

An Numaniyah all the way to As Suwayrah. First LAR Battalion ('Highlander') led the RCT (-) attack along Powerline Road. First Battalion, 5<sup>th</sup> Marines (1/5) followed in trace of Highlander, with orders to seize the pontoon bridge at the town of Az Zubadiyah. The battalion cleared through the town with two companies on-line, meeting no enemy resistance and confirming that the bridge located in the vicinity had been destroyed by aviation fires. The Marines quickly assessed the bridge, evaluating its potential for repair and use as an alternate crossing site. Following 1/5, 2/5 continued the advance to Al Aziziyah, where the battalions on the south side of the Tigris intended to cross and link up with the battalions on the north side of the river.

*The Iraqis fired rocket-propelled grenades from behind a taxi parked along a distant canal. One grenade zipped across the nose of an armored amphibious vehicle and exploded in the dirt. That angered Major Andrew Bianca, executive officer of the Marines' 2<sup>d</sup> Tank Battalion. Sheathed in aluminum plate, the tracked amphibious vehicles known as AAVs can withstand rifle fire, but not rocket grenades. And Major Bianca's support team was in AAVs. He ordered his tank crew to fire a round at the Iraqis. The 120 mm cannon barrel dropped slightly, then erupted with smoke and flame. The noise ripped the air so violently that Marines standing in an AAV behind the tank were knocked off balance. A cloud of dirt appeared behind the taxi. The shell had gone through the taxi's open windows. But shrapnel from the round finished the Iraqis, and a finger of black smoke and flame soon rose from the taxi.*

*The tank column resumed its march to Baghdad. For Marines and Army soldiers fighting throughout southern Iraq, this was their war: armored columns blasting through urban ambushes. The 2<sup>d</sup> Tank Battalion started several fights with these urban opponents. Speed mattered more than body counts or seized ground. Using tanks to punch through enemy ambushes put the Marines closer to Baghdad and Saddam Hussein's regime. Lieutenant Colonel Mike Oehl, the battalion's commanding officer, put it to his officers this way: "Speed is the essence of this endeavor." He was talking about a planned raid, but the remark held true for the battalion's mission in the war. "It's hard to know what our part was in the overall war, but I'd like to think we made it a shorter war because we got here so quickly," Colonel Oehl said when his unit reached Baghdad.*

*Yet several analysts agreed that the battalion exemplified the strategy and tactics that toppled Mr. Hussein in just three weeks of warfare. Colonel Oehl's crew named its tank "Deadly Mariah" and animated the name with an angry cloud blowing swords from its mouth. Major Bianca's tank crew reached back to Greek mythology for the name "Two Furies" - anger and vengeance, minus the third fury, jealousy, which seemed out of place in Iraq. The 2<sup>d</sup> battalion spent most of the war at the tip of the Marines' spear. It came within three miles of Baghdad on April 4, after three days that destroyed what was left of the Al Nida Division of the Republican Guards. They cleared the way to Baghdad for the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division and killed a large number of Arab Muslim volunteers who heeded Osama bin Laden's call to come to Iraq to kill Americans.*

By Jim Landers in the *Dallas Morning News*, 18 May 2003.

On Powerline Road, RCT-5's advance proceeded without challenge, at first. Passing through dilapidated farming villages, the Marines were amazed to find themselves welcomed with surprising hospitality. Despite living in what was obviously desperate poverty, the smiling villagers offered sweet tea, flat bread, and dates to the Marines. Meanwhile, inquisitive children touched the Marines' camouflage uniforms without fear. These farmers, members of an oppressed Shiite Muslim religious community, had no love for Saddam and the Iraqi Regime. This response from the Iraqi people would soon become routine, characterizing the population's relief at their liberation.

First contact was reported by Highlander as its lead company advanced on the south bank of the river. Observing a pickup truck speeding toward them, a platoon of Delta Company identified a heavy machinegun mounted on the vehicle as it turned south along a canal. One section engaged the pickup truck with 25mm high explosive rounds, destroying the truck and killing the occupants. Soon after, 'Highlander Three' called for Delta Company to form a screen line along an aqueduct leading south from the river for about 10 km. Two batteries of 2/11 moved up behind the screen line and were soon providing artillery fires in support of 2<sup>d</sup> Tanks and 3/5 in their fight on the north side of the Tigris. By then, 1/5 had moved up as well, and the near side of the aqueduct had become crowded with tanks and AAVs.



*Eleventh Marines units cross the Tigris River at the Pearl 3 bridge west of An Numaniyah.*

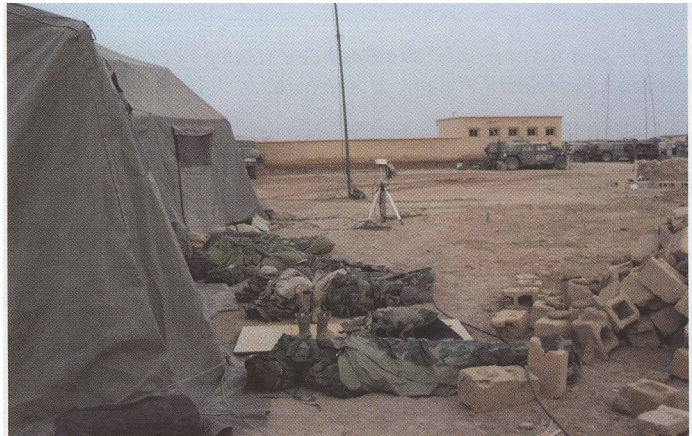
As the fight to the north in Al Aziziyah drew to a close, 1<sup>st</sup> LAR resumed its reconnaissance in zone along the south bank of the river. In the lead of the battalion, Lieutenant 'Lucky' Cullins' Third Platoon, Delta Company, rounded a bend where Powerline Road ran west right along the reedy riverbank. All at once the platoon found itself in an ambush. With heavy small arms and RPG fire emanating from an orchard and from around a bridge about a thousand meters down the road, the platoon returned fire using all of its organic weapons. Lieutenant Cullins was ordered to pull back so

that the enemy position could be engaged with supporting arms. Destruction of the ambush force was a perfect choreography of supporting arms that demonstrated the combined arms killing power of the MAGTF, and ended in the certain destruction of the Iraqi defenders. The battalion's 81mm mortars went into action first. Fox Battery, 2/11, shifted trails and was soon ready to fire in support. Captain Reuel Pietz, the company FAC, arrived and air began to check on station. Meanwhile, the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2d Platoons moved up on line and the company attack by fire



position was set. As the LAR company began to engage the enemy with direct fire, Lieutenant Cullins directed mortars and artillery into the orchard and a nearby walled compound into which some of the ambushers fled. Captain Pietz controlled a division of AH-1 Cobra gunships and a section of F/A-18 Hornet jets, which worked over the ambush area. Fox Battery recorded Lieutenant Cullins' surveillance as he ended the artillery mission, "Everything is destroyed, everything is destroyed. The buildings are destroyed. Everything is destroyed."

As 1<sup>st</sup> LAR was battling the enemy, 2/5 reached the bridge at Al Aziziyah. Engineers from the Combat Engineer Battalion evaluated the captured pontoon bridge and determined that it would not support the armor and heavy equipment of the elements of the RCT advancing on the south side of the River. After a discussion about continuing the attack to a potential crossing site further west, the Division CG ordered the RCT's elements on the south bank of the Tigris to turn around and cross the river at An Numaniyah. With 1<sup>st</sup> LAR and Battery F covering the withdrawal, 1/5 and 2/5 began the long movement back east down the powerline road, across the Tigris at An Numaniyah, and then back west on the north bank. There, they prepared for the planned attack to the outskirts of Baghdad the following day. Initial movement was slowed for 2/5 by difficult terrain near the Tigris, where the marshy ground swallowed up three M1A1s and an M88, which were left behind for recovery by follow on forces. In the dark while moving to link-up with the rest of the RCT, three Marines were severely injured when their LAV ran into a dump truck abandoned on the road. The artillery convoy of 2/11 also came under enemy indirect fire, causing them to mask up and drive for several additional km in MOPP 4. As night fell, the RCT-5 units on the south side of the Tigris were spread out on a 90 km road march to the north side of the Tigris River. Enroute, they re-armed and re-fueled. They joined the rest of the RCT early the next morning, physically tired, but prepared to press the attack to Baghdad.



*Marines get some much-needed sleep near Al Aziziyah.  
The Division would soon launch the assault on Baghdad.*

The Division noted a number of intelligence indicators that the Regime's control inside Baghdad was beginning to fracture. Although the military forces remained at least partially under control, it appeared that the civilian populace was beginning to take to the streets against the Regime. There were reports of Regime leadership figures abandoning Baghdad and attempting to head to Syria. Additional intelligence hits indicated that the large number of tanks and BMPs in the vicinity of the Al Nida Division's garrisons had been abandoned. The Division CG was eager to exploit this situation, and reiterated the importance of speed in getting to Baghdad. There, it was likely that conditions would allow a continued attack right into the Baghdad urban area. The Division Forward CP was ordered to Al Aziziyah to collocate with RCT-5 and be in a position to let the Division Main CP leapfrog to the outskirts of Baghdad.

Logistics would provide the fuel, ammo, water, and food that would allow the Division to move into the city. The importance of KC-130 strips in keeping the Division's momentum forward was already proven. By the end of the day, An Numaniyah Airfield (RRP-19) was clear



*The CG and his staff plot the Baghdad strategy at the Blue Diamond Forward CP near Al Aziziyah.*

of unexploded ordnance and made operational. To enable speed against Baghdad, Al Kut could not be allowed to draw off combat power in the defense of this airfield and the very important RRP. RCT-7's attack to Al Kut along the southern bank of the Tigris ensured no enemy threat existed from this direction. The G-4 and CSSG-11 continued to work with 3<sup>d</sup> MAW and MWSS as they expanded aerial re-supply capability in support of the Division's high tempo combat operations. In addition to serving as a FARP, RRP-19 would serve as the Division's maintenance collection point for damaged vehicles and other gear, and eventually became home to the MEF Forward headquarters.

#### **4 April Pushing to the West**

On the morning of 4 April, Ironhorse led the Division's Main Effort, RCT-5's attack to Baghdad. With signs that the enemy's ability to conduct a conventional defense in Baghdad was collapsing, rapid progress was expected. Commencing their attack from approximately 10 km to the west of Al Aziziyah, Ironhorse ran into stiff resistance not far after crossing the LD. It was



*The MEG emplaced Maybey-Johnson bridges over water obstacles where a more permanent structure was required.*

clear that the enemy along Highway 6 had not gotten the word that they were losing the war. The combined arms power of the MAGTF was brought to bear. Eleventh Marines brought up 2/11 to support the attack, and the Battalion opened up to devastating effect. The Division Forward CP and the RCT-5 CP were rocked by volley after volley of outgoing artillery, and the sky was filled with friendly aircraft overhead as 3<sup>d</sup> MAW and JFACC air entered the fray, demoralizing and destroying the enemy.



RCT-5 began the attack as it had the previous day. Ironhorse (with attached infantry from 2/5) led the movement with a strong push up Highway 6 through numerous small villages and hamlets. A battery of 2/11 providing close and responsive fire support followed them closely. Lieutenant Colonel Sam Mundy's well-oiled 3/5 machine came next, with the remainder of 2/11 and 5/11 in hot pursuit.

As 2<sup>d</sup> Tanks moved through a stretch of Highway 6 north of Salman Pak, a hail of rifle, machinegun and RPG fire ripped into the battalion from both sides of the road. The fiercest resistance came along Highway 6 between the 61 and 66 east grid lines (absent significant terrain features, battles were often noted simply by map grid references.) The battalion saw small arms, machine gun fire and RPG teams near the highway, launching attacks against the entire column. Numerous enemy fighters were spotted throughout the area along Highway 6 in abandoned buildings, man-made bunkers, fighting holes, and behind vehicles. The enemy was a mix of regular Al Nida Division units as well as irregulars clad in black uniforms and non-military attire. These were not just Iraqi soldiers, but Fedeyeen fighters and *jihad* extremists imported from as far away as Egypt, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, and the Sudan. Their sole motive may have been to kill Americans, but these *jihadis* seemed committed to die for the Saddam Hussein regime. The Marines of Ironhorse efficiently complied with their wishes, killing many with air strikes and tank main guns. As with the day prior, fixed and rotary wing aircraft provided accurate and effective close air support in conjunction with the RCT's maneuver.



*Iraqi Artillery (like this D-30) was found abandoned all along Highway 6. Artillery pieces were often found in schoolyards, mosques, and urban areas.*



*An M1A1 destroyed by a fire during a Fedeyeen ambush on Highway 6. This burned out hulk was a sharp reminder of the dangers that remained in the fight for Baghdad.*

Second Tanks continued the attack along Highway 6 with the Scout Platoon in the lead. In the vicinity of the 65 easting, the scouts uncovered another enemy ambush. In the process of engaging the enemy, the new Scout Platoon Commander, First Lieutenant Brian M. McPhillips, was killed by an enemy sniper. Lieutenant McPhillips had taken over the platoon from the seriously wounded Lieutenant Zummo when he had been evacuated. Knowing the dangers of his

position but still leading from the front, Lieutenant McPhillips led the Division's attack in the face of a determined enemy. Despite the loss of their Lieutenant, the scouts accomplished their mission of identifying the enemy, then fell back to allow Company C to continue the attack west and north. As the lead elements of RCT-5 approached to within a few km of Baghdad, the enemy set fire trenches adjacent to the road ablaze, making visibility extremely difficult. At this point in the battle the fog of war began to thicken for the battalion. The intersection of Highway 6 and Route Green (the route leading north to the battalion's objective) was known as the 'Diyala Crossroads'. The intersection was to play a significant role throughout the coming fight. Upon approaching this key crossroads, the lead tank was hit with multiple RPGs, instantly killing Corporal Bernard G. Gooden, the lead tank's loader. Corporal Gooden's loss was indicative of the ferocity of the enemy's defense, and the bravery of the Marines, like him, that were willing to meet the enemy in combat.

Damaged, but moving, the lead tank continued through heavy fire, but soon realized they had missed the turn on Route Green. Under fire, the battalion executed a counter-column as rear elements waited just prior to the turn north. Not far behind, Charlie Company's Commanding Officer had taken fire and his tank was immobilized. Captain Jeffrey S. Houston dismounted his tank in order take over another tank within his Company. While moving to the other tank, an enemy sniper found his mark and Captain Houston was severely injured with a gunshot wound to the jaw. Captain Houston's immobilized tank became an instant target for Iraqi gunners. In the fusillade of fire that followed, an RPG pierced the rubber *flexcell* fuel bladder strapped to the side of the tank, and the leaking fuel set the entire tank ablaze. This burned out M1A1 hulk was a sobering sight to follow-on units and drove home the bitter fighting in the area. There were dangers beyond bullets and RPGs too. A truck bomb mixed in with the mass of civilian traffic on Highway 6 maneuvered next to another tank of Charlie Company and was detonated. Fortunately, the injuries to the crew were minor and the tank continued in the attack.

With plenty of aggressive enemy still anxious to fight (2<sup>d</sup> Tanks had passed), Colonel Dunford ordered 3/5 to clear both roadsides in the vicinity of the 61 easting and provide security for the burning M1A1. The battalion's lead tank and CAAT section moved to support the damaged tank. Lima Company also halted, dismounted, and prepared to conduct a hasty attack. Ordered to clear a large, fenced military complex on the north side of the road, Captain Scott Meredith quickly organized his platoons and sought to lay down some indirect fire suppression. Unfortunately, due to the density of the urban structures and vegetation lining the road, he was unable to observe the fires. Unwilling to cause civilian casualties, Lima resorted to entering the compound using direct fire suppression only. As Lima moved into the assault, Lieutenant Colonel Mundy ordered India Company to move forward, dismount and clear the south side of the road:

*"Because 2<sup>d</sup> Tanks had already moved through and we were unable to conduct face-to-face coordination, I wasn't exactly sure where the enemy was located. Looking at the map, I guessed that they must have been defending from the apparent military compound on our right flank, and so I ordered Lima to clear it. I pulled India Company up mainly to protect Lima's flank and to provide some flexibility during the attack. The left side of the road was dominated by a large canal giving way to a huge open field running south and southwest. The ground was broken and had some scrub vegetation on it. My Battalion Gunner and I were discussing the fact that it*

*didn't look or feel right to leave that flank unguarded. I'm glad he planted that seed because it turned out the open ground was hiding a hornet's nest of jihadis."*

India Company began its movement along the left side of the road and all seemed well. Without much warning several Marines flushed pockets of well-camouflaged *jihadis*. These clustered groups maintained a steady and willing defense of their respective areas. The attitude they displayed was fatalistic, *"kill me or I'll kill you."* The Marines of India willingly obliged them. During the next several hours, a raging, close quarters battle ensued where India Marines, operating by platoons and squads, closed in on scores of defending *jihadis*. Though not particularly good marksmen, these *jihadis* fought tenaciously. During this intense battle, Corporal Erik Silva was shot and killed by a Syrian fighter hiding underwater in a canal. The presence of these foreign fighters, eager to fight to the death in their misguided cause, reinforced the larger purpose of the Division's mission. The Marines had come to Iraq to liberate the innocent Iraqi people from just this sort of brutal repression, and the loss of fine Marines like Corporal Silva was a painful reminder of the lengths these terrorists would go to retain their grip on power. Silva's squad members reacted violently to the loss of their friend and comrade, bayoneting and shooting the attacker before he fell dead. After the fight, several Marines mentioned that the small caliber 5.56mm round failed to stop the Iraqi fighters even when hit, spawning conjecture of possible *jihadi* drug use and causing many discussions among the Marines about having a larger caliber bullet to shoot. Initially, the fighting was too close for artillery. India's artillery FO called in several missions but the enemy were in too close to have much effect. India Company resorted to employing a division of AH-1W Cobras to root out the defenders. As usual, and even in clear danger from ground fire, 3<sup>d</sup> MAW's killers closed in on the enemy alongside their infantry brothers. In one case Staff Sergeant Gonzalez, commanding a



*Marines advance near the Diyala Crossroads, while Iraqis begin to return to their homes.*

rifle platoon, popped smoke in front of his position so the Cobras could run a 20mm strafing run only 30 feet off the ground into a stubborn group of 15-20 terrorists. It was a spectacular display of combined arms fighting and when Gonzalez swept through the trench shortly thereafter he found nothing but body parts.

While India continued to pursue the *jihadis* deep into the open field, the rest of 3/5 experienced sporadic, small arms attacks up and down the battalion column. Most were beaten back by aggressive small unit actions on the parts of sergeants and lieutenants. Lima continued to clear the compound, killing an estimated 25 Iraqi soldiers and capturing approximately 40 more who lacked the courage of their convictions. When the lead platoon of India Company encountered stiffening resistance 500 meters deeper in the open field, Lieutenant Colonel Mundy ordered the platoon to return, then directed the FSC, Captain Robert Piddock, to unleash a fury of artillery fire. The display that followed was a sight to behold. Back to back battalion volleys that lasted for 10 minutes or more caused the earth to shake and lifted a pall of smoke that lasted for several hours. Because the Marines had pulled back to a covered position, 3/5 was able to direct this devastating fire within danger close ranges and right on top of the enemy positions. Afterward, India Company reported that the effects of the fires had left the *jihadis* shattered and bloody. In this fighting, 3/5 had sustained fallen comrades, as well. Along with the loss of Corporal Erik Silva, the battalion also experienced four seriously wounded Marines, including Staff Sergeant Anderson, a platoon sergeant in Lima Company, leading from the front in the finest tradition of infantry platoon sergeants.

As 3/5 fought furiously along Highway 6, 2<sup>d</sup> Tanks turned north on a narrow hard surface road to seize the intersection of Route Green and an east-west hard surface road that provided access into and out of Baghdad. Ironhorse, still led by their Scout and TOW platoons, rumbled to the intersection under sporadic gunfire. The last block of buildings near the intersection proved to be another ambush site, and the column came under intense machinegun and RPG fire. Trucks full of enemy ammunition began to explode, causing numerous secondary explosions. The sector designated for Fox Company, 2/5 (attached to 2<sup>d</sup> Tank Battalion), turned out to be an enemy ammunition supply point (ASP), now exploding out of control, sending shrapnel, debris, and RPG rounds into the air. During the fighting, First Sergeant Edward Smith, the Fox Company First Sergeant, was wounded in the head. Several Marines from the company heroically tried to evacuate their beloved leader under enemy fire, but he died of his wounds shortly thereafter. His loss was keenly felt throughout the entire battalion.

Once the intersection had been secured and the sun began to set, the Marines of Ironhorse faced the challenge of trying to sort panicked civilian traffic from fleeing or attacking military personnel approaching this critical intersection. At one point, shortly after 2<sup>d</sup> Tanks arrived on the objective, a small white car raced towards the intersection from the east, headed towards Baghdad. Staff Sergeant Efrain Torres' TOW section was blocking the road and engaged the vehicle after it ignored warning shots, killing both occupants. Upon searching the vehicle it was obvious one of the occupants was a very high-ranking general officer. Upon closer inspection, it was determined that the general was the Chief of Staff of the Special Republican Guard, and his vehicle was filled with important documents and large amounts of cash. The Division had moved so quickly, and the Iraqi's command and control systems had been so completely



disrupted, that even this senior general was unaware that RCT-5 was between him and his capitol city. From that time, the intersection was referred to as 'Dead General's Crossroads.'

As 2<sup>d</sup> Tank Battalion and 3/5 led the attack, the rest of RCT-5 moved up behind them on Highway 6, facing sporadic enemy resistance from remnants of enemy forces who had been bypassed by the lead assault battalions. Highway 6 remained a dangerous place on the battlefield, as the *jihadis* who had escaped the wrath of the initial Blue Diamond assault occasionally returned to the Highway to reengage the Americans. One such attack took the life



*LAVs roll past an abandoned T-72 near the Diyala Crossroads.*

of Sergeant Duane Rios, who was killed by an enemy sniper as he stood exposed in the turret of his advancing AAV. Sergeant Rios, an engineer squad leader supporting 1/5, had molded his Marines into a tight, cohesive unit, and had been a defining influence on many of his junior Marine's lives. He had led his squad through battles in the Rumaylah oilfields, Al Aziziyah, and An Numaniyah. His loss weighed heavily on his Marines, who had enjoyed a special bond with a leader they respected and admired.

Having successfully completed their attack on the Baghdad RG Division the day before, RCT-7 conducted a movement from Al Kut to the Diyala crossroads, a distance of over 100 km. They moved up to relieve 3/5's position on the night of 4 April. The following morning, 3/5 moved up to the 'Dead General's Crossroads' to join the rest of RCT-5. RCT-5 immediately began to aggressively patrol toward their objectives along the Diyala River, searching for crossing sites.

As the Division worked its way up Highway 6, Lieutenant Colonel Stacy Clardy's 3<sup>d</sup> LAR Battalion ('Wolfpack'), as an independent maneuver element, conducted a moving flank screen to the north. After being relieved of their Hantush Airstrip security duties, Wolfpack had crossed the Tigris at An Numaniyah and was now operating to the north of Highway 6, paralleling the Division's attack route. Wolfpack picked its way toward the airfields at Sarabadi and Salman Pak over a dense network of canal roads and trails. The terrain was extremely limited, giving even the highly mobile LAR battalion pause. As the Battalion closed on the Sarabadi Airfield, it engaged with and destroyed several armored vehicles and tanks. Third LAR reports of the limited trafficability from the flank gave the Division confidence that no sizeable armor force from the Al Nida Division could attack from this direction. Having transited some of the worst terrain imaginable, 3<sup>d</sup> LAR was ordered back to Highway 6 for follow on tasking in the vicinity of Baghdad.

## **5 April**

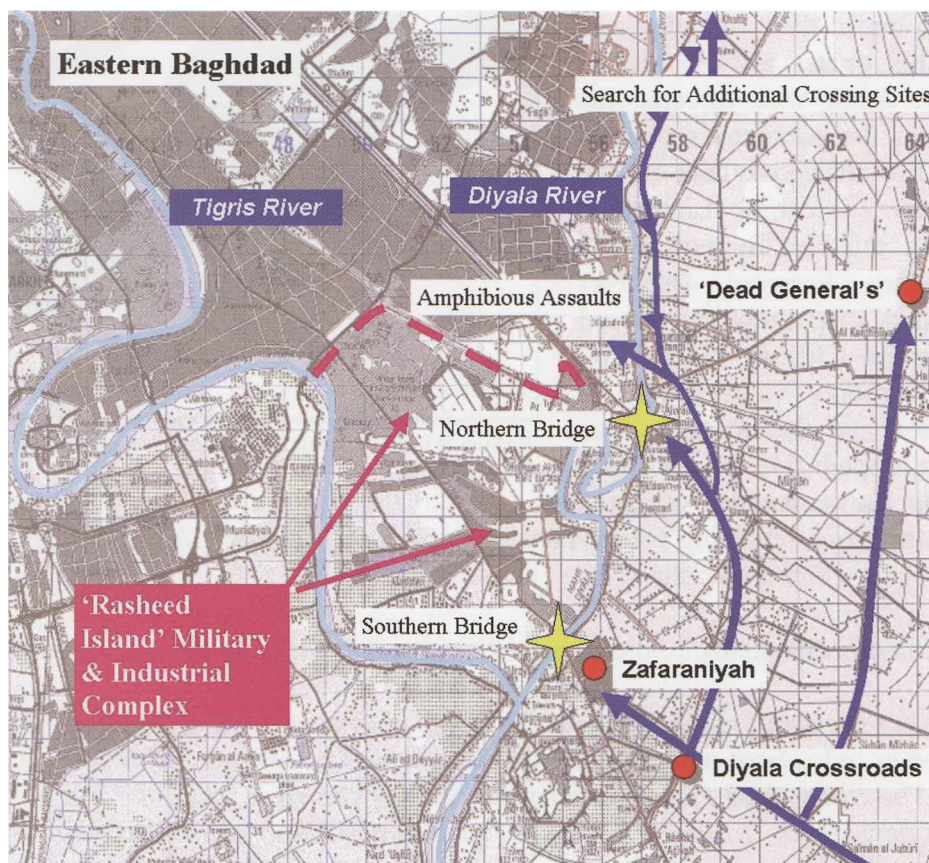
### **Pulling the Division Up to the Diyala**

The Division was reasonably confident that the enemy had abandoned most of the equipment belonging to the Al Nida RG Division's 43<sup>d</sup> Mechanized Brigade in the vicinity of its garrison east of the Diyala River. A number of intelligence sources reported tanks, artillery, and other vehicles in the revetment fields around the garrison. Blue Diamond had received multiple indications that this equipment was abandoned, and agreed with this assessment. In a scene that was often repeated during the war, however, every time an unfamiliar Coalition pilot or new theater imagery analyst would observe the site, the Division would receive the alarm that there was an armored brigade on the Division's eastern flank. Each iteration of this erroneous reporting would require the commitment of additional intelligence collection assets to confirm that these were the same abandoned vehicles seen before. Most times, additional fires were also directed against the potential threat. During the night of 4 April, the Division DASC had once again scored a series of B-52 strikes, which the Division vectored to the Al Nida garrison (the garrison was located 20 km to the east of the Diyala River, and had the added benefit (misfortune) of being away from populated areas, affording a low risk of collateral damage.) After tiring of these repeated false alarms, the Division dispatched 3<sup>d</sup> LAR Battalion to establish a security zone to the east, and to sweep through the area to confirm this equipment it no longer posed a threat. Echo Company drew the mission of reducing a brigade's worth of abandoned equipment. After a cautious approach, they came upon the large revetment fields containing intact and operational T-72 tanks, BMPs, and other vehicles. The Marines happily turned to rendering this equipment inoperable. Echo Company spent the next 12 hours destroying, exploding, or calling in air on the gear of the former 43<sup>d</sup> Mechanized Brigade. For some, it was the most enjoyable 12 hours of the war, as they reduced one of the most-vaunted enemy units to scrap. This action removed any possibility of a threat to the Division's rear as the Marines oriented west into Baghdad.

The north-south running Diyala River now stood between the Division and Baghdad proper. The ineffective outer defensive cordon of Baghdad had been defeated. Compared to the crossing of the Euphrates or the Tigris, the Diyala crossing had received less planning attention. Both of the bridges over the Diyala in the south of the Division's zone remained intact. By the plan, these southern bridges would support an RCT-7 fixing attack, while RCT-5 would swing wide and attack into the vicinity of Saddam City. RCT-5 began its reconnaissance up the Diyala to the north in order to find a suitable crossing site that would support its attack. Crossing the river there would allow RCT-5 to extend the cordon around Baghdad to the north. That morning, the Division and 8<sup>th</sup> ESB planners reviewed the data on the Diyala River, and 'flew' over sections of it on the Falconview 3D terrain visualization system. A number of sites appeared to offer relatively easy crossing of the river, and the Engineers worked their way north to check each of them first hand. By this time, the Iraqis had also figured out that the Americans were looking to envelop Baghdad to the north, and the Marines soon found themselves receiving mortar fire along the banks of the river.

The companies of Highlander moved out to reconnoiter their zones. None would locate a suitable crossing site that day, but all found plenty of trouble. Around noon, a platoon from Delta Company was the first to make contact when it received fire from a compound on the west

bank of the Diyala. The remainder of the company arrived and came under small arms and mortar fire from enemy forces across the narrow river. Delta Company returned fire and called for support from artillery and its own organic mortars, destroying the enemy positions. An hour later, two platoons from Alpha Company also received fire from across the Diyala and returned it. Shortly after midnight, Charlie Company's screen line encountered a dismounted force of platoon size, which it engaged with artillery and rotary wing CAS as well as 25-millimeter and 7.62-millimeter fire, destroying the enemy force.



*The Division planned to cross the Diyala River in multiple places, including the two intact bridges near the Rasheed military complex. Attempts to find a crossing further north were unsuccessful.*

Weapons Company was the busiest that day. After searching throughout the morning, a promising crossing site was uncovered near a place called Ummal Abid. It appeared that the Iraqis had prepared this site for the same purpose, and had staged pontoon-bridging trucks on the west side of the river. The approach on both sides of the river had been prepared and was suitable for the emplacement of standard bridging and would support the huge amount of traffic that the Division planned to put across it. The fording report was filled out and sent to higher. The Company Commander, Captain Dave Hudspeth left one of his LAV-25 platoons to provide security of the site. Included in this security element was the company's Command and Control LAV that housed First Lieutenant Jonathan St. John, the company's Fires Support Team (FiST) leader, and the rest of his crew. As Captain Hudspeth continued north to look for other sites, the



security element arrayed itself in a screen line along the east side of the river among sparse trees and vegetation. Opposite them separated by the steep banks of the Diyala River were several thick palm groves and a road running parallel to the river and an approach to the potential crossing site.

At about 1300Z, the company's FAC, Major Randy Nash, noticed a squad-sized element of Iraqi Republican Guardsmen conducting a dismounted patrol just across on the west side of the river. Although he was perched on top of the LAV-C2, the trees were providing concealment and the squad was oblivious to his presence. He alerted Lieutenant St. John, who directed his team to call on the company's organic mortars for a fire mission to take out the enemy soldiers. Second Lieutenant Mark Reinhart, the Fire Support Team (FiST's) artillery Forward Observer (FO), did a quick map study and passed a grid to Corporal Clifford Walker, the mortar FO. Corporal Walker called in the fire mission and the accurate fires immediately dropped five of the Iraqi soldiers, while the remainder retreated toward the palm grove returning fire as they ran. Crewmen on the LAV-C2 quickly formed a fire team and opened fire with their rifles.



*Rotary Wing CAS was critical to success throughout.*

Sergeant Clayton Blankenship, the Vehicle Commander, picks up the story from there:

*"With the XO's orders I moved to the ledge of the bluff over looking the enemy troops. I was given an order to only shoot once the mortar mission was complete, and if there was anything left moving. The troops had moved toward the bend of the river when the mortar rounds fell exactly where they stood. I thought to myself 'Corporal Walker, you just did some damn good shooting'. Soon after, several enemy soldiers ran to the top of the bend setting up perfect silhouettes. I estimated the range at about 320 meters. As I saw them advancing to the main tree line I didn't waste anytime before putting rounds down range. I noticed the first three impacts a bit low and adjusted my aim. As I fired again I watched one fall down immediately, then I waited for the next one to pop up. Meanwhile, Corporal Walker had called in another fire mission and joined me with his M-16 on the bluff. I noticed a few of the soldiers trying to get up; it looked as though they were injured. We observed fire coming back at us, so we put some more rounds down range on the enemy soldiers. It seemed we had taken 'em all out when a vehicle approached on the parallel road across the river. I heard the other LAV-25s light up the three individuals who had dismounted as well as the truck. While all that went on, we lay there watching the tree line across the river, but there was no movement. Then the last mortars fell making sure that no one was left alive."*