

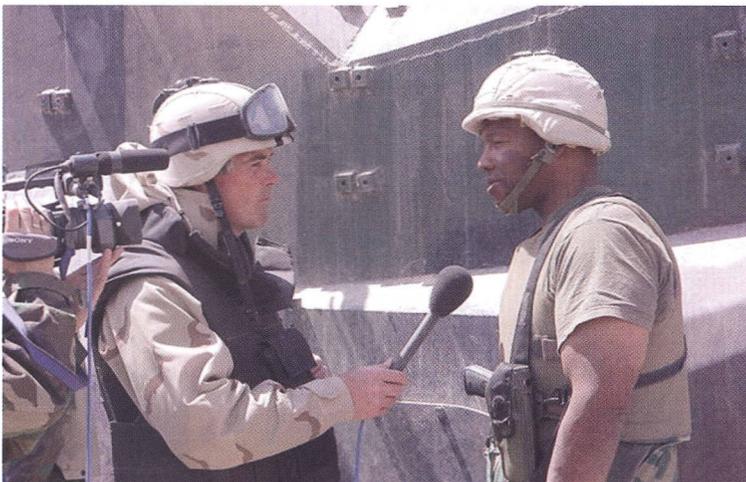
tanker support, assets from across the coalition were piling on against the luckless Baghdad RG Division. From the limited battle damage assessment received, it was clear that the air shaping was having a crushing effect on the Republican Guard. The artillery regiments of the Baghdad Division were assessed at less than 45% remaining strength, and additional shaping fires were on the way. Division Marines eagerly awaited the attack order while applauding the destruction of the enemy by air fires.

Closer to Baghdad, CFACC shaping was having a similar effect on the artillery of the Al Nida RG Armored Division. Once 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division was successfully across the Tigris, the Al Nida Division would be the last major force between Blue Diamond and Baghdad. The Iraqis were now making some attempt to reposition artillery and troops into the gap between the Al Nida and Baghdad Divisions, but these efforts were rewarded with precision guided munitions from Coalition aircraft. The Iraqis had lost the opportunity to reposition major elements of their ground forces now that they were under a deluge of air fires. Out of position, and unable to move their conventional forces, they found themselves unprepared for the coming ground attack of the Marines. It was too late for the enemy to close the seam. This was the classic combined arms effect the Marines had hoped to achieve, and it was working. The Iraqi military leadership that had not yet run away probably began to appreciate the power of a balanced combined-arms fight.

### **28 March The Waiting Continues**

As the Division waited for approval to continue the attack north, all three RCTs continued aggressive security and ambush patrols to their flanks in their respective 4 km security zones. Along Highway 1, RCT-5 conducted limited objective attacks and security patrols, and continued the pressure on the Fedeyeen remnants in Ad Diwaniyah.

RCT-5 began to experience the transition between military operations and civil operations that was to be a recurring theme throughout the campaign. During the early days of the attack,



*Embedded media enjoy unprecedented access to Marines and commanders during the entire operation.*

operations had been conducted in the classic manner to which the Marines had been trained. All reported mortar attacks or troop concentrations were responded to with devastating firepower. As the Regime presence declined in the area, however, the Marines had to make the mental adjustment from attacker to liberator. The recent decline of large paramilitary organizations in zone allowed the Division to become much more discriminating in their application of firepower. Counter-battery indicators, for example, now had to

be confirmed by the splash of rounds or observed enemy troop concentrations prior to granting approval for return fires. Villagers started reporting to the Marine units that were being hurt by the Marine's artillery fires as the enemy would drive up next to noncombatants, fire mortar rounds, then drive away (a method termed 'shoot and scoot', designed to draw the Americans into indiscriminately firing on civilians.) Positive identification of targets had always been the

rule, but now the security situation allowed the Marines to more deliberately assess the risks to local civilians before they opened fire. This extension of the positive identification ROE saved many noncombatants from injury or death. Making this adjustment required a disciplined force with a strong moral compass, one of the Division CG's emphases from the earliest days of preparation. From the beginning, the members of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division had been taught to be 'No better friend, no worse enemy.' It was a sliding mental adjustment the Marines would be required to make in both directions until the entirety of southern Iraq was secure.



*Tanks from 2<sup>d</sup> Tank Battalion provide security along Highway 1. In the flat open terrain, tanks were always near the front of the Division's advance.*

The Division continued its security patrols to the south and west of the zone, and closed up its positions along Highway 1. Two platoons from the I MEF Force Reconnaissance Company, temporarily assigned to the Division, were given a zone south of the Division's current positions along Highway 1, and carried out their task with zeal and professionalism. The Division's intent was quite clear; to kill those who had been attacking the Division and Coalition forces along the LOCs, using innovative and aggressive techniques. No enemy attacks took place along either of the Division's columns this day, another clear indicator that the time to resume the attack had come. The MEF continued to press CFLCC hard to let them unleash the Division, and the Marines were more than ready.

The Division continued to rely heavily on the P-3 and Pioneer platforms that were flying in direct support. As the only direct support imagery intelligence collections assets assigned to the Division, these were the only ones that provided continuous reliable support for the entire operation. The Division was to have little success in navigating a cumbersome collections bureaucracy to obtain support from non-directly supporting platforms, but aggressive use of these two assets provided excellent coverage for what they could range. Between the efforts of the VMU squadrons and the Sailors of Combined Task Force 57 (CTF-57), the Division Marines had eyes that would have been the envy of their predecessors. As the Division moved north into Iraq, the Joint Forces Air Component Commander (JFACC) gave its approval for the P-3 to begin operations north of the Iraqi border. P-3s, began to fly missions in 'safe' killboxes further north, remaining in step with the Division's movements. The P-3 was invaluable in supporting the Division's efforts up Route 7, especially in the vicinity of the town of Qalat Sukkar. Similarly, the Pioneer Unmanned Aerial Vehicle continually demonstrated the value of a direct

support or organic UAV in prosecuting the Division's deep fight and targeting efforts. During the maneuver pause, intelligence collections continued apace, and a large number of Iraqi armor and artillery units were located and struck. On this day, the Pioneer detected a G-5 155mm howitzer battery just north of the Highway 27 Bridge, enabling the Division to direct precision guided munitions against the position.

## 28 March

### 2/23 Strikes a Blow Against the Baath Party

The town of Al Fajr had been a hotbed of Regime activity. This town anchored the eastern end of the Highway 17 cross route between Highway 7 and Highway 1, the route of march for any forces seeking to travel cross-corridor within the Division's battlespace. On the morning of 27 March, 2/23 was tasked to secure the west side of the intersection of Highways 7 and 17.

The account of the guarded cooperation on the part of the local citizens is telling, as it is representative of the encounters the Marines had with the Iraqi people:



*Marines used hand-written signs to tell Iraqis to stop at checkpoints.*

*After Fox Company killed a driver attempting to run the road block we had established, one of the battalion's own Arab speaking Marines, Sergeant Dory Habachy, identified several citizens willing to discuss enemy activities in the town. These informers seemed fearful of talking to U.S. forces in the presence of other Iraqis so the battalion arranged to meet with them several hours later. With the help of these Iraqis and others in the surrounding hamlets, information suggesting a Baath Party presence in Al Fajr began to come to light. The informants described the structure of the local Baath party identifying four distinct groups and their leaders.*

*This information helped the battalion to further develop the situation and plan for actions into Al Fajr. To locate the reported Baath party houses, the regiment's Dragon Eye was launched to fly over named areas of interest within the town and its findings were reported back to 2/23. At the same time, the scout-sniper platoon began planning for a night insert of three teams to confirm the presence of armed individuals and air defense weapons at sites on the west side of the Al Gharraf River.*

On 28 March, 2/23 was sent to Al Fajr to clear out the Baath party members that had been reported in the city. They initially met no resistance, and turned to Civil-military operations in

the town instead. The Baath party members had wisely chosen to stay out of sight while the Marines were in town. The local populace was friendly and willingly received the Marines into the town. From information received from friendly local citizens.

The battalion concluded that approximately 60 Baath Party loyalists controlled the town using local schools as their headquarters and meeting places. The battalion learned the precise locations of the four top Baath Party leaders and their weapons caches in the town. As the rest of the battalion pulled back just outside of the town, the S-2 assigned objectives for scout snipers that would allow them to observe these suspected sites, and perhaps catch the Baath militia (who were avoiding contact with the Marines) in the open.



*Day and night, Marines keep a watchful eye for the enemy.*

As night fell, two scout-sniper teams conducted their insertion, and by daybreak they were observing and reporting targets. One of the sniper teams observed enemy forces carrying Kalashnikov rifles in a crowd of people. The third scout-sniper team began its insertion into a building when they ran into a group of armed Iraqis. The team immediately broke contact and fought their way out of the building, bounding back to the link-up point. During the emergency extraction, a HMMWV hit two members of the response team, tragically killing Staff Sergeant James Cawley and seriously injuring Captain Harry Porter. This tragedy occurred incident to the liberation of the fearful citizens of Al Fajr. The Battalion mourned the loss of Staff Sergeant Cawley, recognizing that the brave Marines who participated in this action played a key role in removing the Baath militia as a force of oppression on these people, and set the conditions for a successful attack the next day.



*Arab linguist interrogates an Iraqi detainee near the Tigris.*

On 29 March, based on this new information, the battalion staff quickly completed planning and issued a raid order on the key sites inside the town. At 1300Z, a platoon of M1A1s from RCT-1 approached the town from the east. Citizens of Al Fajr, recognizing that an attack was imminent, gathered to see the Baath members receive their due justice. As the tank platoon entered the town, the 120 mm guns fired into the building where the scout-sniper team had been attacked the previous night. To the rising cheers of the town's civilians, the tanks continued west over the bridge, remaining on the

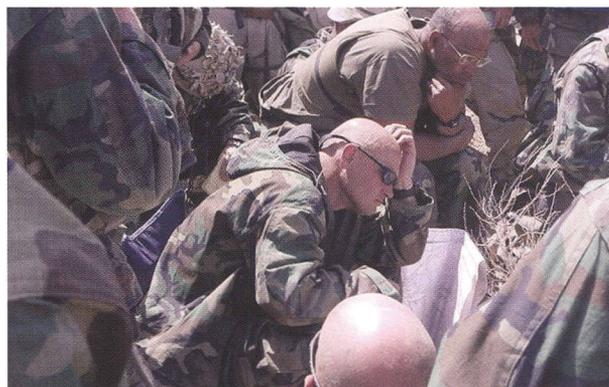
main road to provide over-watch. An Army PsyOps team followed the tanks into town and broadcast a message for the Baath Party members to surrender. A division of Cobra helicopters engaged an open truck carrying armed Iraqis and provided forward air support during the raid.

The battalion's CAAT sections led each of the companies through the town to their objectives and provided local security as the companies cleared their objectives. Fox Company secured the suspected Baath Party residences while Echo Company assaulted the Baath Party Headquarters buildings. Each company uncovered large caches of weapons and numerous documents, which confirmed the extent of Baath Party activities in the vicinity of Al Fajr. Golf Company moved rapidly through Al Fajr and cleared the school on the north side of town. Iraqi civilians, eager to help rid themselves of the former Regime thugs, pointed out the location of the Baath Party members. Golf Company cleared a nearby built-up area where they located another large weapons cache and documents. Marines spotted armed men burning documents in an adjacent building and provided covering fire as another platoon cleared the building, which yielded an even larger cache of documents, information, and weapons.



*Liberated Iraqis everywhere expressed their appreciation for Marines.*

Meanwhile, Weapons Platoon Sergeant, Staff Sergeant Charles Spence, and the Mortar Section led by Sergeant Antonio Dominguez, confronted 12 well-dressed men wearing traditional Arab robes. As these men were searched, a patrol found military uniforms and equipment in nearby bushes beside the road. These men were detained, as was another group of men traveling in a tractor-trailer. The driver discreetly pointed out eight of these passengers for further search. Underneath their gowns, they were fully dressed in Iraqi military uniforms.



*RCT-1 Commander pushes north while simultaneously transitioning to stabilization operations in part of the Regimental zone.*

As the raid continued, Marines began looking for opportunities to assist the local citizens. The town's inhabitants had been instrumental in capturing the Baathist thugs and the Marines wanted to show their appreciation. Soon after, the battalion began conducting humanitarian operations in full earnest. Medical supplies were issued and medical assistance was provided to

both children and adults while other 2/23 Marines distributed humanitarian rations to members of the town.

### **29 March Plans and Re-plans**

The Division awaited orders to resume the attack while stabilization operations continued in the 1<sup>st</sup> UK Division and TF Tarawa zones in the rear. The Division remained convinced that the quickest path to stability in the south was a Marine Division astride the single LOC leading there from Baghdad. The Division noted that it was still possible to drive from Baghdad to Basrah on major highways controlled by the Regime, a continuous source of weapons, fighters, and Regime control. The remaining enemy forces to the south of Al Kut had been effectively shaped, and were powerless to take major offensive action.

The operational pause also gave dangerous time for the planners at higher headquarters to think, and a number of schemes had been pushed down to the MEF for consideration. A number of supporting plans were considered and rejected, including a scheme to mount up an RCT from 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division on Heavy Equipment Transports, and ship it to the east in order to attack the 10<sup>th</sup> Armored Division in Al Amarah.



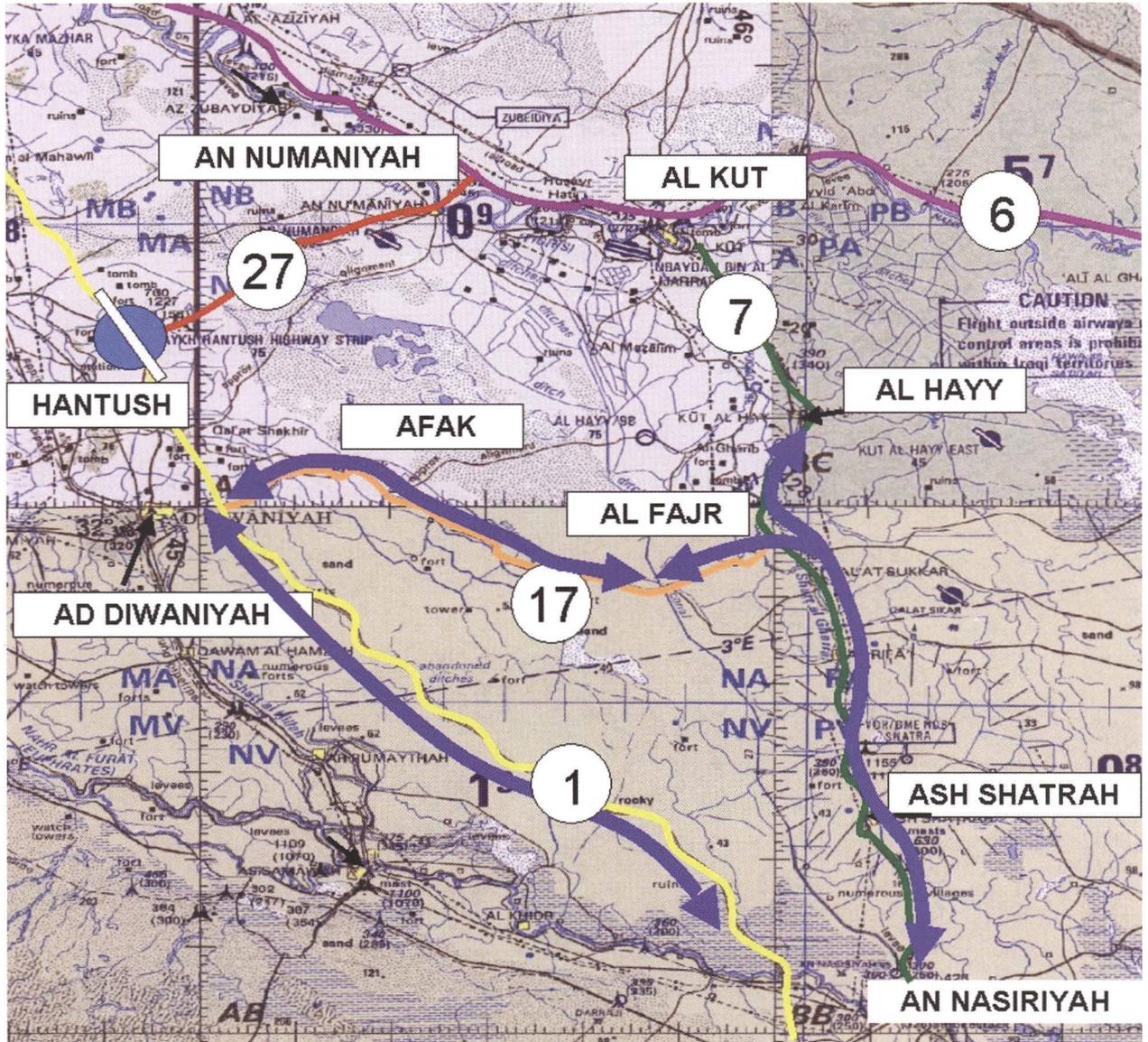
*Marines keep a watchful eye on prisoners.*

Most of the proposals would have served to shift the momentum away from the successful advance toward Baghdad, and back to the south and east. On 29 March, the Division sent Operations and Intelligence planners to the I MEF Headquarters at Jalibah Airfield in southern Iraq in order to participate in the planning efforts, and to drive home the Division's perspective that chopping the head from the snake would be the most effective way of reducing its influence in the south.

The media reporting of the day was an interesting study in perceptions. Some media reported, almost gleefully, that the Coalition attack was falling apart. They implied that the highest decision makers in Washington were eager to continue the attack, while others were sounding notes of caution. The media cited 'commanders in the field' as those most opposed to the continued attack. To the Division poised on the leading edge of the attack, this all came as somewhat of a surprise. The Division had full ammunition bays, full fuel tanks, and was eager to get back into the attack. The MEF planners had a similar appreciation of the situation. Some, outside the operating forces, took the counsel of their fears, playing into the hands of a sensationalist media that was anxious to exploit any potential negative news. At all echelons, Marines on the ground were itching to resume the attack.

## Afak Operations

As the Division pressed its advance along two separate axes, the divided RCTs were not immediately mutually supporting on the tactical level. Although the RCTs were mutually supporting at an operational level, regaining the ability to provide mutual tactical support and gain additional maneuver flexibility became a priority for the Division. On 28 March, 3/4 was ordered to conduct a reconnaissance in force along Highway 17 in order to link up with RCT-1



*Afak and Al Fajr operations called for elements of RCT-7 and RCT-1 to link-up on Hwy 17 in order to provide mutual support and a logistics route that connected the two corridors..*

east of the Saddam Canal. That evening, Lieutenant Colonel Bryan McCoy issued the order for a reconnaissance in force, east along Highway 17. “Go in like you own the place,” he charged, “We’re gonna kick the beehive and see what comes out.” Once the connecting route was open,



*A Battalion huddle gives the commanders of 3/4 a chance to talk through the plan of attack for Afak.*

the two attack corridors of the Division would again be mutually supporting. This route would become a crucial west-to-east re-supply route for the Division, and serve as the connecting file between RCT-1 and RCT-7.

Operations in the town of Afak turned out to be representative of the actions that occurred in each of the towns 3/4 encountered along the route. The pattern had become predictable in the smaller towns of southern Iraq. In each town, the Iraqis used dismounted paramilitaries supported by technicals in hastily arranged ambushes and defensive positions. In response, 3/4 used shock action and combined arms. In Afak, CAAT and supporting air blocked the town's ingress and egress routes. Tanks led into the center of the urban area with rifle companies following in trace conducting the reconnaissance in force. Once in the city, infantry dismounted to clear buildings and gain the rooftops. The result was the same in every case; accurate supporting and direct fires destroyed the paramilitaries and their equipment. Follow-on Marines swept into the town on the heels of the attack, giving medical attention to the locals, dispensing humanitarian supplies, and using the HETs to gain intelligence.

By early afternoon, 3/4 approached the last town in the planned zone of action, Al Budayr. A section of AH-1W Cobras, uncovered three separate Anti-Aircraft Artillery (AAA) pieces and

engaged two, under Kilo Company's control. The aircraft dropped smoke on all three sites to aid follow-on aircraft in locating and destroying the AAA.



*An 81mm mortar platoon emplaces its mortars to support the attack on Afak.*

Bravo Company (1<sup>st</sup> Tanks, attached) established a support by fire position while CAAT platoons once again surrounded the town. Kilo and India Companies, led by the Battalion Commander, pressed into the town center. Eerily quiet, the expectation was that this would be a much stiffer engagement than the previous towns. As the units progressed, however, the town citizens began to come out in force to watch the invading forces. Lieutenant Colonel McCoy called to report that he was surrounded by townspeople, and called up the HET and security. Kilo had cleared through the Baath Party headquarters and penetrated deeper

into the town. India did likewise, both companies pressing in for a distance, and then dismounting to clear the nearby city blocks. In all, 3/4 captured 23 detainees, of whom 16 were ultimately designated EPWs. The logistics effort was significantly helped by the discovery of a fuel depot, which served to refuel all the tanks in the task-organized battalion. Having completed its efforts, 3/4 pulled out of the town and consolidated along the road northwest of Al Budayr.

### **30 March Regaining the Momentum**

The Division remained ready to continue the attack to the north, and had repeated the mantra in its daily Intentions Message:

The Division Commander flew to Jalibah to join the Division planners and to meet with the

*The area around the Division is increasingly secure. Offensive operations on Route 7 and North on Route 1 will help set conditions to turn over our rear area to TF Tarawa when we go across the Tigris. Our current vulnerability to chemical attack and the potential for the enemy to realize they have a gap in their defenses indicate we should conduct a limited objective attack soonest to cross the Tigris.*

MEF Commander. The MEF planners had agreed that the security situation allowed a limited objective attack by the Division across the Tigris, and were as eager as the Division to get moving to Baghdad. The MEF and Division Commanders agreed, and the Division was given authority to proceed with a limited objective attack across the Tigris to isolate Al Kut. Once

Blue Diamond was positioned across the River, the MEF and Division would be in position for a variety of further actions. The CFLCC Commander had mandated a shaping reduction of the Baghdad outer cordon by 50% before launching an assault on the capitol, but this fight was several days away. A continuous flow of joint air strikes against the Al Nida RG Division persisted over the next several days. The Division, who planned to meet the Al Nida RG face-to-face very soon, greeted the strikes with enthusiasm.



*The commanders and staff of Division HQ gather to receive the plan for crossing the Tigris.*

The CG and his planners flew back to the Division's positions along Highway 1, and straight to the RCT-5 CP where Colonel Dunford and his staff were briefed on the plan. The attack would take place tomorrow, and RCT-5 would lead it. A feint by 3<sup>d</sup> LAR would press north along Highway 1 (the avenue of approach expected by the Iraqis), while RCT-5 would abruptly attack northeast along Highway 27 through the seam in the enemy's defenses. Crossing the Saddam Canal and seizing the Tigris River bridge at An Numaniyah, the Division would gain a bridgehead and sever southern Iraq from Baghdad's control. The Division was finally on the move again. The CG made the rounds and briefed the plan to all of his RCT commanders. In every position, the life went back into the faces of the Marines as the CG explained his concept. Blue Diamond had waited long enough, and the Marines were more than ready to go.

### **Linkup Along Highway 17**

Having accomplished the task of reconnaissance in force along Highway 17, 3/4 looked to complete the link-up with RCT-1 to the southeast. Moving west from Al Fajr, 2/23 had uncovered Highway 17 from RCT-1's positions to the Saddam Canal. Early on the 30<sup>th</sup>, the link-up between 3/4 and 2/23 was completed when both units made physical contact at the bridge over the Saddam Canal. The Division was no longer attacking up two isolated corridors, and now had a viable connecting route. This route would see a great deal of Division traffic over the next four days, and the welcome flow of supplies through this corridor enabled RCT-1 to continue its fixing attack north.

One of the remarkable aspects of the continued success of RCT-1 up Highway 7 was the ability of the Marines to continue the attack with minimal resupply. Unsecured LOCs and the great distance from fixed logistics nodes had precluded ground resupply, and a perceived Surface to Air Missile (SAM) threat limited the use of aircraft for a few days. Highway 7 through An Nasiriyah continued to be impassable for resupply convoys. With the linkup on Highway 17 accomplished, Delta Company, 1<sup>st</sup> Tanks escorted a CSSG convoy up Highway 1 and across Highway 17 to link up with RCT-1. After remaining overnight with 3/4, the convoy was