revealed an Iraqi counterattack force heading south from Al Kut, and Barbarian again proved their valor in the ensuing meeting engagement.

*After assisting Bravo Company's move through the city Alpha Company reverted back to battalion control. Captain Monclova was reinforced with a platoon of tanks and given the mission of conducting a forward passage of lines through 2<sup>d</sup> Battalion 8<sup>th</sup> Marines and 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion 2<sup>d</sup> Marines and to continue the attack north up Route 7 in the lead of the battalion. As Alpha Company attacked north they encountered heavy enemy resistance and fire was taken on both sides of the road. The Forward Air Controller ran Cobra gun runs 10-15 feet from the vehicles, at times, to hit Rocket Propelled Grenade teams which were hiding in ditches along the side of the road. Captain Monclova skillfully used a tank platoon to engage and destroy a large number of technicals, ammunition vehicles, and dismounts facilitating the battalion's rapid 15 km movement north. At dusk the company established the north side of the battalion defensive perimeter astride Route 7 in the vicinity of Al Jahar.*

*Almost immediately after establishment of the perimeter it came under attack. Captain Monclova decisively led his company, integrating direct, indirect fire with close air support, engaging numerous vehicles carrying personnel south toward An Nasiriyah along Route 7 throughout the night. As vehicles were being engaged, the number of dismounts began to increase as the Iraqi forces discovered that Alpha Company was blocking their movement south toward the fight in the city. Throughout the entire night the company engaged the enemy. Along the entirety of Company A's lines the Iraqi's attempted to penetrate the battalion's perimeter. Due to the skillful use of supporting arms and a high volume of direct fire the Battalion was successful in defeating each attempt at penetrating its lines. As the last attack was defeated near dawn, the Battalion collected numerous EPWs and observed between 200-300 enemy Killed In Action. In addition to the Killed In Action and Enemy Prisoners of War, Alpha Company destroyed 2 busses used to carry forces south, as well as 2 trucks and several cars being used as personnel carriers.*

### **The Division Crosses the Euphrates**

Along Highway 1, RCT-7 continued to move up behind RCT-5. RCT-7 spent the entire day of 24 March and most of 25 March on the road, in a road march of over 250 km. The RCT-7 Staff worked diligently to ensure accountability up and down the line. To overcome communications challenges over this great distance, Colonel Hummer himself drove over 300 km in a single night, ensuring that all of his RCT elements continued their move from TAA-7 and into the Division file. Those in the RCT-7 TAC, spent two nights in their AAV as the column slowly advanced west then north. The Blue Force Tracker system, with its satellite instant text messaging capability became an important tool during these conditions, with vehicles spread out over long distances, mostly out of voice communications range with the RCT commander. As the weather worsened, the convoy slowed even more.

By the end of the day, most of RCT-5, RCT-7, and 11<sup>th</sup> Marines were across the Euphrates. Highway 1 would need improvement if it was to act as a major supply route, but the Division was successfully making its way along it. As long as the weather remained good and the route dry, the Division could easily handle the threat posed by the Fedeyeen paramilitaries. Ominously, the wind began to shift and pick up speed. By the time darkness fell, a smothering dust storm had begun. Marines choked on the dust and visibility was reduced to almost nothing. Soon, it was blowing so hard that it was difficult to breath outside. Tomorrow was going to be a tough day.

## **25 March**

As the Division had more frequent contact with the Fedeyeen, a new picture of their tactics was emerging. The Fedeyeen and the other paramilitaries were a disingenuous lot. By this time, the paramilitaries had been identified using false surrenders to approach US forces in An Nasiriyah. Marines from 1/4 witnessed this first-hand, 2 km south of Ash Shatrah. Two individuals approached the battalion's perimeter with their hands in the air, offering the universal sign for surrender. Two Marines moved forward to investigate, while a scout sniper team served as their guardian angel. One Marine ordered the individuals to lay on the ground with their arms to their sides, while the other Marine served as the cover man. As the two surrendering individuals moved towards the ground, a third individual emerged from a clump of trees with an AK-47, preparing to fire on the Marines. Before the third individual could open fire, the guardian angel, Corporal Juan Vela, squeezed the trigger of his M40A1 and shot him between the eyes. The guardian angel concept was validated that day.

Even the conventional elements fighting with the paramilitaries shed their uniforms in an attempt to hide among the populace. The fighters tested the limits of the Marines' ROE, and exploited what gaps they could discover. The guerilla 'fish' needs to be able to swim in a 'sea' of popular support, however, and the Regime and foreign fighters did not have this support in southern Iraq. This was not a guerilla war. The Shia Muslims in the south resented the presence of these Regime oppressors, and were willing to work with the Marines once they knew the Marines were there to stay. The paramilitaries were able to maintain small powerbases in the urban areas, but were largely ineffectual in the countryside. As the populace gained more confidence in the presence and motivations of the Marines, they became key allies in the fight to identify the forces still fighting for the Regime. In later weeks, the population would contribute increasingly to assisting US forces remove the Fedeyeen, once the people understood the Coalition was committed to the Regime's removal. For now, the Marines would have to continue to lead with their fists, and annihilate those paramilitaries bold enough to open fire at them.

## **The Mother of all Sandstorms**

The weather continued to severely degrade most operations the next day. As the 'Mother of all Sandstorms' raged, columns moving up Highway 1 were slowed to a snail's pace. Many vehicle accidents due to the reduced visibility contributed to the slow movement. An MTRV (7-ton truck) moving with the Division Main fell into a ditch and rolled on to its side. CSSC-115

had two vehicle accidents that wrecked two HMMWVs and another truck. Close calls, near misses, and bumps were commonplace.

The blowing sand and dust made it necessary to completely cover faces and eyes. With visibility already reduced by the blowing dust, the addition of goggles and face masks added to the burden. Penetrating as if it were liquid, the dust leaked into every opening in vehicles, tents, and uniforms, covering everything with a thick layer of talcum-like powder. That evening, freakish torrential downpours soaked it all into a sticky muck that covered everything. Loud thunderclaps accompanied the rain, and it was hard to differentiate between rolling crashes of thunder and the frequent artillery fire. Every rumble caused the Marines to pause momentarily to consider whether they were in for more sheets of water, or rain of a heavier caliber.



*Visibility was drastically reduced by blowing dust, sand, and rain during the sandstorm.*

The blowing dust caused brownouts that completely blinded the drivers moving over the narrow Highway 1 construction road. First Lieutenant Robert 'Akron Tough Guy' Olson, from Headquarters Battalion, recounts a typical tale of the road that day:

*"In places, it was a complete brownout. You couldn't even see the road in front of the vehicle. We were making our way up the construction road when our MTRV missed one of the culverts. Before we even knew what was happening, the whole truck had flipped on its side. I jumped out into cold water up to my chest and crawled out of the mud. By some miracle, none of the Marines in the back was injured, and we got them all out of the truck unhurt. The truck rolled over until it was laying flat on its side in the muck. The column kept rolling past while we set-in a perimeter around the vehicle. After about five hours, with a tow truck and an M88 track recovery vehicle working on it, they still couldn't budge the MTRV from the mud. We jumped in an empty five-ton in the last stick and kept rolling. It was dark now and still blowing so hard that we couldn't see. We finally could go no further and had to wait for the sand to quit blowing before we could move again. I think they eventually got the truck out."*

Tragedy also struck the Division while crossing the Euphrates River over the precarious night. In the raging sandstorm, unseen by the vehicles in front or behind, the M1A1 tank Charlie 2-3, the 'Harvester of Sorrows' veered off the high Highway 1 Bridge and was lost in the night, along with its crew. The tank plummeted into the Euphrates, and settled on its turret into the silt at the bottom of the Euphrates. Staff Sergeant Donald May, Corporal Robert Rodriguez, Lance Corporal Patrick O'Day, and Lance Corporal Francisco Martinez-Flores all lost their lives. It wasn't until 22 April that 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion was able to rejoin its detached companies and conduct a formal memorial service to mourn the loss of the crew of Charlie 2-3. On that later date, the Battalion Chaplain, USN Lieutenant(jg) Mark Redmon conducted the service with the assistance

of Father Bill Devine from RCT-7. Staff Sergeant Steven Santana, platoon sergeant for the crew, spoke about each of his Marines and their loss with his fellow tankers. In a sweeping motion around him that referred to the recently liberated Iraqi people, Captain Brendan Rodden ended the service by reminding the Battalion that the crew of Charlie 2-3 had not sacrificed in vain. Even on 22 April, however, the pain was still deeply felt. As with all the men the Division lost, they will not be forgotten by those privileged enough to have served alongside them.

The weather steadily grew more intense. By midday, it looked like dusk as sand and dust darkened the afternoon sky with an eerie deep orange hue. For twelve hours, the storm pelted everything with rocks and grit, reduced visibility to less than 10 meters, and even impaired breathing. In the Division Forward CP, poles supporting the tent first bent and then snapped as Marines used everything including cammie net spreaders to keep the structure from falling down around them. Movement became increasingly difficult. Convoys inching up Highway 1 slowed movement and turned on headlights. When that proved insufficient, A-drivers dismounted and walked in front of their vehicles, navigating by dead reckoning. Vehicles moved no faster than a few kph and took hours to arrive at locations that could normally be reached in minutes. The dust particles were so fine that they penetrated the masks and bandanas Marines wore for protection and were often enough to make them choke or vomit. Venturing into the weather could mean quickly becoming lost and disoriented. One Marine left his vehicle to make a head call, and could not find it again. While trying to decide whether he should continue to look or sit down to wait out the storm, he stumbled across a UH-1 Huey parked at a FARP. The crew was kind enough to let him stay with them for the night.

Some chose to tie string to a vehicle or tent to provide a means of finding the way back to it. For others, the only option was to stop their vehicles and wait for the storm to pass. While these Marines were not getting sandblasted, they were enduring a different challenge. The air was so saturated by sand that the only way to breathe was to close all the doors and hatches. Air circulation decreased and the effects of the past hot days without showers became more

pronounced with doors closed. Jammed into tracks and trucks, on top of ammo, chow and water jugs, there was little room to breathe and no way to stretch out.

After battling traffic and brutal weather conditions for over 48 hours, RCT-7 came to a stop to the southeast of Ad Diwaniyah, behind RCT-5. By the end of the road march, every Marine was coated in a thick layer of fine greenish dust that contrasted noticeably with both the red color of blood-shot eyes and the strangely orange,



*Sandstorms drastically slowed the movement of vehicles.*

dust-filled sky. The rain had covered the vehicles with a coat of mud. Mud and dust-covered vehicles were passing endlessly along Highway 1 as Marines stomped around in ankle-deep mud and standing water. Spread out over 40 km of Highway 1, RCT-7 was tasked with protecting the MSR. The route was threatened by Fedeyeen attackers up and down its flanks, largely from the uncontrolled Highway 8 to the west in the adjacent US V Corps zone. The Marines of the RCT were just happy to have stopped, and quickly went about their mission while waiting out the rest of the storm.

Despite the weather, there were indications that the Blue Diamond advance was having the desired effect on the Medina Division. This Republican Guard Armor Division was already stretched thin by its responsibility to defend Baghdad from the south. Their primary defensive area was the 'Karbala Gap', a classic attack route into Baghdad from the south near the Shia holy city of Karbala. The US 3<sup>d</sup> Infantry Division's actions had now opened up a number of simultaneous threats to the Medina Division along the Highway 9 and Highway 8 corridors, including the Karbala Gap. With the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division astride Highway 1 and ready to continue its attack north, the Medina Division would be unable to defend everywhere at once. According to intelligence reports, the Medina Division was now being forced to commit elements of its combat power to the south to counter the threat posed by the Marines along Highway 1. This was exactly the effect the Division had hoped to achieve. A repositioning of the Medina's 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Brigade to the south would have the dual effect of drawing them away from Baghdad, and also removing the threat to 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division's western flank once turning northeast on Highway 27. The Division was also aware that this repositioning could possibly have a more ominous overtone. With the weather situation degrading rapidly, the Division's ability to rely on air support would soon be reduced to nothing. If the Iraqis were ever to conduct a counterattack, these would be ideal conditions. Over the course of the morning, enemy prisoners and informants began to report more Republican Guard forces north of the Division along Highway 1, in areas that had been recently reported by collections platforms as being clear. Similar to the situation in Safwan days ago, there had been no positive indications of significant combat forces in this area, but the weather precluded confirmation that these forces were not present. With the weather closing down all intelligence collections, the Division again prepared for the worst case and planned to deliver heavy blows against any RG units that tried to counterattack down Highway 1.

### **RCT-5 Continues The Attack**

As the fierce storm blew around them, RCT-5 continued the attack as the Division's main effort. The previous afternoon, 3/5 had moved north along Highway 1 for several kilometers and consolidated just before nightfall to allow the remainder of RCT-5 to close the gap. Two technical vehicles approached from the north along Highway 1 and were quickly dispatched by tank and heavy machinegun direct fires. The Marines realized that they would soon get their chance to test themselves against the stiffening Iraqi resistance. At first light on 25 March, 3/5 led an attack to clear Highway 1 in zone. As they moved forward, the Marines of 3/5 could sense their moment was approaching. Lieutenant Colonel Mundy recalls the events that day:

*"Stacy Clardy told me that if we were looking for a fight, we'd soon find one, and he was spot on! As we drove up the road, things seemed to get quiet around us. Right after I noticed*

*this stillness, Sergeant Major Joe L. Vines and my driver, Private First Class Tyrell Victor, commented on the lack of 'locals' who had disappeared from the road sides and mud huts nearby. That's when a hail of machineguns, mortars and RPGs opened up on us."*

A high volume of small arms firing broke out along most of the column as 3/5 found itself reacting to a violent near ambush by an estimated battalion-sized force. Traveling as the lead company, India Company found itself hotly engaged in a close fight with dozens of Iraqi fighters firing from behind a large berm dominating the right side of the road. Captain Ethan Bishop quickly oriented his Marines and watched as the AAV crews of Delta Company, 2<sup>d</sup> AA Battalion (attached to 3/5) skillfully turned their vehicles toward the enemy and began laying down high volumes of fire from their up-gun weapons stations. The skillful cooperation between infantry and amtrac Marines made a difference that day as the AAV crews kept up a strong volume of suppressive fire while India's Marines dismounted and went into the assault, firing at the heads of the Iraqis, and throwing hand grenades back and forth in an intense and close range firefight. Delta Company Commander, Capt Vance Sewell, reported an outstanding example of the great cooperation between his and India's Marines during that attack:

*"Lance Corporal Jonathon Talbott distinguished himself while driving the lead AAV in the battalion column (India Company). When his vehicle came under heavy Rocket Propelled Grenade and automatic weapons fire, without hesitation, he turned his AAV into the fire; as he did so, he saw two enemy soldiers preparing to fire a Rocket Propelled Grenade at his vehicle in a fighting hole 15 meters away. Still under small arms fire, Lance Corporal Talbott accelerated the vehicle and crushed the enemy as they fired the Rocket Propelled Grenade, which buried itself harmlessly in the ground. He then expertly maneuvered to a defiladed position and disembarked the infantry."*

Up front, 3/5's tank platoon, 'Blue 1', and First Lieutenant Brian Chontosh's CAAT platoon, remained hotly engaged with a large body of Iraqi soldiers. During this engagement 3/5 suffered its first casualties when an RPG slammed into a heavy machinegun vehicle, killing the platoon's corpsman, Petty Officer Michael Johnson, and seriously wounding the gunner, Corporal Frankie Quintera. Petty Officer (HM3) Johnson was the only corpsman Killed In Action while serving as part of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division during OIF. His presence at the front of the action, sharing the hazards of his infantry brothers, was indicative of the brave and distinguished service provided by Navy corpsmen throughout the campaign. Firing multi-purpose, anti-tank (MPAT) and heavy machinegun rounds at nearly point blank range into the berms and concentrations of troops, Blue 1 and the CAAT platoon Marines soon gained the upper hand and began mowing down Iraqi defenders. Blue 1 and CAAT continued to press their attack forward, pursuing the Iraqis and engaging another well-laid ambush position further to the north. When the forward units moved beyond communication range with India Company and the battalion Forward CP, Lieutenant Colonel Mundy directed the two platoons to hold up, issued a verbal FRAGO to pass Kilo Company into the lead, and then ordered the remainder of the battalion to continue its attack north. As the rifle companies mopped up remaining resistance, passed off the enemy wounded and EPWs, the freakish sandstorm added to the friction by turning day into night. Coordination proved very difficult. 3/5 continued to press forward, uncovering multiple caches of weapons, ammunition, and equipment along the axis of advance while pursuing the Iraqi defenders.

The weather continued to impact the lead elements of the Division, even after the worst had passed. On the night of 25 March, 3/5 consolidated in a very tight defensive perimeter south of the Ad Diwaniyah cloverleaf. A few hours later, Lima Company reported to the CP that they heard what sounded like armored vehicles approaching. The weather was so terrible and it was still so dark that NVGs and thermal sights were nearly useless. Trying to maneuver the tank platoon into a position to engage, the 3/5 CP received a report that the M1A1's thermal sights could not achieve a ballistic firing solution beyond 800 meters. Captain Mario Schweizer was ordered to form a provisional reserve from available Headquarters and Service Company Marines standing security watch, while Captain Scott Meredith's Lima Company broke out AT-4s and prepared SMAW-AT rounds. Both expected to repel the enemy's assault at close quarters. The 3/5 CP reported to the RCT-5 CP that they could hear armored vehicles approaching. Enemy tanks were so close that the 3/5 Marines could feel the vibrations from the enemy tracks in their defensive positions. The Marines braced for the assault that they knew was coming soon, prepared to defend without air support. The RCT-5 CP reiterated that there was no friendly armor in that area. Through the blowing dirt and sand, 3/5 finally spotted 8-10 Iraqi tanks closing on Lima Company's lines, and called for artillery support. As the situation continued to develop, a mechanized enemy threat was also identified moving south down Highway 1 toward 3/5's positions. The all-weather capable 2/11 responded with DPICM and requested reinforcing fires from 11<sup>th</sup> Marines. The Battalion was allocated the reinforcing fires of 3/11 and 5/11. In no engagement was artillery more effective, as the combined fires of the three artillery battalions rained down on the enemy attack force, forcing them to beat a hasty retreat. Captain Spaid, the 3/5 Air Officer, also managed to direct a section of F-15s, flying above the weather, against the enemy tanks, hastening their retreat north of the cloverleaf. Throughout the night and into the early morning hours of 26 March, 2/11 processed 12 missions providing 457 rounds of support that no one else could in that environment. Overnight, 3/5 continued to experience small probes by dismounted enemy forces moving in front of their lines and engaged several technical vehicles approaching from the north along Highway 1. Dispatching both with a combination of mortar and artillery coordinated HE/illumination missions, 3/5 spent a restless and edgy night in their defensive positions.



*JSTARS ground stations operated through the storm at the Division Main CP. These Army attachments added the critical capability for the Division to view the entire battlespace.*

The all weather fire support provided by 11<sup>th</sup> Marines also raised the adrenaline levels of many units of the Division during segments of the fight. During the sand storm, 1<sup>st</sup> LAR Battalion ('Highlander') had unknowingly pulled up next to an artillery firing battery. When the

battery responded to a call for fire, the explosions of the rounds going down range threw the Highlanders into a scramble for cover from the 'incoming'. Taken by surprise, they thought that they were once again under attack, but soon realized the true source of the noise. After a few muttered comments about the Cannon Cockers being inconsiderate neighbors, the Marines got some well-deserved rest.

### **Blue Diamond Weathers the Storm**

Sometime that evening, the blowing dust stopped and it began to rain. Golf ball sized hail mixed in with the rain, turning the unpaved road from dust to mud. Throughout the night, periods of relative calm alternated with periods of freakish lightning and large crashes of thunder. 'Blue Diamond' passed from the Division Forward to the Division Main CP in the midst of the storm and the Forward Marines hunkered down for the night. Covered with water and mud, with the CP tent half-collapsed around them, the Marines took to any level surface they could find, glad to find at least a small bit of shelter from the storm.

The Division was to fight much more than the weather on this day. Most of the Marines of the Division found themselves enduring the sandstorm along Highway 1. But at the same time, about 70 km to the east, the Marines of RCT-1 found themselves with a more conventional opponent. On the morning of 25 March, the Commander gave the word, and the Marines of RCT-1 moved across the Euphrates River and up Highway 7.

### **Inchon Carries the Ball Downfield**

With the attack along Highway 1 slowed down by the weather, it was RCT-1's turn to carry the ball downfield. To the east, the weather, though severe, did not have the same impact as it did to the exposed columns along Highway 1. The previous evening, 2<sup>d</sup> LAR had carried the fight to the enemy north of the city, but was cut off from the rest of the RCT. The Fedeyeen still made for a dangerous passage through the eastern An Nasiriyah bypass, posing a special threat to soft-skin vehicles. The progress of the rest of the Division up the Highway 1 corridor, however, mandated immediate action to get the fixing force for the Baghdad RG Division up on the Highway 7 corridor.

The original timeline was premised on TF Tarawa's successful securing of An Nasiriyah prior to RCT-1 making this move. With Tarawa still engaged with significant enemy resistance, however, the Division decided to accept the risk of passing the entire RCT column through the edge of the urban area. RCT-1 was ordered to make its way through the eastern edge of the city, just as 2<sup>d</sup> LAR had done the previous night. With RCT-2 in control of the two eastern bridges over the Euphrates River and Saddam Canal, this would require the RCT to pass through the 4km stretch of road in between. The ADC, Brigadier General Kelly, and the RCT Commander, Colonel Dowdy, decided that, even though the An Nasiriyah environment was not completely under control, the combat power of a Marine RCT would certainly be sufficient to force its own way through. Lieutenant Colonel Jim Parrington, the Regimental S-3, worked out a strategy to strongpoint the 4 km passage using 3/1 to hold the door open for the rest of the RCT to pass. The Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Lew Craparotta, would force open the passage

and remain in position for 12 hours, as the rest of the RCT convoy made its way through the restricted terrain.

The Iraqi fighters had been prepared by a great deal of propaganda regarding the willingness and ability of American forces to fight the close battle. The Marines taught them a first-hand lesson. The Marines of 3/1 and Alpha Company of 1<sup>st</sup> Tank Battalion swept into the city in the predawn hours. In the twelve-hour firefight that followed, the Marines of 3/1 literally had to stack the bodies of the Fedeyeen to clear fields of fire. The Iraqis were quickly learning a very important lesson; Marines would fight with a skill, ferociousness, and determination that they had not seen or experienced before.

The Marines of 3/1 and Alpha Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Tanks benefited from their technical overmatch during the hours of darkness. With thermal sights and night vision equipment, the Marines were able to engage squads of Fedeyeen moving under the 'cover' of darkness. The adage 'too much night vision gear is just about enough,' was true in this fight. The Fedeyeen, unable to see in the very dark night, repeatedly would walk into the same kill zone, and fall like their predecessors.



**Marines from 3/1 hold the door open for RCT-1 in An Nasiriyah.**

As daylight began to break over the scene, the Fedeyeen gained a better appreciation for the Marines' positions, and began to change their tactics. They used the cover of walls and civilian houses to gain close approaches to the Marines. From there, they would attempt to engage the column with RPG's and grenades, but usually not before being cut down by the withering fires laid down by 3/1 and Alpha tanks.

Following 3/1 into the breach were 1/4, 1/11, 2/23, the Reconnaissance Battalion, and the rest of the units that made up the RCT. Lieutenant Colonel Steve Ferrando, CO of 1<sup>st</sup> Recon Battalion, was in the column, and recounts the story:

*"As we rode up, we rolled past the three AAVs that had been shot up in the previous day's [TF Tarawa] actions. It was a very sobering scene, as these armored vehicles lay in smoking ruin, jagged twisted metal bent in every direction. The enemy opened up with small arms, heavy machine guns, and RPGs. The Marines returned fire on everything that posed a threat as we made our way through the city. We would see paramilitary guys in civilian clothes without weapons come out and look at the column, then run back inside buildings and begin to open fire. Anything that moved was quickly suppressed. Most of these guys were hard-core, and had no fear of death. They were all dressed in civilian clothes, and would take refuge in houses along the way. It was a shooting gallery. The Marines from 3/1 and Tanks did a great job laying down suppressing fires, and every vehicle in the convoy had their pick of targets. One of the Marines from 3/1 was wounded, so we grabbed him and put him in one of our vehicles and got him to the north bridge and the aid station. When we got to the north end, we moved across the bridge and quickly got back on the Highway 7 corridor. There were weapons and ammunition caches all over, and our guys were destroying them as we went. I got a radio call from one of my*

*commanders asking permission to blow up a huge truck full of mortar rounds on the north side. When we plotted it out, it was only a couple of hundred meters from our CP! We had to say no to that one.”*

As aerial and human intelligence reporting began to trickle in it became clear that the Iraqis were making a late effort to reinforce the An Nasiriyah defenses. The Iraqis had clearly not been prepared for the rapidity of the Division’s attack, as they had to assemble reinforcements from deserters, conscripts, and Baath militiamen. These fighters augmented a cadre of Republican Guard and Regular Army soldiers that made their way south along Highway 7. Intelligence clearly revealed the busses and trucks that were making their way down Highway 7 to An Nasiriyah, and 3<sup>d</sup> MAW quickly swept into action. The Wing began attacking the convoys of busses and ‘technical’ vehicles that contained additional forces aimed at An Nasiriyah and RCT-1. The artillery fires of 1/11 were added to the devastation, as they moved in support of the forward elements of RCT-1. Although indirect fires were devastating in their attacks on the columns of vehicles, it would be Lieutenant Colonel Ray’s 2<sup>d</sup> LAR Battalion that would spring an ambush on the survivors, finally crushing the counterattack effort. Much as they had done the previous evening, 2<sup>d</sup> LAR Battalion’s LAV-25s and the LAR Battalion Scouts stopped the counterattack force well short of An Nasiriyah with a wall of firepower. The destructive power of the LAV-25 would earn the enemy’s deep respect. Captured enemy information revealed that the Iraqi troops referred to LAV-25s as ‘destroyers’, and the presence of LAVs on the battlefield spread panic through their ranks.

The devastation of the enemy’s attempt to reinforce by artillery, air, and direct fires was complete. In reviewing the wreckage of the counterattack force, the Marines of 2<sup>d</sup> LAR Battalion reported that the charred remains of Iraqi Soldiers were still holding on to brand new AK-47 assault rifles wrapped in the original wrapping paper. The counterattack was stopped abruptly and violently by the Marines and now the Iraqi’s were beginning to understand that they were fighting a determined and disciplined force rather than the ‘paper soldiers’ they were led to believe they would face. With the reinforcements/counterattack force wiped out, the stage was set for the eventual victory and stabilization in An Nasiriyah.



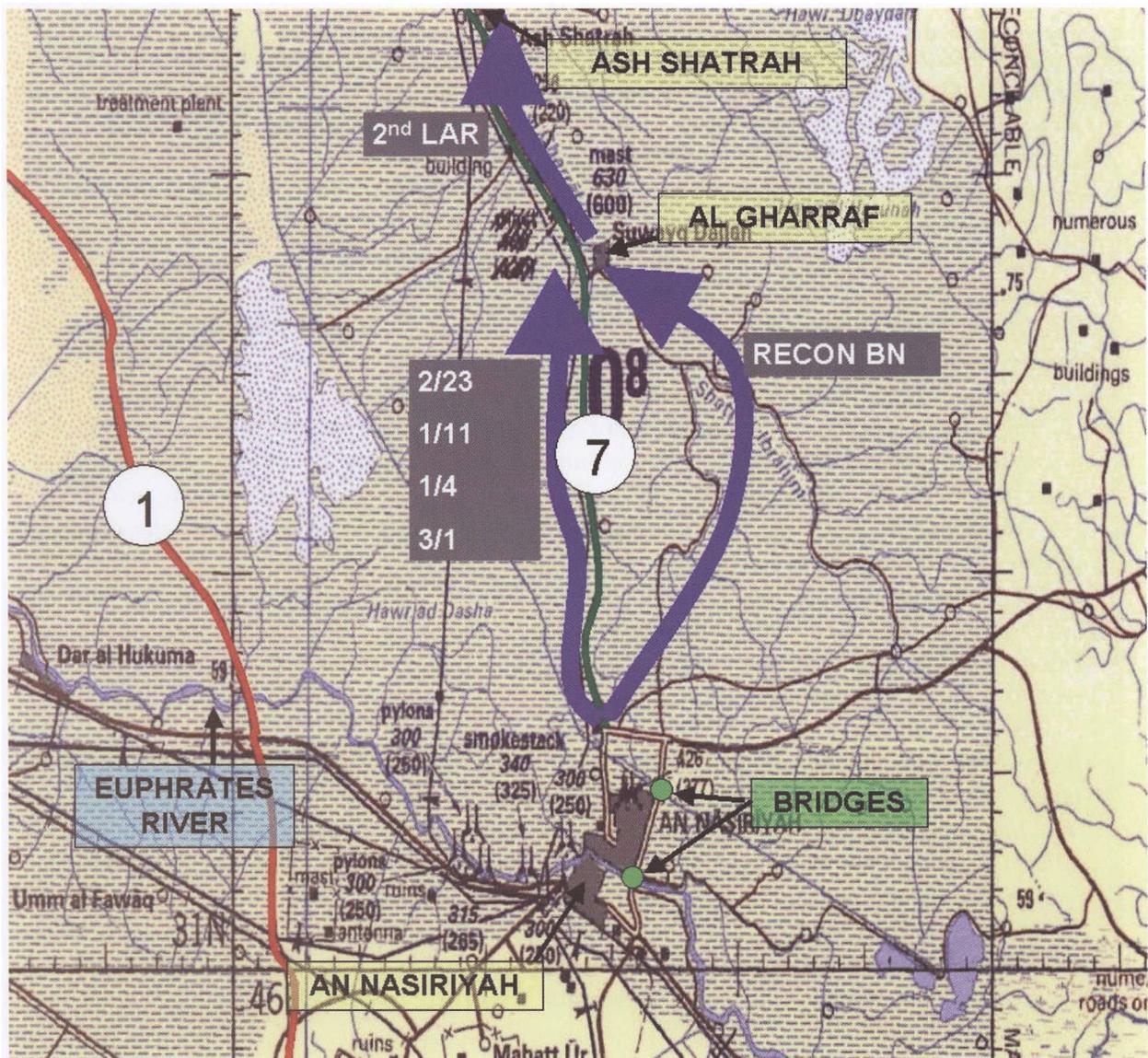
*A bird's eye view of the Euphrates River from a UH-1 Huey.*

As soon as the Reconnaissance Battalion got to the north side of An Nasiriyah, they attempted to establish the eastern picket line to protect the Division’s flank. In the planned Division scheme of maneuver, they would establish multiple outposts astride the avenues of approach the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Division might take to counterattack or interdict the Division. The Battalion hoped to be able to pick its way to the north by route finding to the east of Highway 7. The deep

Mesopotamian mud, however, immediately began to tug at the Battalion's vehicles, and soon got the upper hand. The terrain just a few hundred meters off of Highway 7 was a mucky quagmire. The locals had built a number of canal roads on raised levees that offered some trafficability through the swamps for their light pickup trucks, but these roads were often nothing more than generations of stacked reeds on top of mud levees. When the Battalion's MTRVs and heavily laden HMMWV's traversed these roads, they compressed the material, leaving deeply rutted mud paths in their wake. After pushing several kilometers to the east, it was clear that no sustainable route of march existed to the northeast, and the Battalion would have to return to Highway 7 in order to travel north. Going back the way they had come was not possible, as the roads they had taken to this point would not support a second crossing of the Battalion's heavy vehicles. The CO decided to keep pushing to an unimproved surface road depicted on the map that led back northwest, rejoining Highway 7 at a small town called Al Gharraf.

The remainder of RCT-1 moved through An Nasiriyah and began the attack up Highway 7. Led by Lieutenant Michael Borneo's CAAT platoon, 1/4 passed through 2<sup>d</sup> LAR's lines and continued the attack north. Approximately 5 km south of Al Gharraf, three 'technicals' emerged and engaged the CAAT platoon with ineffective small arms and RPG fire. CAAT A responded with devastating accuracy, as their .50 caliber machine guns rendered two of the vehicles destroyed. Almost immediately, the enemy revealed the rest of his ambush position and began to engage CAAT A with small arms fire from prepared positions. Alpha Company, led by Captain Chris Griffin, was ordered into the fight to conduct a flanking attack from the east while CAAT A established a base of fire to suppress the enemy. The 81mm Mortar Platoon, led by Lieutenant Andy Owings, established a mortar firing position and was responding to calls for fire from CAAT A's forward observer within minutes. The battalion's air officer, Captain Evan Wahl, directed a section of AH-1W Cobras to support Alpha Company. With audacity of action, Alpha Company secured the objective. They reported one enemy KIA and 18 EPWs, including 8 enemy WIAs. Human Intelligence Team-1 (HET-1) quickly went to work on the EPWs. They determined that the lot consisted of a combination of Republican Guard soldiers, Regular Army soldiers, Fedeyeen, and other paramilitaries.

Lead elements of the RCT now pushed all the way up to Ash Shattrah, but bypassed significant enemy resistance that had fled and sought refuge in the village of Al Gharraf. The enemy had already learned to let the tanks and LAV-25s pass, holding their ambushes for the soft-skinned vehicles that followed. RCT-1's main body began to arrive at the town of Al Gharraf by noon, and immediately became engaged with a mix of all types of Iraqi fighters. A platoon from 1/4 and the RCT-1 Alpha command group were on the southern edge of the town, while an advance party from Alpha Battery, 1/11 was also forward, scouting for new firing positions. Captain Jason Frei, the Alpha Battery commander, and Lieutenant John Carroll, his assistant, were with the advanced party when it was ambushed by the enemy.



*RCT-1 experienced some of its heaviest fighting just north of An Nasiriyah along Highway 7. In a meeting engagement, RCT-1 destroyed elements of the Fedeyeen attempting to reinforce the city.*

While the Alpha Battery artillery advanced party was pinned down, the main body of A/1/11 also began to come under fire. The Alpha Battery main body, under the calm direction of First Lieutenant Lucas Hanback returned fires with organic crew-served weapons and small arms. The Fedeyeen continued to swarm the cannoneers, and soon India Battery (attached from 5<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 10<sup>th</sup> Marines) and the 1/11 Battalion CP also came under attack. Fedeyeen fighters were firing from rooftops and windows from multiple directions. The fire was so intense that Major Russo, the battalion Operations Officer had a 'yellow canary' (memorandum pad) shot right out of his hand. This time, the Cannon Cockers decided to conduct a fires demonstration for the Fedeyeen, as Alpha and India Batteries each lowered a number of their tubes and used direct fire from their 155mm howitzers to destroy Fedeyeen firing positions in the buildings around them.