

along the main and secondary roads in the same direction. These were the conscripts of the Iraqi 51st Mechanized Division and other elements, now making their way back to their families. Division Marines realized that these men, now unarmed and no longer a threat, were not the enemy. Even though they had been reluctantly forced to bear arms against the US only days before, they were now some of the very people Blue Diamond had come to liberate.



Iraqi children wave, hoping to catch a handout from passing American convoys.

The units of the Division waited for their turn to cross with some apprehension. The fight so far had been one-sided. Highway 1 took a wide arc around the Tallil airbase on the southwest side of An Nasiriyah, skirting the urban area at a range of about 20 km. Off to the east, the Marines could see helicopters flying and smoke rising from the An Nasiriyah urban area. TF Tarawa was at that time in a tough fight with resistance fighters in the town, and it would be over a week before the city would be considered secure. The Division Marines moving along Highway 1 toward the bridge kept their focus on their next objectives. RCT-1's attack up Highway 7 would fix the enemy in-place in Al Kut.

Moving up the muddy Highway 1 route would allow them to steal a march on the enemy, and would soon carry them to the Tigris River and the Baghdad Republican Guard Division.

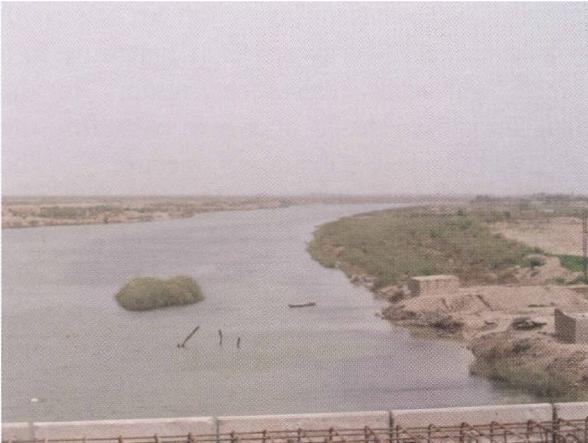
As the Division units were now immersed among the Iraqi populace, the CG took the opportunity to remind all hands to refrain from images of triumphalism. He republished the mandate against the display of US or Marine Corps flags while in Iraq. His intent was to show the Iraqi people that the 1st Marine Division came as liberators and not as conquerors. The Marines complied with the order, not without some mixed emotions. For the Marines of the Division, these mixed emotions were easily resolved when they began to see the poor Iraqi people and the brutal conditions they were forced to live in under the repressive regime of Saddam Hussein. Very soon, the Marines would come to take great pride in their actions as liberators, and of the actions of their own Nation. What other country would act like this in victory? The Marines did not need flags to display their fierce pride, it was present in the faces that peered out from under their dusty helmets.



Handing out Humanitarian Rations was part of the "No better friend" ethos.

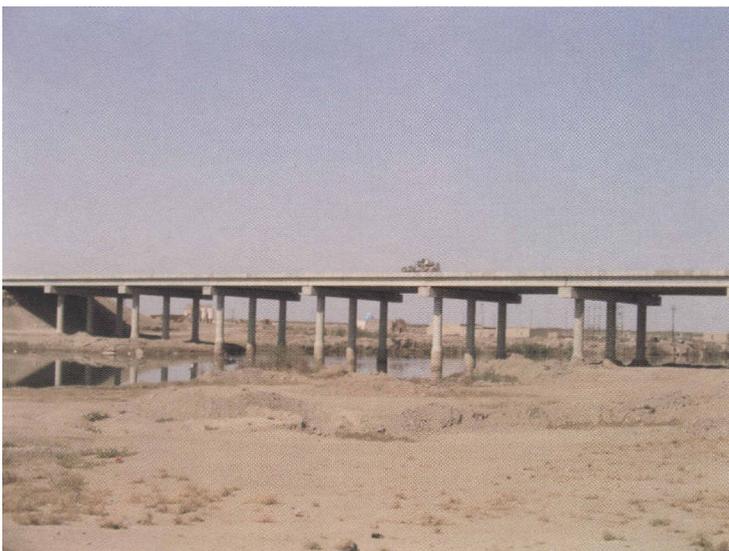
After spending so much time reading about the Euphrates and looking at it on the map, most of the Marines were eager for their first glimpse of the river. Heads eagerly strained out of trucks and tracks to catch a glimpse of this historic waterway as the columns crossed. The day was particularly hazy, and the muddy brown river with low banks failed to live up to expectations for this historic moment. Only an occasional date palm or mud-walled house broke up the flat muddy plains around the river. Until now, the Marines had traveled through wind-swept desert with burning oil fields, and blowing dust. The smells had been sterile, industrial - diesel smoke, oil fields, and dust. Here, the smells were organic, earthy - overpowering. Despite the historic occasion, the scene elicited a number of irreverent comments from the Marines, many referring to the smells associated with the 'cradle of civilization'.

Once across the river, it was clear why the Iraqis had not made a major defensive effort between the two Rivers. The Iraqis had certainly not expected the Americans to use this



Crossing the Euphrates River was anticlimactic for many Marines.

unfinished Highway 1 as an avenue of approach. The terrain on either side of the unfinished roadbed was an untrafficable patchwork of muddy fields, drainage canals, and mud berms. Beyond An Nasiriyah, there were no cities along Highway 1 until Ad Diwaniyah, 150 km to the north. The poorest of Iraq's citizens scratched a living along the banks of the canals, mostly as subsistence farmers, shepherds or camel herders. As the column advanced with 3^d LAR's LAV-25s in the lead, a small number of the citizens began to appear on the sides of the road, begging for food. Once over their initial fear, the people began to tentatively wave.



Armor moves across the newly constructed bridge Over the Euphrates.

The Highway 1 roadbed was actually raised above the surrounding terrain on a 20-foot high levee. The road was not paved in this section, and numerous deep culverts cut across the road for the first 50 km, forcing traffic off the raised highway, and onto the construction road that ran parallel to it. (These culverts were bridged over the next several days, allowing the Division's re-supply convoys to move along the improved surface road on top of the levee.) The worst sections of the road were the first encountered by the Marines. As the Division pushed north toward the Tigris, the road quality improved, eventually

becoming paved, prompting a sigh of relief from the Intelligence Marines who had recommended the route. The Division's decision to ask for the Highway 1 battlespace had been the right one. The Division had taken a measured risk, and now it was positioned on a high-speed avenue of approach leading straight to the enemy's heartland and the Division's major objectives.

The Division continued to pay a human toll in its advance toward Baghdad. Second Tank Battalion lost one Marine killed to a non-battle accident. In another action, the Division Staff Judge Advocate (SJA), Lieutenant Colonel John Ewers, and the Division's Reportable Incident Assessment Team were ambushed in the vicinity of Az Zubayr while enroute to investigate the circumstances surrounding the deaths of the UK journalists killed earlier in the Iraqi suicide attack across the Shaat al Basrah bridges. The CG had established this team to be able to immediately investigate the circumstances of any significant collateral damage incidents, friendly fire accidents, or non-combatant deaths. The team was passing through Az Zubayr on their way to the site of the incident when several RPG gunners ambushed them in the narrow urban streets. In the ensuing running firefight through the town, Lieutenant Colonel Ewers was shot in both forearms and his left foot. Lance Corporal Henry Lopez also took two rounds to the right shoulder while engaging the enemy. Both Marines were successfully evacuated and treated for their injuries. When he heard of Lieutenant Colonel Ewers' injuries, Brigadier General Kelly remarked, "Damn, they shot the only lawyer I ever liked."



A TOW gunner conducts security along route Tampa with a M-240G machine gun as his HMMWV approaches the Euphrates River during a road march.

Chapter 5

Bridgehead Over The Tigris

By securing the western bridges over the Euphrates River, the US 3^d Infantry Division had set the stage. Expanding this bridgehead and moving rapidly across the river, Blue Diamond had successfully bypassed the entire Iraqi IV Corps, and was now in a position to exploit its success all the way to the Tigris River. Although the Division doubted that the bypassed enemy divisions had the capability to attack, it nonetheless kept a close watch on the exposed eastern flank. From 23 March until 3 April, the Division's operations focused on maintaining the tempo of the attack, and rapidly gaining a position on the north side of the Tigris River. Historically, this terrain between the rivers in south-central Iraq had been a no-man's land. Defenders had typically had tied themselves to the key water and land approaches to Baghdad, leaving attacking forces to the mercy of terrain and weather as they slogged through the swamps of Mesopotamia. The 1st Marine Division would now face the same terrain that had stymied attackers for centuries as it threaded its way between the ruins of Babylon and the Garden of Eden.

The Iraqis React to the Opening Gambit

As 1st Marine Division looked to exploit its early success, the Iraqi Regime also began to consider its next moves. The Regular Army south of the Euphrates had disappeared in the face of the overwhelming firepower of the MEF. Now, the enemy chose to show a different face as the Division resumed its attack to the Tigris River.

In An Nasiriyah, TF Tarawa still dealt with the defensive effort by paramilitary forces operating inside the urban area. The vigor of this defense surprised some, as the Shia Muslims of An Nasiriyah had shown a keen resentment of the Regime prior to the commencement of hostilities. The Iraqi RA 11th Infantry Division had been garrisoned near An Nasiriyah for this very reason. The Iraqi 11th Division was known to have had a difficult time controlling the population, and was expected to rapidly surrender when confronted by the US 3d Infantry Division's attack. Perhaps this very fact caused the enemy to reinforce the city with significant numbers of strong-willed Fedeyeen fighters, reportedly emboldened by the presence of Ali Hasan al-Majid (Saddam Hussein's cousin) in their midst. The infamous 'Chemical Ali' was one of Saddam's key advisors, and had murdered thousands of Iraqi civilians, many with chemical weapons. As this was one of the first major urban areas secured by Coalition forces, the paramilitaries had not yet tasted the defeat that would dampen their enthusiasm later. Not fully understanding the strength of resolve of the Marines who opposed them, the paramilitary fighters remained motivated to fight in the An Nasiriyah urban area. Another possible reason for their enthusiasm may have been their initial successes against American forces, including the capture of US Army Soldiers from the 507th Maintenance Company when their convoy had become lost in the city. The Fedeyeen were so confident that they did not destroy the eastern Euphrates River bridges inside the An Nasiriyah urban area. While the MEF's TF Tarawa battled for control of the city and the intact bridges, the main effort of the 1st Marine Division bypassed the city to the south and west over the Highway 1 corridor.

The events in An Nasiriyah were but a harbinger of the Regime tactics that the Division would shortly encounter. There were few conventional defenses between the Euphrates and

Tigris Rivers, but the Saddam Fedeyeen, Baath Party militia, and reconstituted remnants of other military groups launched a new defensive strategy based on human wave attacks, ambushes, and treachery. Collectively referred to as 'paramilitary fighters' or 'Regime Death Squads', these fighters demonstrated a zeal for combating Americans that their conventional brothers in the south had not. The paramilitary fighters proved treacherous and ruthless in their attacks, and were despised by the well-trained Marines. To the paramilitary fighters, violating the Law of War became a shield they could use to exploit the Rules of Engagement (ROE) of the well-disciplined Marines. They set up their command posts and operating bases in mosques, stored their weapons in schools, wore civilian clothing to hide among the civilian population, and forced the local population to fight the Americans through intimidation and murder.

The Saddam Fedeyeen was the core of this resistance. These loyalist forces, sent down from Baghdad, used intimidation to force the local populace to resist. The Fedeyeen entered the towns in the south, taking advantage of the existing Regime control structure and Baath Party offices. The Fedeyeen had been trained to resist to the death, and often demonstrated an eagerness to do so. They were joined by equally committed foreign fighters drawn from several nearby countries



Marines conducting flank security along Highway 1, guarding against Fedeyeen attacks.

in a misguided *jihad*. The irony that many of these religiously motivated fighters would show such loyalty to a Regime that had systematically repressed the religious freedom of Muslims was apparently lost on these groups, not known for their enlightened intellect. This core group of fighters filled out their ranks through 'press gangs' that terrorized the local inhabitants, kidnapping young men and forcing them to fight. Stories abounded of black-pajama clad Fedeyeen bursting into local farmers' homes and putting a gun to the head of their children. The poor conscripts were given minimal training by a cadre

staff, then put into fighting positions and kept there at gunpoint. The mix of dedicated loyalists and poor conscripts became readily apparent on contact. The core groups were tough fighters who had no fear of death and continued to attack beyond military reason. The conscripted component, on the other hand, looked for an early escape or surrender, as soon as their Fedeyeen 'minders' had been distracted or killed.

The treacherous tactics of the paramilitary reflected their training and misguided loyalty to the Regime. One method used by the paramilitary was to pretend to surrender to gain close approach to American forces, then quickly drop their white flags and open fire. In a variation on this tactic, trench lines of paramilitary fighters would often wave white flags when US aircraft were overhead, then quickly resume firing when the aircraft had passed by. Posing as civilians begging for food was another tactic used to gain close approach before opening fire. Still other

paramilitary fighters were reported using local women and children as human shields. In some cases, the Fedeyeen took up positions in civilian homes, forcing the families to remain in the line of fire. Since these paramilitary fighters had been sent to the south from Baghdad, they had no loyalty to the local Shia populace and did not fear the collateral damage an American response might cause among the locals. In many cases, armed men would open fire then fade into a crowd of civilians, escaping the firepower of the Marines. In setting ambushes, the Fedeyeen would often assign a cadre of hard-core members to help lay the heavy weapons, mortars, and positions for the conscripts. This cadre would not only coordinate the ambush, but also would ensure the conscripts stayed at their posts. Although some labeled these dedicated fighters ‘fanatics’, most were well-trained soldiers fighting in a misguided cause against a liberating force whose motivations they could never understand.

The Iraqi military had once been a professional, well-trained conventional force. These soldiers had been eliminated over time, as the character of the Iraqi military had undergone a significant change. The Iraqi military was now a force of intimidation, and operated against its own populace as the greater part of its mission. The thugs and bullies that made up the new military class in Iraq had a simplistic, almost childlike, understanding of warfare. They understood intimidation and murder, but did not understand maneuver, fire support, or logistics to any great degree. When this façade of a military force was confronted with the crushing realities of integrated fires and maneuver, it crumbled to dust almost immediately. The unconventional response, however, was more complex. Many of the Fedeyeen and *Jihadi* fighters had been convinced that the Americans would not fight. Their handlers had told them repeatedly that the American warrior on the ground had no courage, and that Arab manhood would be sufficient to make the cowardly Americans run away. Many of them believed, and found out too late that this was not the case. When these overconfident fighters ran into US Marines, they were in for the biggest (and last) surprise of their lives. To their chagrin, the Fedeyeen found that Marines liked to fight, and fought with a moral and physical superiority driven not by arrogance, but by confidence, skill, and courage. The Marines were here because they wanted to be here, and there was no one better at dealing death and destruction to those who would oppose them.

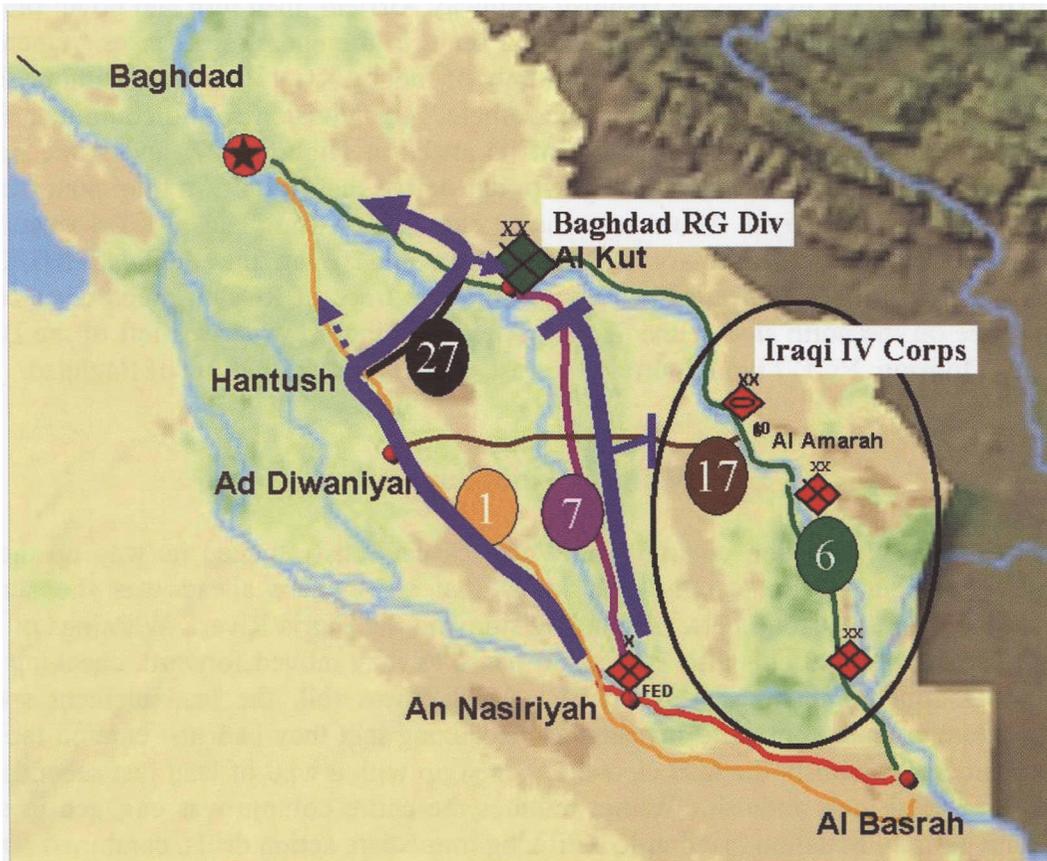
The Operational Design

The Division continued its push to the Tigris, enroute to Baghdad. Not simply a movement to contact, the route and speed of the maneuver were designed to have specific effects on the enemy. The primary effect was to keep the forces on the south and east sides of Baghdad from withdrawing into the city. If Iraqis were allowed to mass in the urban area, the Coalition main effort (the US 3d Infantry Division) would be delayed. Keeping the Iraqi forces out of the urban area would be achieved by posing a credible threat to Baghdad from the east, on the north side of the Tigris River. A second desired effect was to be a catalyst for the surrender or collapse of the remaining divisions of IV Corps and the Baghdad RG Division by obtaining positional advantage astride their single lifeline to Baghdad. Getting the Division across the Tigris River, and astride Highway 6 would satisfy both of these strategic objectives.

There were a number of secondary effects that the Division sought as well. The Division had achieved operational surprise by beginning its attack up Highway 1. If the enemy reacted to this

unexpected avenue of approach by repositioning forces, those forces would be exposed to air interdiction. Likewise, the effect of maneuvering against the Baghdad RG Division and turning its defenses to the north and west would expose its indirect fire assets to air interdiction. The isolation of the entire southern region (Al Kut, An Nasiriyah, Al Basrah, and beyond) from Baghdad would also greatly improve the stabilization environment. Liberating the Iraqi people and transitioning to a representative government required removing the influence of the Baghdad Regime. This was not possible as long as Regime enforcers could drive from Baghdad to Basrah through entirely Regime-controlled territory.

The Division clearly understood that the quickest way to destroy the Regime ‘snake’ was to sever its head, Baghdad. Thus, any Division operations south of the Tigris River were not as potentially decisive as an attack into the heart of the Regime’s base of power. Because of the centralized nature of the Regime and its limited span of control, the Division G-2 assessed that defeating the enemy forces to the south in detail would be largely accomplished once 1st Marine Division was between them and Baghdad.



First Marine Division planned to fix the Baghdad Division in Al Kut, while bypassing them to the west in order to maintain momentum to Baghdad.

With the Highway 1 Bridge secure, the Division successfully expanded its Euphrates River bridgehead. Although not much heralded, the seizure of an uncontested Euphrates River crossing by the US 3^d Infantry Division was an operational victory almost on par with the seizure of the critical oil nodes. Once crossed by 1st Marine Division elements, this bridgehead put the

Division almost a third of the way to Baghdad in a matter of less than three days. Access to Highway 1 over the western bridges, and access to Highway 7 over the eastern An Nasiriyah bridges, would enable the Division to fix and bypass the Baghdad RG Division, isolating it and the rest of the Iraqi III and IV RA Corps. The soldiers of the Iraqi 10th Armored Division may not have yet realized it, but they had already been operationally defeated when 3^d LAR Battalion began to wind its way up the incomplete highway.

Leading the Division's attack up Highway 1, Wolfpack had planned to do a detailed route reconnaissance of both the Division's primary and secondary routes. When 'Chaos' contacted 'Wolfpack Six' (Lieutenant Colonel Clardy) the afternoon of 23 March, however, his message was clear. 3^d LAR was to drive hard up Highway 1 and get to the Hantush Airstrip and the Highway 27 intersection as rapidly as possible. Exploitation of alternate routes would come later. The CG knew that the enemy was disoriented by the rapid pace of the Blue Diamond advance, and wanted to exploit this before the enemy realized the magnitude of the force that was coming up the unfinished Highway. RCT-5 would follow in trace of 3^d LAR, ready to quickly exploit the attack to seize the Hantush Highway Airfield, then turn and go all the way to the Tigris River through the previously identified seam in the enemy's defenses. Opening the Hantush airstrip would allow for the rapid re-supply of fuel by KC-130 aircraft without clogging the single roadway with refueler trucks. Once refueled, the Division would continue a feint up Highway 1, but would change the direction of its attack at Highway 27, and strike northeast along the seam, directly for the An Numaniyah bridge across the Tigris. An Iraqi pontoon bridge 35 km upriver at Az Zubadiyah would serve as an alternate crossing site. RCT-1 would attack up Highway 7, clearing paramilitary resistance there and fixing the Baghdad RG Infantry Division in Al Kut. RCT-7, meanwhile, would follow in trace of RCT-5, prepared to continue the attack once on the north side of the Tigris. After cleaning up what was left of the Baghdad RG Infantry Division, RCT-7 would turn to the east, with a final destination of Baghdad.

23 March **Wolfpack Finds the Prey**

In the lead of the Division column, the Wolfpack cautiously picked its way up the route. They had seen signs of the enemy, and knew that somewhere ahead was the screen of paramilitary fighters that stood between the Division and the Tigris River. Warnings of booby-trapped culverts and minefields also gave them pause as they moved forward, checking for the enemy and assuming an ambush lay ahead. As darkness fell, the lead element spotted a suspicious situation and stopped to investigate. Realizing that they had just entered the killing zone of a deliberate ambush, the lead element opened up with a wall of lead just seconds before the enemy triggered their ambush. Within minutes the entire column was engaged in a direct firefight with an Iraqi battalion-sized unit. Utilizing immediate action drills, combined arms, and controlled violence the Wolfpack fought its way out of the ambush. Captain Charles Blume, the Wolfpack Fire Support Coordinator describes the scene:

“Wolfpack had departed TAA Fang on the morning of 23 March. We had been ordered to begin to Recon up Highway 1 and the alternate routes called Lexus and Cobra. We had begun to move forward when the CO got a call from Chaos. The CG had told our CO to get up to Hantush and the Highway 27 Bridge over the Saddam canal as rapidly as possible, and forget

the alternate routes for now. As we pushed up, we definitely could feel we were getting well out in front of the Division. We lost comms with the DASC-A, and it was starting to get dark. We had some Cobras working in front of us earlier, and they had reported signs of enemy activity. Now, as we rolled up, we began to see abandoned weapons and equipment strewn all about along the Highway. A suspicious vehicle was seen to our front that observed us and then sped away. ROE prevented engagement of the truck, even though it was acting suspiciously. As it started to get dark, we could all feel the hair standing up on the backs of our necks. You could tell something was about to happen. Then, with Blackfoot [Bravo Company] in the lead, we began to see scattered tracers flying across the road in front of us from west to east. The scattered shots soon became a torrent of fire and the entire battalion was engaged almost immediately. They opened up on us with mortars, heavy machine guns, and RPGs. The tracers would seemingly explode when they hit the LAVs, it wasn't like the movies where they just bounce off. We later estimated the enemy at about an infantry battalion in size. There was fire coming from everywhere, and they were starting to mass and charge the column in groups. We were pouring 7.62 and 25mm on them, but they kept coming. There was no communications with the DASC, we were outside of artillery range, and there was no air on station. Unable to reach the CO on the radio and even though we were not in immediate danger of being over run the Air Officer made the decision to call 'slingshot' over the guard channel. This brought in immediate CAS. ['Slingshot' was a radio brevity code that indicated an American unit was about to be overrun, indicating all available fire support was to be vectored to its aid.] Before we knew it, there was air coming from everywhere. There were too many sorties coming to control individually, so we established an east/west buffer of 2000m off the road and in front of our column, and turned that fight over to FAC (A) with our ground FACs directing traffic closer. We estimate we got about 20 sections of fixed wing in support of us that night."



The Fedeyeen used unconventional tactics and vehicles to attack Marines along Highway 1.

The air support and overwhelming fires from the Wolfpack continued to effectively work over the Fedeyeen until well into the night. The devastation was tremendous. Because of the geometry of the column (linearly arrayed along Highway 1) air was able to work up to the north freely, and found a company of Iraqi tanks (10 T-55s) ready to hit the column on its eastern flank. The hunting was good that night, and 3^d MAW effectively shut down the ambushes set along that portion of Highway 1, destroying several large enemy positions. Wolfpack received over 50 total sorties of fixed and rotary wing air support that night from Air Force and Marine aviators, making the enemy pay a heavy price for choosing to engage the Marines.

My vehicle served as the commanding officer's wingman and it was my job as gunner to watch the Battalion Commander's back. As I watched the first rounds slam into Blackfoot's flanks I recalled thinking "Holy shit!" Aside from the pucker factor, my training took over. The CO gave us the free guns order and I tried to kill as many as I could, to protect my wingman and myself. I began to engage with the 25mm main gun and watched through the thermal sights as groups of the attackers dropped. As the close air support checked in and began to attack, I had never seen air that close before. When it was all over the battalion was in a hasty defensive coil. We hit'em, and we hit'em hard.

- Sergeant David Henrikson III, of Astoria, Oregon

This attack marked the first major encounter of the Fedeyeen by 1st Marine Division. The Wolfpack fiercely responded to enemy fighters so confused or eager to die that they repeatedly rushed the column of LAVs in the face of certain death. When it was over, there were over 150 enemy casualties, 10 T-55s, and several 'technicals' with heavy machine guns destroyed. There was one Marine slightly wounded in the attack.

Lieutenant Colonel Clardy noted the complete training and technological overmatch the LAR Battalion had over the paramilitary fighters. The Marines had thermal sights, long-range direct fire capability, armor protection, and fire discipline. He recounts:

"The Iraqis obviously had someone who knew what they were doing set up the ambush position, but the guys they had executing it were really poor soldiers. We detected them and opened fire just moments



A Fedeyeen truck in an ambush lies destroyed along Highway 1. The Fedeyeen employ both military and civilian vehicles.

before they did, and that probably caused a lot of their first RPG volley to miss. After that, we had firepower dominance for the rest of the fight. The Iraqis were shocked by what they had hit. I think they opened up a whole can of whuppass that they didn't know how to deal with."

The controlled chaos within the Division's Main CP during the fight was deliberate execution at its best. Major Hank Weede, the ground watch officer, received the call of 'Slingshot' and passed the word to the 'Killing U' (as the U-shaped configuration of tables in the center of the Division CP was called.) Immediate focus from every section in the Killing U was applied to assisting 3^d LAR. Division Fires immediately realized 3^d LAR was out of artillery range. Radio operators cleared the TAC nets awaiting additional reports. The Division G-3 Air Officers, Major "Grams" Gramuglia and Major "Stinky" Phillips went to work coordinating 3^d MAW's immediate response, which was to send (6) F-18s, (1) F-18D FAC (A), (2) F-15s, and (4) A-10s, all of which arrived on the scene within 30 minutes. As word got passed that Marines were heavily engaged on the ground, pilots of available aircraft started checking into the Division's Direct Air Support Center (DASC) at the rapid rate, looking to assist. With 3d MAW's superb immediate support, the situation was resolved in short order. It was a great exercise in confidence building, both in procedure and in the ability of aviation fires to react immediately across the battlespace.



The 'King of Battle' moves up Highway 1 to take on the Fedeyeen.

24 March The Long March

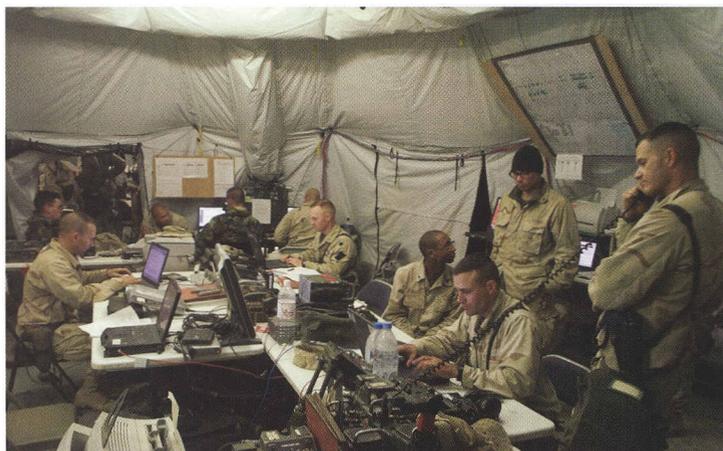
Third LAR consolidated its position along Highway 1 during the morning hours of the 24th, and RCT-5 conducted a Forward Passage of Lines. The reported armor and increased density of fighting positions further up Highway 1 would be more appropriately cleared by tanks and dismounted infantry, and the lightly armored LAVs passed them forward. As RCT-5 moved up, intelligence reports began to trickle in that the enemy was aware of the Division's advance, and was scrambling to plug the huge gap in its defenses. Cargo trucks and busses were reportedly shuttling fighters from the Baghdad area down to the Ad Diwaniyah area, barely stopping before returning north for more troops. 'Technical' vehicles (pickup trucks with mounted heavy machine guns) and mortars were reportedly integrated into these ad-hoc defenses, as were conventional armored vehicles and tanks. Arms caches were dumped along the road in front of the Division, as the enemy raced to plug the gap before the Marines could exploit it all the way to Baghdad.

To the north of the Division, the Republican Guard still continued its preparations for the defense of Baghdad and Al Kut. In Al Kut, the Baghdad RG Infantry Division continued to dig in. They had repositioned some artillery to a position that could range the An Numaniyah

airfield, but had otherwise shown no indication of changing their defensive posture. The increased use of camouflage and decoy equipment was noted in the garrison areas of the Baghdad RG Division. Perhaps unable to respond effectively to the rapid ground assault, the Baghdad RG Division was digging in deep, more concerned with surviving the on-going air strikes than the ground attack they could assume was coming soon.

Wolfpack's encounter the previous night confirmed the Division's suspicions that the nature of the fight between An Nasiriyah and Al Kut was going to be different than the conventional battles before. The late night encounter with enemy forces willing to rush into the 25mm Bushmaster chainguns of Wolfpack's LAVs was a marked contrast to the barefoot conscripts the Division had noted walking away from the oil field fight. The Division's assessment of the presence of a paramilitary screen south of the Republican Guard's main line of resistance was confirmed. The Division would have to fight its way through both the terrain and this new threat in order to reach the Tigris, and Blue Diamond looked forward to the brawl.

The Division Forward CP, moving in column behind 3^d LAR, moved into position alongside Highway 1 north of the Euphrates and set up between the unfinished Highway and the parallel construction road. Master Sergeant Michael Daniels, the Operations Chief for the Forward, and Master Sergeant Jay Joder, the Intelligence Chief, had the setup of the CP down to a science. Within three hours, the CP was established and functional in an intermediate position



Division Forward Marines control the movement of the Division up Highway 1.

approximately 25 km north of the Euphrates River. From this position, the Forward could control the Division's continued movement north long enough for the Main CP to displace to a position that allowed for the seizure of the Hantush Airstrip. The CP was emplaced within hours, and control was passed.

For the remainder of the night on 23 March (and continuing another 36 hours until the afternoon of 25 March) the rest of the Division moved in column behind these lead elements. For most, the movement was

characterized by constant stop and go, and speeds of less than 20 miles per hour. The fatigue factor was high in all Marines, but especially the drivers. Unit leaders had to walk from vehicle to vehicle waking up drivers when it was time to move forward again. Despite constant supervision, some drivers still managed to drift off while driving. Even though they would be quickly awakened by their assistant drivers, even a few seconds caused a break in the column as many vehicles lost sight of the blacked-out vehicle in front of them. As more than two-thirds of the Division was using Highway 1 to move on, the route was filled with every type of vehicle the Division owned.

RCT-5 and the Coming Ground Attack

On the morning of 24 March, RCT-5 completed the FPOL with 3^d LAR, and continued the attack along Highway 1 as the Division's main effort. They were to clear the enemy in zone and facilitate the Division's attack toward Baghdad. Each of the battalions engaged and destroyed irregular enemy forces during this period in actions characterized by initiative and aggressiveness. While the enemy along Highway 1 fought with determination, their hasty defensive positions and ambush tactics were ineffective in slowing RCT-5, whose tank/mechanized infantry teams overran them with skill and determination.

During this continued attack to the north, the Division had a negative incident with one of the non-embedded journalists that skulked around the battlefield. The incident was in direct contrast



Second Battalion, 11th Marines in firing position. Eleventh Marines continuously provided accurate and responsive fires.

to the responsible reporting by the embedded journalists who traveled with and were trusted by the Marines. After working his way into the Marine's confidence, this irresponsible, non-embedded journalist disclosed RCT-5's position and attack plan on the air during a live phone call with CNN. His broadcast included the complete battle plan for what the RCT was about to execute. That afternoon, the I MEF CG called the Division CG to order the apprehension of the offending journalist, and within hours Division MPs escorted him to the MEF CP in the rear at Jalibah.

As the Division was now attacking in two widely separated columns (and the weather was deteriorating), the direct support artillery battalion for each RCT gained the gratitude of its supported unit. RCT-5 was reassured by the all weather, responsive fire support provided by 2^d Battalion, 11th Marines (2/11). This battalion, and supporting/reinforcing battalions of the 11th Marines, provided continuous fire support throughout a period of very poor weather. On the 24th, for example, 2/11 continued to echelon itself forward with the progress of the RCT. Through multiple displacements forward, 2/11 always remained fire-capable in position areas along side Highway 1. During these displacements, they had fired 131 rounds in 3 missions. The Cannon Cockers provided counterbattery fire that quickly silenced the numerous enemy indirect fire attacks on the RCT.

RCT-1 Waiting for Clearance

The CG now convened his planners and asked them to assess the current situation. Did the quality of the route and our success in achieving operational surprise now make it possible for the entire Division to move up Highway 1? The Staff reviewed the requirement to send a force