

13 April Attack to Tikrit

As 3^d LAR Battalion led the charge north, instead of encountering paramilitary ambushes or conventional defenses along Highway 1, they encountered only abandoned Iraqi artillery and armor. In addition to D-30 howitzers and S-60 AAA pieces, several abandoned T-72 tanks were also bypassed after an adrenaline-heightening encounter in the dark. The few civilians encountered during the night and early morning seemed shocked to see the Marines. They knew US forces were in Baghdad, but these were the first they had seen this far north.

Third LAR reached its blocking position in the vicinity of Samarra shortly after sunrise on 13 April. Samarra held special cultural and religious significance to the Iraqis, and the golden dome of its grand mosque shone brilliantly in the morning sun. The Wolfpack took up positions on the avenues of approach on the western side of the Tigris, and oriented its guns to the northeast. The remainder of the Task Force sped along the hard surface bypass road and continued on to Tikrit, their right flank secured by the Wolfpack.

Task Force Tripoli entered the outskirts of Tikrit under a distinctive mural showing Saddam Hussein on horseback, valiantly leading the Iraqi army in the attack to Jerusalem. There was no doubt that Task Force Tripoli had entered 'Saddam country', as every light pole and signpost contained a mural of the dictator. Unlike every other area of the country, these murals and paintings had not been defaced or touched by vandals. The streets were largely empty, and there was a conspicuous absence of cheering citizens. The citizens were clearly 'holding their breath' to see what the arrival of the Americans would mean, both for the Regime, and themselves.



Entering the gates of Tikrit along Highway 1



A smiling Saddam Hussein welcomes the Marines to Tikrit.

The Marines of Weapons Company, 1st LAR, made first contact with the enemy just to the south of Tikrit. The company established a screen +west of Highway 1 oriented north toward the city. Pathfinder Platoon established a roadblock on the western flank and immediately stopped a truck containing seven Iraqi soldiers carrying weapons, ammunition, documents, and caffeine pills to paramilitary fighters in Baghdad. The company came under sporadic small arms and RPG fire over a two-hour period. During one of these engagements, an LAV-25 took a direct hit from an RPG round. The RPG was a contact fused weapon, and

striking the muffler caused the round to detonate before impacting the vehicle hull. The muffler was destroyed, but the crew was unharmed. The Company returned fire, resulting in five enemy KIA and two trucks destroyed. The Marines of Weapons Company, 1st LAR recounted:

“As we approached the southern outskirts of Tikrit, the sun came up revealing a pleasant landscape. I remember thinking to myself, ‘this actually looks like a normal place!’ We stopped for a quick break, grabbed some chow, and then continued north. South of town we identified a large area to the west of the highway with multiple revetments that contained enemy vehicles. Fixed wing air started checking in with us on the TAD nets. We were the only game in town today and ‘Skychief,’ the airborne DASC was sending everyone our way. ‘Mud Duck’ McCardle, our air officer, started directing the air onto the revetments and also had them take a look forward to the city. An F/A-18D from VMFA-225 reported numerous tanks, trucks, and other assorted vehicles in the revetted area. After passing a detailed brief to the Hornet we gave the clearance to engage the targets. Several other sections of fixed wing checked in and the FAC (A) F/A-18D began directing them onto the vehicles he had identified earlier. As they began dropping their ordnance we could feel the concussion of the 1000- pound laser guided bombs as they impacted their targets. We continued to a crossroads just south of the city and occupied a screen line at the 18 Northing, oriented north. Weapons Company was to the west of Highway 1 and Delta was tied in to our right flank. We weren’t there very long when we began to take small arms fire from our direct front. The LAV-25s began returning fire. The volume began to increase and then there were several RPG shots. One of the grenades impacted an LAV less than 100 meters away from our position.”

The Marines from Delta Company, 1st LAR had a similar view of the battlefield:

“The company arrived south of Tikrit and was directed to establish a blocking position across Highway 1 along the 18 Northing in order to prevent any enemy from escaping the town. Weapons Company tied in to our west flank while 2^d Platoon controlled a section of Cobras to destroy AAA pieces and ammo caches identified just north of our position. We began taking small arms and RPG fire from the tree lines bordering Highway 1, and immediately answered with 25mm and 7.62. First Lieutenant William Parment began calling in organic 81mm mortars and rotary wing CAS to engage the enemy forces in that area. The company commander, Captain Seth Folsom, quickly task organized a composite platoon, which systematically engaged enemy fighters who were operating in small groups. An Iraqi cargo truck sped south and jumped the curb west of Highway 1 and immediately dismounted several enemy fighters. As 1st Platoon’s Bravo section engaged the newly arrived enemy, they observed several of them fleeing into a culvert tunnel that ran perpendicular to and underneath Highway 1. As Sergeant Isaac McCorkle’s team began clearing the tunnel from the west, the enemy personnel lobbed a grenade just outside the entrance. The grenade detonated and inflicted minor shrapnel wounds to Lance Corporal Chad Weise and Sergeant McCorkle. His team engaged with small arms and grenades, but the enemy retreated further inside the tunnel. Sergeant William DeWitt’s team was tasked to clear the tunnel from the east, where Captain Folsom’s LAV-25 was abreast of the tunnel. The team tossed grenades into the mouth of the tunnel and the entire team engaged with small arms. Captain Folsom dismounted his vehicle with a M240G to assist the team with additional firepower. As the team continued to engage with small arms, the enemy threw another hand grenade, which exploded at the tunnel’s entrance inflicting minor wounds to Sergeant DeWitt. The team entered the tunnel to find three dead soldiers and one still alive wielding a grenade. The team had an animated discussion with the remaining Fedeyeen, who could speak a little broken English. Despite the team’s orders to surrender, the soldier continuously refused, and attempted to throw his grenade. He was killed. The entire engagement that morning resulted in fifteen enemy KIA.”

As Delta and Weapons Companies continued to take the fight to the paramilitary threat just south of Tikrit, 3^d MAW was wreaking havoc on conventional weapons and vehicles in several areas south, west, and north of Tikrit. The Battalion was directing CAS onto no less than four different sites simultaneously while taking sporadic fire from the Fedeyeen to their direct front. South of the position, fixed wing aircraft were engaging enemy vehicles in the revetted complex. On the north side of town, at the Al Sahra airfield, A-10s were running an effort to destroy enemy targets there. Just west of the city, SA-2 and SA-3 missiles were discovered and attacked. To the direct front, AH-1s engaged the enemy Fedeyeen with rockets, 20mm, and Hellfire missiles. All the while, surface fires from artillery and 81mm mortars were integrated. In a matter of only a few hours, over 50 sections of fixed and rotary wing CAS were directed on the enemy in the vicinity of Tikrit. The orchestration of combined arms assembled by this air-ground team made a sweet sound to the Marines on the ground. The winged-FACs, familiar with the geometry, requirements, and dangers of coordinating this airspace were key conductors of the symphony of violence played on the enemy, destroying the last will to resist.

Rescue of the US POWs in Samarra

As the main effort encircled Tikrit, 3^d LAR remained in its blocking position on the western bridge into Samarra. HUMINT Exploitation Team 3, led by First Lieutenant Nathan Boaz, was with the Wolfpack. The HET entered the city of Samarra in HMMWVs and began to screen citizens to ascertain information about remaining Regime fighters or *jihadis* in the area.

By mid-morning, several of the Samarra tribal/city elders met with HET-3. Lieutenant Colonel Clardy met with the local leaders, and calmed their fears by explaining US intentions. The citizens in the Samarra and Tikrit areas were very fearful of US retaliation against them for their role in supporting the former Regime. Lieutenant Colonel Clardy was able to allay their fears, letting them know that as long as the Marines received no resistance from the town, the Marines would not attack it. He put the burden of peaceful coexistence on their shoulders, stressing their responsibility for controlling the actions of the populace.

Shortly thereafter, an Iraqi police officer approached HET-3 with information regarding the presence of US POWs in the town. Alerted to this information, the HET team chief, Staff Sergeant Randy Meyer, and HET translator, Raed al-Tarakmah, screened the source to ascertain the location of the POWs. Staff Sergeant Meyer gave the source a GPS receiver and instructed him on how to use it. The source was directed to proceed to the location of the POWs and record the precise coordinates.

About 45 minutes later, the source returned, and gave the grid location of LC9712985354. Staff Sergeant Meyer asked the source to provide a sketch of the location and a description of the enemy defenses around it. The source indicated that the POW guards were willing to turn them over to the Marines, and did not want to be killed. The guards would put down their weapons at the approach of the Americans.

Lieutenant Boaz contacted the Battalion S-2, Lieutenant Ben Keating, and the CO. Under pressure to continue the advance to Tikrit, Lieutenant Colonel Clardy made a quick decision, and ordered Company D, commanded by Captain Gordon Miller to conduct a raid to recover the POWs if they were actually there. Captain Miller sent a platoon under Second Lieutenant Brett Eubanks to the location indicated by the grid and the sketch, and they arrived at the house within 30 minutes. The LAR scouts and HET team members stormed the house. As promised, the guards had laid down their weapons, and the POWs were recovered without a shot being fired. The POWs were swiftly raced out to the waiting LAVs, and returned to the Battalion headquarters outside of town.



US Army POWs celebrate their rescue in Samarra by the Marines of the Wolfpack.

The seven POWs recovered were Chief Warrant Officer 2 R. D. Young, Jr. - 1st Cavalry (captured Karbala 23-24 Mar 03), Chief Warrant Officer 2 D. S. Williams - 1st Cavalry (captured Karbala 23-24 Mar 03), Sergeant J. J. Riley - 11th Brigade (captured An Nasiriyah 22 Mar 03), Specialist J. N. Hudson - 11th Brigade (captured An Nasiriyah 22 Mar 03), Private First Class P. W. Miller - 11th Brigade (captured An Nasiriyah 22 Mar 03), Specialist S. N. Johnson - 11th Brigade (captured An Nasiriyah 22 Mar 03), and Specialist E. A. Hernandez - 11th Brigade (captured An Nasiriyah 22 Mar 03).

The POWs were given medical attention and MEDEVAC'd to the rear, eventually back to the United States. The televised return home of the Army POWs to the United States was a tremendous tribute to the efforts of the US Marines, HET 3, and 3^d LAR Battalion. After the liberation and evacuation of the former US Army POWs, 3^d LAR rejoined the Task Force in action in Tikrit.

Securing Saddam's Palaces

Arriving at the gates of the city, Brigadier General Kelly looked to the G-2 to identify objectives in the city that would facilitate the discovery and defeat of remaining resistance. In addition, WMD sites and sites containing Regime intelligence information were to be secured. During the brief mission planning time for the operation, the G-2 had produced a list of over two dozen palaces, sensitive sites, underground facilities, military garrisons, weapons caches, and Regime headquarters facilities, all gleaned from master lists maintained by national intelligence agencies. The list had been refined overnight during the rapid march to the gates of Tikrit. This Intelligence would drive the operation for the next two days as the Task Force secured these sites and defeated the remaining Fedeyeen defenders along the way.

While 1st and 3^d LAR concentrated on the southern side of Tikrit, 2^d LAR established a blocking position on the north side of town, interdicting military targets that attempted to flee the city. The Battalion captured many Regime figures, surprised by the rapid approach of the Americans. These figures had waited too long to flee, and were caught up in Barbarian's net.

After a hastily convened commander's meeting at an abandoned market place alongside the highway, Brigadier General Kelly ordered 1st and 3^d LAR Battalions to press the attack into the city. With Barbarian waiting at the back door, the remainder of the Task Force would kick down the front door. Keeping tempo, the CG wanted them to attack straight into the center of the city, destroy the remaining Fedeyeen, and secure a number of palace sites on the south side of town.



Tripoli Commanders meet at an abandoned market south of Tikrit to coordinate fires and maneuver prior to entering the city.

The Division was notified of a suspected gravesite for Saddam Hussein in Tripoli's area of operations, and was given a FragO to investigate. Brigadier General Kelly rounded up a personal bodyguard, and went to the site in an uncleared area of the city near Al Ouja (Saddam's birthplace). The report was a false alarm, and the courtyard to which the report led had no indications of recent activity. After a thorough search, the Marines returned to the task of rounding up the remaining Fedeyeen.

On the afternoon of 13 April, 1st and 3^d LAR attacked through the southern section of town, including the southern airfield, the SRG barracks, and a military storage facility. As darkness fell, 1st LAR consolidated at a key road intersection near the abandoned SRG barracks. 1st LAR was arranged along the east-west road, when it uncovered and engaged a group of Fedeyeen soldiers hiding behind them near the southeast corner of the intersection. Coming up from the south toward the Fedeyeen positions, Golf Company, 2/23 also received fire from the Fedeyeen, and opened fire in the direction of the initial firefight, resulting in 1st LAR taking both friendly and enemy fire. A few sharp-eyed squad leaders from G/2/23 quickly identified the situation and narrowly averted a major engagement in the dark. The aggressiveness of both 1st LAR and G/2/23 to engage and destroy the enemy between them had nearly resulted in a major intramural firefight between the two units.

The next morning, Task Force Tripoli continued the attack into Tikrit. Second LAR remained in the northern blocking position, and secured the Al Sahra Airfield. With 1st LAR advancing on the east side of Highway 1, and 3^d LAR on the west, the town was soon secured. Third LAR encountered scattered resistance in the urban area near the Fedeyeen stadium and the cemetery. The Fedeyeen had been camped out in the town cemetery, using the tombs and mausoleums as shelter. The resistance in this part of town was heavy, and the Fedeyeen continued to fight until daylight on 14 April. After the Fedeyeen had been cleared out, the cemetery looked like a junkyard of abandoned uniforms, half-cooked food, weapons, and equipment. Fighting positions and trenches had been dug throughout the cemetery. The irony of these allegedly 'holy' defenders desecrating a Muslim cemetery was not lost on the members of Task Force Tripoli or the local citizens.

Major Randy Nash from 1st LAR recounts:

That afternoon we kicked off the attack into Tikrit. Weapons Company attacked to seize an SSE objective just south of the main city. We continued north and consolidated at the SSE compound. There was some sporadic fire and a 2S3 was engaged just off to our right on the east/west road just south of the objective. The 2S3 exploded in a huge fireball and secondary explosions continued for nearly an hour as the artillery ammo continued to cook off. As the sun went down, we gathered the key leaders of the company and the battalion staff and discussed the day's operations and plans for the next morning. We had come a long way and fought hard most of the day on little to no sleep. We had also just learned of the rescue efforts of the seven POWs and everyone was feeling pretty good about Tripoli's efforts. Firm handshakes and knowing stares were the order of the evening. Few words were needed.

A little later that night an intense volley of small arms and machine gun fire were heard, as tracers were flying all around our position. Fortunately, I was inside the LAV-C2 at the time and listened on the radio to hear any reports coming in. There was only silence. Gunfire erupted again but nothing on the radio. After several minutes among the muffled shouting outside the LAV, I heard the always cool Battalion S-3, Major Byron Harper, come up on the battalion's tactical net. He contacted G/2/23 and asked them in a tactful manner if they would mind ceasing firing at the Highlanders to their front. When illumination was popped, you could see G/2/23 on line. One Marine was in a kneeling position ready to fire his AT-4 on Steelrain 12[an LAV-25]. Numerous attempts were made by voice and waving an American flag to let 2/23 know we were friendly. I learned later that Fedeyeen fighters had been uncovered between G/2/23 and the battalion. The geometry, as fate would have it, almost set us up for an intense friendly firefight. Two of our Marines, Sergeant Bryan Benson and Sergeant Nieves Avila were injured by Fedeyeen fighters during the engagement, but both were ambulatory. Sergeant Benson had narrowly escaped death. He received a couple of rounds in his lower leg, but one round had nailed him in the torso. One of his M-16 magazines on his vest had stopped the round from penetrating his chest. He was pretty beat up but in spite of the rounds in his leg and shrapnel from his magazine Sergeant Benson was a happy man.



Abandoned weapons litter the Tikrit cemetery. The Fedeyeen and foreign fighters had desecrated this Islamic cemetery in the center of the city.



This was the primary bridge people from the eastern countryside used to get into town. The TOW Platoon established a blocking position east of the bridge to control insurgent movement into the town.