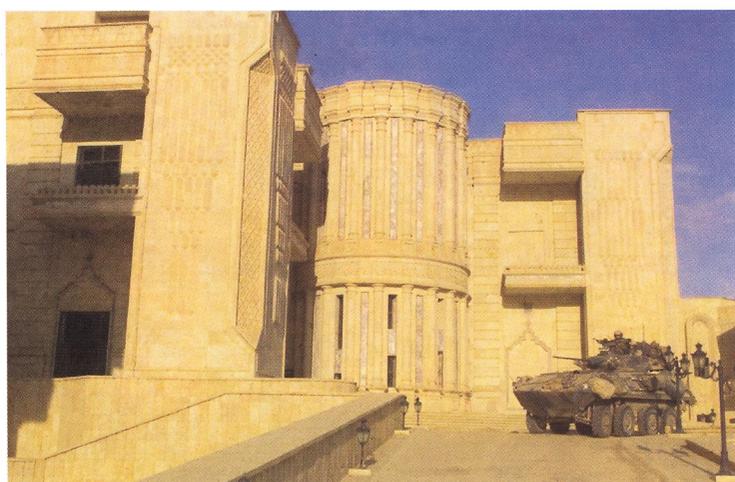




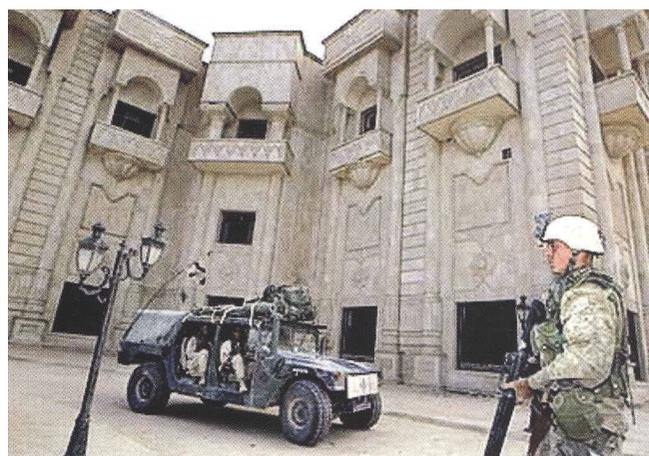
*All three LAR battalions conducted patrols through the city and surrounding areas.*



*First LAR secures the Tikrit New Palace. This palace sat on an ancient site on cliffs overlooking the Tigris River and the city.*



*First LAR occupies the square in the center of Tikrit.*



*The palace served as a meeting place for commanders and the setting for the Task Force Commander's meetings with local Sheikhs.*

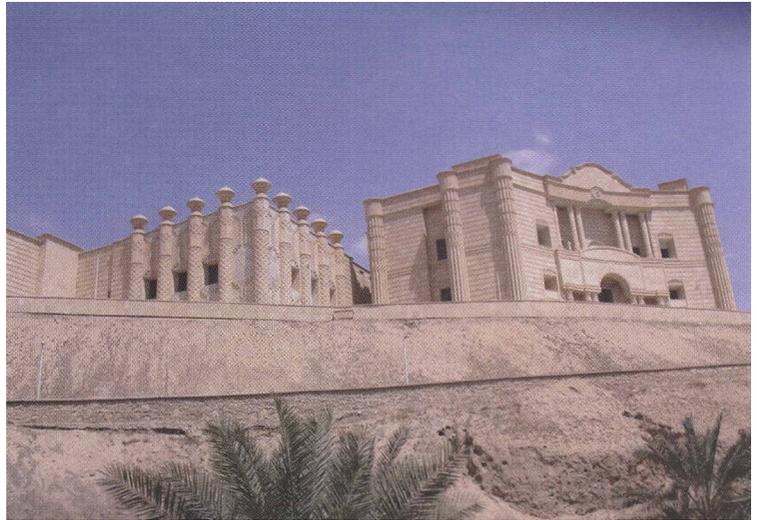
## 14 April Attack on the Palace Compound and Tikrit Bridge

The next morning, the Task Force resumed the attack. 1<sup>st</sup> LAR Battalion attacked to seize the western approaches of the Tikrit bridge and the 'New Palace' complex. The New Palace was the most recent addition to Saddam's huge palace compound in Tikrit. The acres of the sprawling palace complex stretched down the west bank of the Tigris for several kilometers south of the Tikrit bridge. The compound contained dozens of palaces, large and small, around a series of artificial lakes. The entire compound was surrounded by high walls and guard towers, effectively isolating those inside from the reality of poverty stricken Iraqis just outside. On the north edge of the compound, overlooking the Tigris River, the New Palace had recently been completed as yet another monument to the megalomania and waste of the Saddam Regime. It was a large fortress-like complex standing on a dominating cliff that dropped off steeply to the Tigris. The New Palace was clearly built to impress, as it dominated the town from all directions. No one coming into the town from the east could avoid being intimidated (or perhaps sickened) by the immense structure on the hill. The statues and paintings were not enough for Saddam, he wanted his presence to imbue every facet of the Tikriti's existence. A Marine from 1<sup>st</sup> LAR recalls the attack to the palace compound:

*Early the next morning we kicked off the attack to seize the palace compound and the Tigris bridge. The temperature was just right and the skies were clear, it was a perfect morning. That is, until our Company commander's vehicle took a well-aimed round that flattened one of the tires on his LAV. Without missing a step he jumped out of his vehicle and in to ours and off we went without delay. A section of AH-1 Cobras checked in with us and were directed to escort us through our attack. As we moved north then east around the man-made lake Saddam had built for pleasure boating, we encountered more of the same terrain that was perfect for the enemy ambush sites. It was comforting having the Cobra escort. They were masters at rooting around the enemy's potential hiding spots and building our situational awareness around every corner and further north to the bridge. We gained a deep respect for the Cobra pilots during the war. They had taken several hard hits throughout OIF, but they continued to support us in every way. Their devotion to the grunts was tremendous, and they often put themselves at risk flying low and well forward of our lines to find the enemy.*

*As we continued toward the bridge, we were all astonished at the sight of the palace grounds. The immaculate structures and serene landscape reminded us of a scene right out of 'Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous'. It was all the more striking because it stood in such stark contrast to the poverty and filth we had seen up to this point. The sweeping, grandiose compound just added to the disgust we already felt for Saddam and his cronies. They were living a life beyond belief while the majority of the Iraqi people lived as paupers, hopeless and desolate.*

First LAR seized the Tikrit bridge and established a blocking position on the west side. The Battalion commander and the engineers made a quick assessment, and it was quickly established that the severely damaged bridge would not support the weight of a 13-ton 'Light' Armored Vehicle. A HMMWV could barely pass the damaged sections by riding with two wheels on the sidewalk and two on the four foot wide section of roadbed still intact. To ensure responsive fire support to forces guarding the east side of the bridge, the attached SEALs were assigned an overwatch position for snipers on top of one of



*The grounds of the new palace in Tikrit served as the Task Force Tripoli Headquarters during operations nearby.*

of the New Palace buildings. The attached Tow Platoon established a traffic control point on the east side of the Tigris bridge with their HMMWVs. Tripoli now controlled all three main entry and exit routes to the city of Tikrit, and began a rigorous inspection of all vehicles. All roadblock positions received orders to continue to search every vehicle and person going into or out of the city. This was fairly simple in the beginning, as the residents had gone to ground to escape the fighting. As combat operations began to taper off, the civilian crowds grew larger, becoming a significant problem over the next few days. Adding to the mayhem, dozens of vehicles fleeing from the fall of Kirkuk arrived at the bridge with reports of roving gangs of Kurds moving towards Tikrit, ravaging the countryside along the way. The Task Force pushed CAAT elements north along the Tikrit-Kirkuk road to the limit of its battle space, 20 km beyond the Tigris River. No hostile contact was made with the allegedly advancing Kurds. Reports indicated that the marauding bands of renegades withdrew upon hearing that the Marines were advancing north. Criminal gangs were to remain a problem throughout the operation.

The Task Force commander moved to join 1<sup>st</sup> LAR Battalion at the New Palace. The town had not yet been cleared of the Fedeyeen and SRG holdouts, and the CG's small escort of three vehicles was taken under fire at a barricade near the now abandoned SRG barracks. This happened to be just north of the site of the 'friendly fire' incident between 1<sup>st</sup> LAR and 2/23 a few hours before, and the ground remained littered with enemy equipment, uniforms, vehicles, and weapons. After a brief action, the CG redirected the Jump around the ambush point, and continued on to the New Palace. The rest of the Tripoli CP, led by Lieutenant Colonel Rory Talkington, displaced soon thereafter and established the Tripoli CP on the grounds of the New Palace.

Once established on the high ground just outside the main palace complex, the Task Force CP established communications and directed the organization of local security within the city. Through 14 April, elements of the Task Force consolidated their positions in and around Tikrit, and conducted aggressive security patrolling in zone. Sporadic light contact in the form of sniping attacks, mortar attacks, and small-unit hit and run ambushes were reported during the first two days of liberation, but tapered off completely by 16 April. The establishment of checkpoints in and around the city eventually allowed the LAR battalions to identify and detain former regime officials, confiscate illegal weapons, and maintain positive contact with local citizens on a regular basis.



*The Tripoli CG reviews progress with the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3d LAR Battalions at his new command post.*

First LAR, conducted reconnaissance in zone through all of eastern Tikrit, looking for enemy, weapons caches, and sensitive sites. As Charlie Company cleared a military hospital on the northeast side of the city, it uncovered a weapons cache consisting of more than 50,000 weapons. The 'hospital' had apparently served as a military compound, with rooms full of uniforms, NBC equipment, and other war-fighting gear. Several hospital buildings were stuffed floor-to-ceiling with crates of brand new rifles, machineguns, and RPGs.

The thousands of weapons, and hundreds of fully-functional (but recently abandoned) artillery pieces, tanks, and SAMs indicated how intense the fight for Tikrit could have been if the Iraqis had decided to stick with their Tikrit redoubt strategy. The absence of organized conventional resistance in and around Tikrit indicated that these units had collapsed as expected, and had melted away into the urban terrain or local countryside upon hearing of Task Force Tripoli's rapid advance. Information gained by the direct support HETs indicated that many of the Iraqi soldiers and officers had returned to their homes or fled north to an area close to the Syrian border known as Al-Jazira, or 'the island' in Arabic. Over the course of 14 April, organized military resistance ceased in the city of Tikrit.



*An abandoned Iraqi missile at the Al Sahra airfield north of Tikrit.*

One specific report received from an EPW gave significant insight into enemy procedures that made them vulnerable to the rapid attacks of Task Force Tripoli and the Division at large. The Iraqi forces were so concerned with Coalition radio direction-finding capability that they chose to utilize very low-power, short-burst radio transmissions. They established relay stations at regular intervals to pass messages from south to north. The Iraqi communications relay, however, was unable to keep up with the rapid movement of Blue Diamond. Conventional Iraqi military commanders were overwhelmed by the sudden appearance of American forces in unexpected places and departed their posts. The few soldiers that had not already deserted or fled followed closely behind.

### **15 April Give Sheikh a Chance**

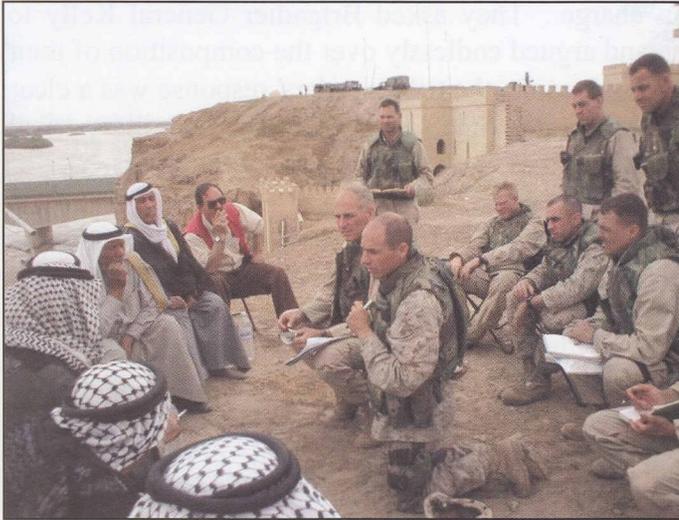
On the morning of 15 April, representatives from the tribes in and around Tikrit approached



*The Tribal Sheikhs were an important part of the local power structure.*

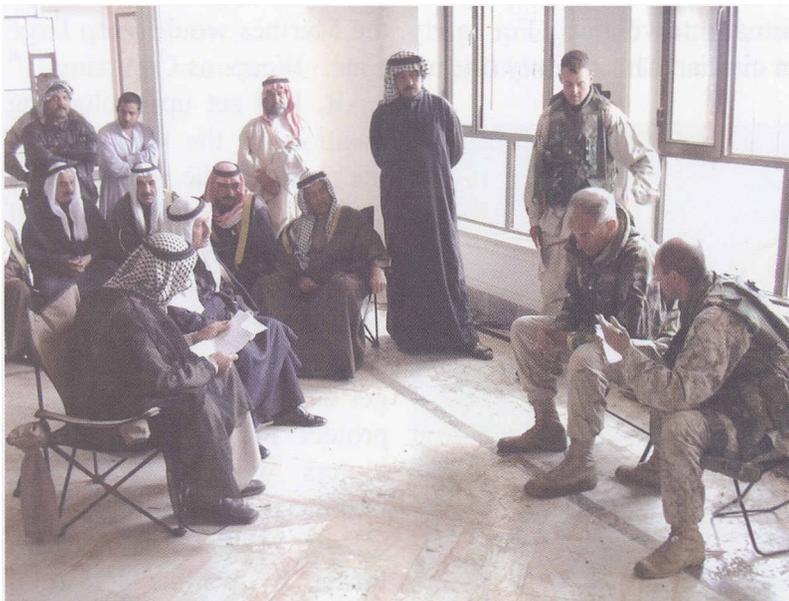
the Marine checkpoint at the palace and requested a meeting with the Commanding General. During this initial contact, several of these tribal sheikhs sought to establish a tribal leadership council, and identified significant issues that affected their people. Major Estep, the Task Force Civil Affairs officer, immediately began coordinating for the resumption of services in Tikrit, as the LAR battalions focused on establishing local security and weeding out remaining militia fighters. Gunnery Sergeant Camille Hamadani (a flawless Arabic linguist), and Captain Ben Connable (another accomplished linguist and Arabic FAO) played critical roles in this and subsequent negotiations between Brigadier General Kelly and the local political power structure.

Brigadier General Kelly had some trepidation in dealing with the Sheikhs. Although nominally empowered with the authority over their tribes, they still represented a hereditary form of governance that was not representative. The sheikhs had many of the same repressive and inhibiting tendencies the dictatorship had. The sheikhs competed for influence with Brigadier General Kelly against another group, the 'technocrats' (educated Iraqis who had traveled



*Brigadier General Kelly meets with local leaders at the palace overlooking the Tigris.*

internationally, and actually had the management skills to restore order to the daily life of the Iraqis.) On this micro-scale, the power struggles amongst competing would-be governors in Tikrit mirrored the struggles the entire Iraqi nation would have. Despite the fact that many of the tribal representatives had personal connections to the former regime, the sheikhs were allowed to form an interim council to support the restoration of services to Tikrit. Although not the ideal solution, the sheikhs offered an existing governmental mechanism that could restore order to the streets quickly.



*General Kelly holds more talks with the Tikrit Sheikhs.*

citizens. Finally, the Iraqis would bear much of the responsibility for restoring services to themselves. The people were authorized to take whatever actions were necessary to restore power, water, food, and medical services. The Americans would help, but it was up to the sheikhs to identify people and equipment to affect the repairs to these systems.

Brigadier General Kelly took the opportunity to talk the Iraqi leadership through a number of themes that explained the Marines' presence in the Tikrit area. First, the Marines were here to liberate, not to conquer. The Marines would protect the lives and property of the people by conducting a security mission. Second, the local leadership and the people had a responsibility to help hunt down any remaining Fedeyeen, criminals, or *jihadis* who violently opposed the American presence or threatened the

This was not as easily done as said. For decades, the Regime had managed every aspect of Iraqi life through an entrenched Baath party bureaucracy. The people did not have a tradition of taking matters into their own hands or solving their own problems. Initiative was not a highly admired quality. The sheikhs received the message, but it was clear that the local leadership was much more concerned with establishing their own power position in a new Iraqi authority than they were about taking care of the needs of their people. The assembled leadership quickly fell to arguing over which of them would be in charge. They asked Brigadier General Kelly to establish by-laws for their ruling bureaucracy, and argued endlessly over the composition of their council. After years of fear and deprivation by the people, the tribal leaders' response was a clear indicator of the difficulties that lay ahead for the Iraqi people. Reversion to a hereditary tribal governance to replace the dictatorship might not represent forward progress for the Iraqis.

The first significant contact between the Task Force and the local populace took place on the Tigris River bridge immediately adjacent to the New Palace complex. The sheikhs had indicated that up to three-quarters of the Tikrit population had fled at the approach of Task Force Tripoli, and many had been stranded on the eastern side by the damaged bridge. As the residents of the city began to lose their fear of the Americans, they returned from hiding places in the countryside. A large crowd of pedestrians gathered on the eastern bridge abutment. By the end of the day on 14 April, a considerable crowd had gathered on the eastern side of the bridge. In keeping with the security mission, the Marines continued with thorough searches of every person and vehicle that attempted to cross the bridge. On the morning of 15 April, the CG told the sheikhs that he would relax some of the search requirements and open the bridge to pedestrian and light vehicle traffic. Searches of vehicles and packages would continue, but individuals would be allowed to cross with minimal intervention. For safety, the Marines would keep large civilian trucks off the bridge, and let civilian cars go only one at a time. Weapons Company, 1<sup>st</sup>



*LAR Marines guard the entrance to the Tikrit Palace Compound*

LAR, had set up a blocking position on the west end of the bridge the day before under the command of Captain David Hudspeth. After word went out that the bridge was to be reopened, the crush of people trying to get back across the bridge to protect their property from looters was overwhelming. Despite the precarious nature of the bridge thousands of locals, by vehicle and foot, wanted to cross the bridge and enter Tripoli's security perimeter. The Marines of the TOW platoon were stationed on the eastern side of the bridge just before the damaged section, and were

trying to hold back the sea with their hands. The situation appeared critical, with the hard-pressed Marines getting closer to using warning shots to restore order to the crowd that threatened to surge past them.

As several thousand people massed along the road and against the easternmost checkpoint, the crowd began yelling and tussling with the Marines. Completely oblivious to the danger the collapsing bridge posed, the Iraqis grew impatient to cross it with their families, vehicles, and



*The Task Force Tripoli CP occupied key ground overlooking the Tikrit Bridge.*

belongings. Tempers among the local populace began to flare. Observing the degrading situation from the cliff-top CP location, members of the Task Force headquarters moved on to the bridge to reinforce the security company. Members of the Task Force headquarters, HET 11, and others ran to the edge of the crowd and attempted to restore order. Using the linguists, PsyOps loudspeakers, and a small amount of physical persuasion, the Marines began imposing order on the people at the bridge. The HET linguists and some reinforcing Free Iraqi Force

translators helped calm the crowd. Using humor and calm reassurance, the small group of Marines slowly regained control of the situation. The press of the crowd had surged halfway across the bridge, and now the Marines slowly worked them back. The Marines reestablished the checkpoint, keeping the crowd of people and vehicles off the near-collapse bridge. Captain Hudspeth set up a structured search and crossing system, and the crowd began to flow across the bridge in a (somewhat) orderly fashion. The surge of the crowd would take days to dissipate, as the Marines continued to search vehicles entering the city. Later that day, four Kurdish men, identified by locals as Peshmerga (the name given to Kurdish fighters), attempted to cross the bridge in a stolen vehicle. They were identified by former Tikriti police officers as common criminals, men who had dynamited homes and killed people in the town to the east of the river. As word passed through the crowd of their identity, several citizens attempted to beat the men, who attempted to escape by driving through the checkpoint. The individuals were stopped, and all four men were detained. An AK-47 rifle and explosive devices were discovered in the vehicle.

As the population started to filter back across the bridge, HET 11 reporting began to indicate a strong presence of former regime officials in the greater Tikrit area. Although it did not appear that one central figure was coordinating their efforts, these officials maintained a stranglehold of fear over the majority of the local residents through intimidation and coercion. The presence of these former Regime members would continue to influence the willingness of the population to support the Coalition, even after Task Force Tripoli had been relieved of the battlespace. The

'Shadow Regime' as it came to be called was a decisive influence on the people outside of the areas under direct US control.

With order being restored to the city streets, the Task Force continued aggressive patrolling into the countryside and in expanding areas within the city itself. Local Iraqis supporting the Marines identified numerous large weapons caches. The amount of weapons and ammunition found throughout the town was staggering. The challenge of destroying the weapons in the midst of the civilian populace was also an exercise in patience for all. The presence of these weapons had been a severe risk to the civilians, now their destruction would pose an additional inconvenience. The discovery of the military hospital by 1<sup>st</sup> LAR was one such. Another storage facility to the north of town was discovered to contain over 30 *warehouses* of weapons and ammunition. The EOD team from 5/11 worked ceaselessly to destroy this massive amount of munitions, and every thirty minutes another explosion was heard (the Division had established a policy of conducting EOD operations on the hour and half-hour only, so the Marines would be able to discern it from incoming fire.) It is always good to have Marines around, but they can sometimes be rather disruptive neighbors.

### 16 April Restoring Civil Control

For the time being, direct combat action between Marine forces and enemy combatants in Tikrit had ceased. The cessation of hostilities, however, had not yet led to peace for the citizens living in the greater Tikrit area. Large numbers of automatic weapons and explosive devices looted from military installations were now in the hands of local troublemakers. In the areas under direct observation by Task Force Tripoli Marines, there was relative calm and an absence of violence. Beyond these zones of continuous physical presence of Marines, however, the situation deteriorated rapidly. The dissolution of the brutal and oppressive police force, although a short-term boon for Tikritis, left them without any form of law enforcement or security apart from the Marines. Because Tikrit had a reputation as being one of the wealthiest cities in Iraq, looters and criminals from outlying areas made regular trips into the greater urban area in order to steal property and conduct revenge attacks on the citizens. People within the city limits and in the immediate countryside continued to take justice into their own hands by murdering looters, seizing property at random, and shooting strangers that passed through their neighborhoods.



*Hasty HLZ on Saddam's front lawn.*