

As the sun set on the second day of fighting, another lull in ground combat fell over the battlefield, and activity shifted almost exclusively to air attacks. The AC-130s continued their missions of strafing enemy positions as they had the previous night. The proximity of the Marines to the militia positions, however, made the Marines' and gunships' tasks difficult. To distinguish themselves from the militia fighters, the Marines placed Meal, Ready-To-Eat (MRE) heat packets on top of their helmets so the infrared sensors on the planes could detect their locations.

By the end of the day, Marine commanders were moving to break off the cemetery attack. The Army had informed the 11th MEU that the two promised battalions from the 1st Cavalry Division—1st Battalion, 5th Regiment, and 2d Battalion, 7th Regiment—would not arrive until 7 August. Since BLT 1/4 could not accomplish anything more tactically in the meantime, Colonel Haslam decided to halt the advance, regroup, and continue the attack later, when reinforcements would allow an assault straight through to the objective. The interim period would facilitate rest, maintenance to equipment, and time to train the Iraqi National Guard contingent. Coalition forces would continue clearing the cemetery, using armor instead of Marines on foot. At the same time, the battalion landing team would conduct raids to destroy enemy supplies, disrupt control, and otherwise keep al-Sadr's militia off balance.<sup>116</sup>

The official order to halt the advance through the cemetery came at 0700 on 7 August. Although complicated in many areas because of the proximity of the enemy, the Marines executed a withdrawal from the Revolutionary Circle area without major incident. Some Marines had to run 400 to 500 meters under fire with full battle packs to waiting transportation back to Forward Operation Base Hotel.

Back at the base, the Marines welcomed rest and recovery time, as well as much-needed baths. Company C's Lieutenant Sellars asked some of his troops, who had told him that they were ready to "get some," if they were satisfied after having spent two days in the cemetery fight. "Yes sir," they replied, although they were in no hurry to "get some" more for a while.<sup>117</sup>

Despite not achieving its original objective of clearing the militia resistance because of the imbalance between militia numbers and 11th MEU resources, BLT 1/4 could claim relative success. The Marines had killed about 350 of al-Sadr's militia fighters and wounded hundreds more, while the Marines lost only five killed and 60 wounded.<sup>118</sup> The Marines had deflated militia morale and seriously disrupted its command structure. Although not a decisive

victory, the Marines would soon have the chance to complete the work they had begun.

### *Raid Interlude*

The withdrawal from the cemetery was not an end to the battle, just the conclusion of its first phase. The 11th MEU could do nothing more against such a large enemy considering the size of its force and the delay in the arrival of reinforcements.<sup>119</sup> The Marines needed to make major adjustments in their approach, but the mission remained unchanged: the capture of al-Sadr and the elimination of his militia.

In fact, the cemetery fight prompted a major acceleration of the original plan in dealing with al-Sadr. When the 11th MEU took over the Najaf-Kufa area from the Army, Colonel Halsam had outlined a 90-day plan to allow ample time to organize for the long campaign against al-Sadr's forces. But the cemetery fight changed everything, and Halsam advanced the timetable from three months of preparation to as soon as practical—weeks instead of months. "Iraqi and U.S. forces are making final preparations as we get ready to finish this fight that Muqtada al-Sadr started," Halsam told the *New York Times*. "We will not allow [the Mahdi] to continue to desecrate this sacred site, using it as an militia base of operations. There will be no sanctuary for thugs and criminals in Najaf."<sup>120</sup>

The Marines continued to plan for their next move against the militia fighters, but how long that process would take remained uncertain. Such a sizeable and complicated task defied an exact time frame. Several matters had to be addressed, particularly military logistics and political permissions required to continue operating in the Wadi al-Salam area. The Iraqi government's desires, area and fire mission restrictions, and the possibility of a negotiated settlement all required attention and consideration.

Since the relatively small size of the Marine attack force had proven insufficient, the force for the next phase needed all the resources available in the theater of operations, including Marines, Army, Iraqi ground forces (both mechanized and dismounted), and Polish GROM Special Forces.<sup>121</sup> Marine and Army helicopters, as well as Marine and Air Force fixed-wing aircraft, would patrol the skies in support of the ground forces. The planners hoped that a more robust force on land and in the air would eliminate the militia's advantages in manpower.

Marine commanders focused their efforts on planning and control, particularly on getting the Coalition ground forces and the Iraqi government of one mind on all

### *Battle of An-Najaf*



Photo by Maj Glen G. Butler

*An AH-1W Cobra from HMLA-169 fired a TOW missile at a building in the center of the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery that was being used as a mortar position.*

aspects of the operational picture. On 9 August, just two days after the halt of the cemetery fighting, 26 high officials of the Iraqi and U.S. military met at Governor al-Zurufi's compound to discuss strategy. The group included interim Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, his defense minister, and key Coalition military leaders, including General Casey, Lieutenant General Thomas F. Metz, Lieutenant General Conway, and his deputy, Brigadier General Dennis J. Hejlik. The conference also drew a large number of international reporters. The militia fighters learned of the conference, and not long after the meeting began, they launched several mortar rounds at the governor's offices, breaking up the gathering and scattering the participants, who quickly left the area. The attack ended soon after it started after forward air controller Captain Bryant E. Budd fired a few well-placed 40mm grenade shots with his M79 grenade launcher.<sup>122</sup> But the militia had made its statement and prevented any more future meetings of this sort in the battle area.

As short as it was, the meeting did accomplish a handful of basic objectives. The participants agreed on a collective mechanism for command and coordination at the highest levels. The Marines established an 11th MEU sub-

headquarters and liaison unit. The unit's executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Apicella, took charge of the Marine contingent and created a communications relay system to facilitate contact among higher headquarters, Colonel Haslam, and the national and provincial Iraqi governments.

The officials at the meeting also drastically reduced exclusion zone restrictions for fire missions in the battle area and eased the process of fire mission approval. General Hejlik also clarified the confusion over command by affirming that Colonel Haslam would control the battle without interference from I MEF on tactical matters. To ensure freedom of action in the Najaf-Kufa area, General Casey's Multi-National Command Iraq shifted control of the battle area from the Polish-led Multi-National Division South Central to the Fallujah-based I Marine Expeditionary Force. The Polish command did not have the experience or resources to supervise the kind of undertaking that the 11th MEU faced.

With collective agreement on the Coalition allocation of responsibility, Colonel Haslam could act freely to plan the operation. He had the resources to execute the mission and much more flexible political restrictions. On





Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

*Marines of BLT 1/4 on patrol in the Old City, near the cemetery. The Marines were seeking to destabilize and disrupt the operations of the militia by using aggressive patrolling and by destroying militia assets.*

11 August, Haslam met with his subordinate commanders at Forward Operating Base Hotel to solidify plans for operations. The objective remained the same: elimination of al-Sadr's militia from the Najaf-Kufa area through an overwhelming final assault. But before this assault could take place, Coalition forces needed to soften up the militia with constant aggressive patrolling by the Army cavalry in the cemetery and Old City area and by conducting raids to destabilize and disrupt militia operations throughout the Najaf-Kufa area to keep the enemy off balance. The raids would destroy enemy resources and distract militia leadership from reinforcing the Imam Ali Mosque area by attacking militia strongholds and resources.<sup>123</sup> Plans moved quickly as planners slated a raid for the next day. At the same time, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, was already engaged in "search and destroy" patrols in the cemetery. In addition, the newly arrived 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, positioned itself for combat operations in southwest Najaf in the Old City. Unmanned aerial-reconnaissance vehicles (UAVs) complimented the scouting efforts of the cavalry by spotting enemy targets from above the fighting. They passed information on to supporting artillery or aircraft

to use in targeting and destroying the enemy positions.<sup>124</sup>

The battle plans developed simultaneously as Prime Minister Allawi had I MEF declare a suspension of operations on 11 August, giving the Iraqi government a chance to begin dialogue with al-Sadr. This move resulted from the government's desire for flexibility with the political situation, especially recognizing Shi'a sensitivity regarding the Imam Ali Mosque. Although Governor al-Zurufi and some of his officials believed that the mosque's protection was secondary to al-Sadr's removal, the national government wanted to pursue negotiations.<sup>125</sup>

The militia maintained high morale and, despite their high number of casualties, convinced themselves that they had won the first fight because they had forced the Marines to withdraw from the cemetery. Muqtada al-Sadr rejected negotiations and released a statement encouraging his followers to "keep fighting even if you see me as a prisoner or a martyr. God willing you will be victorious."<sup>126</sup> One of his fighters, Qasim Falshir, echoed the militia's response to al-Sadr's words, stating that "once we are given the order to fight, the whole world will not stop us from doing so." A militia spokesman declared on 12 August that the "the morale of the fighters is very high."<sup>127</sup>





Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

*Marines of BLT 1/4 enter a house near the al-Sadr compound. The raid on the al-Sadr compound area included Company C, the reconnaissance platoon, Combined Antiarmor Team A, and three Iraqi National Guard platoons.*

After the cemetery fight, raids and firefights became a daily occurrence. The Army's cavalry squadrons carried out most of the daily fighting, although BLT 1/4 engaged in frequent disruption/destruction raids to prevent al-Sadr and his leadership from having any stability of communications or operations.

On 12 August, the combined force conducted its first major raid near al-Sadr's house. Intelligence identified the house and surrounding buildings, where the Borneo patrol had fought 10 days earlier, as a major militia strongpoint, serving as a center of militia concentration and logistics. The raid tasked Company C, the reconnaissance platoon, Combined Antiarmor Team A, and three Iraqi National Guard platoons from the 405th Battalion with seizing four of the buildings: two houses, a hospital, and a school, which were adjacent to 800 meters of open lot and a junkyard.

Company C cleared the lot and hospital without incident. Elsewhere along the front, other battalion landing team elements maintained violent contact with the enemy. Combined Antiarmor Team A observed four militiamen running toward the al-Sadr family's private

clinic. As two of the men stopped to fire at Lieutenant Borneo's vehicle, Lance Corporal Brandon Shaw returned fire with his MK19 grenade launcher. When two other militia fighters tried to hide under a fuel tanker truck, Shaw engaged them as well. With his MK19, he fired a few rounds and blew up the truck, along with the militiamen underneath it.<sup>128</sup>

The reconnaissance platoon also remained heavily engaged with al-Sadr's forces. Assigned to protect Company C's right or east flank, the unit immediately came under mortar and small-arms fire. The platoon closed with the smaller enemy element and, under the leadership of Sergeant Julio C. Palafox, neutralized the threat with a few 40mm grenades.<sup>129</sup>

More serious trouble developed with the augmented forces. Word came that the Iraqi National Guard platoons and their U.S. Army Special Forces advisors had encountered heavy resistance at the school, a four-story building where they met a platoon-sized enemy. The Special Forces commander, Captain Michael Tarlowski, USA, had been killed, and his senior noncommissioned officer, a master sergeant, was seriously wounded. The



Photo by Cpl Matthew S. Richards  
*Marines of BLT 1/4, behind an earthen berm, and Iraqi security forces conducted a joint raid on al-Sadr's compound and neighborhood.*

reconnaissance platoon and Company C's 3d Platoon moved in quickly to assist. They came under heavy small-arms and machine gun fire as they approached. Once they reached the building, 3d Platoon found itself in an urban firefight for the next two hours. The enemy fought desperately from the upper floors. The militia fighters fought off several of the platoon's advances by rolling hand grenades down the stairs and firing wildly with machine guns at anything that moved below them.<sup>130</sup>

After the Marine unit failed to dislodge the militiamen, the task force reevaluated the situation. The assault team withdrew to a safe distance and called in close air support. An Air Force sortie dropped a 500-pound bomb on the building, but the bomb failed to explode. A follow-on Maverick missile destroyed almost the entire building, including the militiamen who occupied it.<sup>131</sup> When Marines returned to the building site, they found a significant weapons and ammunition cache.<sup>132</sup> The raid cost the Coalition dearly, with a Special Forces advisor killed and another wounded, 1 Iraqi National Guardsman killed and 16 wounded, and 3 Marines wounded. The force confirmed 3 militiamen dead and 18 wounded, although Colonel Haslam estimated some 40 casualties. The Marines could not compile an accurate count of the enemy dead and wounded in the school building.<sup>133</sup>

There was also a lighter moment that day as Company C's 2d platoon cleared and searched al-Sadr's house. On his bedroom dresser, the Marines found pictures of American action movie heroes, including Clint Eastwood, Bruce Willis, and Harrison Ford.<sup>134</sup> It appeared that al-Sadr, who publicly vilified Americans and western culture, secretly idolized American movie stars.

In keeping with its original plan, the 11th MEU kept up the pressure on al-Sadr's militia. Early on the morning of 13 August, the 11th MEU launched a major raid on the Imam Salah Mosque, directly north of the Kufa Mosque, which intelligence had marked as a militia stronghold. Anticipating a significant militia force, the expeditionary unit developed an elaborate operation plan. Iraqi leaders did not want foreigners entering a religious site, so that task was assigned to 36 Commando Unit, which was composed of Iraqi-Kurdish troops and an Iraqi counterterrorist force. A robust task force supported the Iraqis. It included a U.S. Army Special Forces advisory unit and the 11th MEU's Maritime Special Purpose Force, which consisted of a force reconnaissance platoon and a specially trained rifle platoon. The special purpose force, along with the light armored reconnaissance platoon and Antiarmor Team B, provided a cordon while the 36 Commando and the Iraqi counterterrorist force conducted the raid.<sup>135</sup> The Marines also provided close air support, while the remaining task force stood ready to handle significant enemy resistance.

Militia resistance proved anything but in this instance, however. The 11th MEU Maritime Special Purpose Force killed two militiamen who fired small arms on them from rooftops. After watching their fellow militiamen fall to enemy fire, the rest of their accomplices fled toward the Kufa Mosque. In the meantime, Iraqi forces completed their raid, tallying four enemy killed and nine captured.<sup>136</sup> More importantly, the size of the raid demonstrated to the militia the Coalition's resolve to eliminate its forces.

The plan that Colonel Haslam and Lieutenant Colonel Mayer developed to take down al-Sadr and his militia depended heavily on urban warfare tactics. The 11th MEU staff had learned that the Marines should not directly engage enemy forces ensconced in buildings but should attempt to draw them out. They also knew that they could not feasibly search and clear every building. The Marines relied on the Army's capabilities and equipment to solve this tactical shortcoming. Its M1A2 Abrams tanks and M2 Bradley fighting vehicles provided the perfect platform for the job. Enemy small arms could not penetrate the armor of the Bradleys and Abrams, which could counter with heavier weapons of their own: the Abrams mounted a 120mm main gun, a .50-caliber machine gun, and a 7.62mm machine gun, while the Bradley carried a 25mm cannon, two wire-guided missile launchers, a 7.62mm machine gun, and two rear-firing 5.56mm machine guns. Mayer had observed the battle at Revolutionary Circle and the cemetery fight first hand, and he requested these Army units as reinforcements specifically for their capabilities. The addition of armored



cavalry provided the Marine battalion landing team with the resources needed to execute Haslam and Mayer's plan of armored patrolling, raids, and close air support, eventually culminating in an assault on the Imam Ali Mosque. The Coalition military and government leaders came to this agreement on 9 August and solidified the details two days later at Colonel Haslam's brief meeting at Governor al-Zurufi's compound.

Elements of the Army's 5th Cavalry arrived on 7 August and began combat patrols in the cemetery to the north of the mosque almost immediately after the cemetery fight. The enemy had no chance to move back into their previously held positions. Further, the restrictions of movement, eased to 500 meters around the Imam Ali Mosque, made deployment much easier.<sup>137</sup> The situation stabilized even more after the 7th Cavalry units arrived in force a few days later. They patrolled the western end of the cemetery as well as the Old City south of the Imam Ali Mosque and east to FOB David, just south of Najaf. Both units performed admirably and aggressively. In fact, the tankers of Lieutenant Colonel James Rainey's 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, had to be restrained from firing their main guns excessively in the cemetery.<sup>138</sup> The Abrams and Bradleys used identical tactics to engage snipers, machine guns, rockets, and mortars—draw fire, pinpoint the origin, and destroy it. Both units deployed at least two patrol companies every day, all day, leaving the militiamen no rest from the constant pressure.<sup>139</sup> The cavalry's efficiency also allowed the Marines the luxury of conducting various raids separately on a daily basis.

Despite the practical invincibility of the Army's armored vehicles, they endured one tragic incident on 15 August. During a firefight, a militiaman climbed onto one of the tanks and fired into an opening in the turret lid, killing the tank commander and the gunner. The fast-thinking driver threw the tank into reverse and crashed it into a building, covering the tank—and its attacker—with debris. The driver and loader escaped. When reinforcements arrived, they destroyed the enemy position from which the militiaman came and retrieved the tank.<sup>140</sup>

The remaining Army tank commanders agreed that the tragedy resulted from too few Marines accompanying the armored vehicles to protect them. Thereafter, Marine rifle platoons helped provide 360-degree security around the tanks and tracks as the vehicles pursued their missions. The adjustments worked well, as no other such incidents occurred for the remainder for the battle period. Company C's platoon leader, Lieutenant Sellars, believed that the militiamen pushed into the Old City to escape



Photo by SSgt Ashley Brokop, USAF  
*An U.S. Army M1A1 Abrams tank of 1/5 Cavalry used its 120mm main gun to respond to an attack by militia during a routine patrol in Wadi al-Salam Cemetery.*

from the cavalry and get out of harm's way. Lieutenant Colonel Johnston, the 11th MEU operations officer, asserted that the militiamen feared the Marine security element more than they did the Abrams and Bradleys.<sup>141</sup>

The Coalition also adjusted to the restrictions set by the Iraqi government dictating that only it could give permission to attack a mosque and that only Iraqis could enter the sacred site as the assault force.<sup>142</sup> As described above, the 36 Commando and the Iraqi antiterrorist force executed the actual assault of the Salah Mosque. The Coalition also used 405th Iraqi National Guard Battalion elements whenever possible. This unit was still in training and not ready for employment in a direct combat role, but the command viewed its use as progress toward the Iraqi forces ultimately taking over responsibility for their nation's defense.

While Marine commanders labored over final assault preparations, the Iraqi government continued to seek a negotiated settlement with the militia leadership. Prime Minister Allawi, in power since 1 June, hoped to persuade al-Sadr through the political process rather than forcing him to submit through violence. Not all in the Iraqi government shared Allawi's confidence in negotiation. This group, which included Governor al-Zurufi, wanted to remove al-Sadr from power by any means and pressured Allawi to take the hard line. These anti-Sadr officials even pushed for disregarding the exclusion zone restrictions all together, even if it meant destroying the Imam Ali Mosque to get al-Sadr out of his stronghold.<sup>143</sup>

Consequently, the Iraqi government carried out a double-edged policy regarding al-Sadr—negotiate on one



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

*Marines of BLT 1/4 during a sweep of an an-Najaf neighborhood, clearing up pockets of resistance and providing support for armored battalions from the 5th and 7th Cavalry, U.S. Army.*

hand and prepare to destroy him on the other. The politicians ardently worked at negotiation. They had already called two cease-fires for talks on 11 and 13 August. Al-Sadr rejected them both, including a negotiation session with General Hejlik at al-Zurufi's compound on 14 August, which broke down after just a few hours. In response, the hard-line An-Najaf Provincial Council voted and demanded that al-Sadr and the militia leave Najaf. The following day, top Iraqi officials met with Lieutenant General Metz, commanding general of Multi-National Forces Central Iraq. As a result of the meeting, the national government endorsed the An-Najaf Provincial Council's 15 August vote to oust al-Sadr.<sup>144</sup>

Al-Sadr ignored the government's demand, and the fighting continued. The Army's 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, resumed their combat patrols and raids. On 17 August, BLT 1/4's Companies A and C each conducted raids in conjunction with 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, that secured several enemy prisoners and weapons caches. That same day, 16 Iraqi delegates arrived in Najaf for talks with al-Sadr in a classic application of "carrot and stick" diplomacy.

The next day, 18 August, every battalion in the 11th MEU engaged the enemy at some point. The Army task forces were heavily engaged as well. The 5th Cavalry battalion patrolled the cemetery with a Marine foot escort, and the 7th Cavalry battalion operated in the Old City just inside the Ring Road (the beltway that ringed the Old City surrounding the Imam Ali Mosque) with helicopter gunships in support.<sup>145</sup> Augmentation arrived daily for the final assault, and the 11th MEU planned a surprise for the militia fighters that night: an attack on the Kufa Technical College, a militia strongpoint and logistical site, heretofore unscathed by the Coalition.

Intelligence identified the college as the principal staging and supply point for the enemy, with perhaps 200 to 300 militiamen occupying the site. This base directly supported the militiamen in the cemetery and al-Sadr's fighters at the Imam Ali Mosque. The Marines sought to neutralize the technical college for both military and psychological reasons. The Coalition could not allow the militiamen to think they had a free base from which to operate. Meanwhile, on the west side of the Euphrates River and on the southern end sat a major bridge where





Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

*Marines of BLT 1/4 preparing to engage militiamen across the Euphrates River during a night attack on the Kufa Technical College. The college was a major staging area for al-Sadr's militia.*

Route Hartford crossed as the main road to FOB Echo at Diwanayah. Intelligence believed that the militia fighters had rigged the bridge with explosives, so the Marines neither wanted to nor needed to threaten it. They just had to ensure that the militiamen did not cross it to interfere with the attack.

The technical college's location on the western bank of the Euphrates River made it an inviting target for fire. Intelligence identified the campus as ideally located for an "attack by fire" from both air and ground firepower from across the river, with the plan to destroy the base without use of ground troops. The ground elements would deploy in peripheral areas for security and support. The "destruction raid" would commence at about 0200 hours on 19 August.<sup>146</sup> The 50-meter-wide river would provide ideal fields of fire from an undefended eastern riverbank, inflicting maximum destruction on the enemy compound at a minimum risk to Marines.

The raid party, called Task Force Blackhorse, consisted of two heavily reinforced Company B platoons, Antiarmor Team A, the LAV-25 platoon, a section of the 81mm mortars, a 60mm mortar platoon, and the battalion sniper team. The Army provided a psychological operations platoon and a tactical human-

intelligence team. Captain Lowe coordinated the air support. A platoon from Bravo Company occupied a building next to the bridge to provide overwatch security. The reconnaissance platoon established a blocking position south of the technical college, and Team A set up west of the campus to block enemy egress.<sup>147</sup>

As Marine units took their positions on the riverbank, enemy machine guns opened fire. A light armored vehicle answered. The LAV-25's cannon achieved immediate fire superiority, but the mission called for much more firepower. Company B opened up with all its light weapons and supporting machine guns on the enemy buildings and targets of opportunity. Antiarmor Team A fired tube launched optically tracked wire guided missiles (TOW) along with its .50-caliber machine guns and MK19 automatic grenade launchers. From 1,000 meters to the rear, both mortar platoons pounded the campus grounds. The sniper team, positioned on the bridge, fired straight down on militiamen moving about the campus.<sup>148</sup> Close air support also demonstrated its tactical dominance. Captain Lowe called in AC-130 runs with its 25mm Gatling gun roaring and 105mm howitzer blasting away. Cobras and Huey gunships soon arrived as well, spraying the enemy with their mini-guns. They flew





Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

*Marines of Company C, BLT 1/4, assault the outskirts of Najaf's Old City in preparation for the final push toward the Imam Ali Mosque.*

so low that the shell casings fell on the Marines like rain. One lieutenant said of the campus that “the whole place was just an impact area.”

The raid continued for about an hour. The militia attempted to fight back, but the Marine ground forces eliminated militiamen resistance as they occupied and reoccupied destroyed positions. The attack ended with a surprising silence. The final casualty count identified 73 killed militiamen and an estimated 102 wounded.<sup>149</sup> One Marine suffered a minor wound. After the attack, there were no more militia press statements boasting of the militia's high morale. The Coalition called for another cease-fire on 20 August amid speculation that al-Sadr was willing to negotiate, but nothing came of this pause.<sup>150</sup>

When word of the failed cease-fire talks reached the Marines, the 11th MEU conducted another attack by fire with the same units two nights later (21 August).<sup>151</sup> Although it had been found empty on previous raids, intelligence indicated considerable numbers of militiamen occupying the former police station in Kufa. Lieutenant Colonel Mayer ordered a sizable raid to eliminate this new militia garrison. Lieutenant Thomas' four Abrams tanks led the raid, followed by Lieutenant

Kroop's 12 P7 amphibious assault vehicles carrying two Company A platoons, and Mayer's command element. The battalion employed the “sneak and peak” tactic, with the tanks drawing out the enemy so the AC-130s and helicopter gunships could rain fire on the militiamen.<sup>152</sup> This technique proved easier in theory than in practice. Before the air support arrived, the fighting escalated intensely, especially on this occasion when the enemy used 120mm heavy mortars.<sup>153</sup>

The battle at the police station developed slowly at first but then exploded into a furious fight. The tanks moved cautiously a few hundred meters to the front of the amphibious vehicles, then halted, waiting for Company A to dismount and begin clearing the building. Suddenly, the militiamen opened fire on the tanks, seemingly from everywhere. The enemy fire came with such ferocity that tank platoon commander Lieutenant Thomas recalled that, for a short while, he actually feared his unit might be overrun.<sup>154</sup> The political realities caused by the areas of restrictions made this fear a genuine concern. With a small mosque in the vicinity, the 11th MEU ordered the tanks not to use their main guns. The tanks could only answer the militia's weapons with their machine guns. Nevertheless, the fire grew so intense that, out of pure

desperation, Gunnery Sergeant Philley ordered his tank to fire two main gun rounds into the mosque.<sup>155</sup> He clearly violated orders, but he may have saved his crew.

In the meantime, the P7s reached the police station and the Marines of Company A dismounted. They immediately engaged in a frenzied firefight as they began clearing the objective. The .50-caliber and MK19s of the amphibious assault vehicles blazed as militia fighters swarmed over the police compound. Captain Staab, the forward air controller on the mission, took full advantage of the plentiful targets and called in the AC-130 and helicopter gunships in rapid succession. The aircraft fired on the militiamen as they scurried about the open ground in the battle area. The close air support also razed several mortar and machine gun emplacements.<sup>156</sup>

The fighting ended when Company A finished clearing the Iraqi police station. Overall, the mission was a great success. Captain Sotire's Marines took the objective and killed several enemy fighters, and they took a number of prisoners as well. The 11th MEU estimated that Task Force Blackhorse killed 45 of al-Sadr's militiamen and captured 29. Battalion Landing Team 1/4 suffered only one injury when a Marine caught his arm in an amphibious vehicle ramp as it closed.<sup>157</sup> The Marines departed the site slowly, encumbered by two broken-down P7s and a disabled Abrams tank that had to be towed back to Forward Operating Base Baker.

The Army cavalry battalions continued their daily destructive patrols, aided as before by unmanned aerial-reconnaissance vehicles. The video images from these aircraft proved invaluable, as fire support used them to call in artillery and close air support.<sup>158</sup>

Not surprisingly, militia morale showed signs of cracking after the Marine successes and as the militia leadership moved closer toward negotiations. An "offensive cessation" on 20 August led commanders to note progress on al-Sadr's willingness to accept a cease-fire deal. The talks broke down over conditions for turning the mosque over to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, who negotiated with al-Sadr on the Iraqi government's behalf. Then talks broke down again.<sup>159</sup> Al-Sadr apparently did want a cease-fire, but he was still driving a hard bargain.

While al-Sadr stalled peace negotiations, the Coalition continued planning for its final assault. Augmentation neared completion as multiple units gathered and staged at various forward operating bases. There they awaited for orders to deploy. The only real delay came from indecision over which direction to begin the assault on the Imam Ali Mosque. Planners favored an attack from



Photo by Cpl Matthew S. Richards

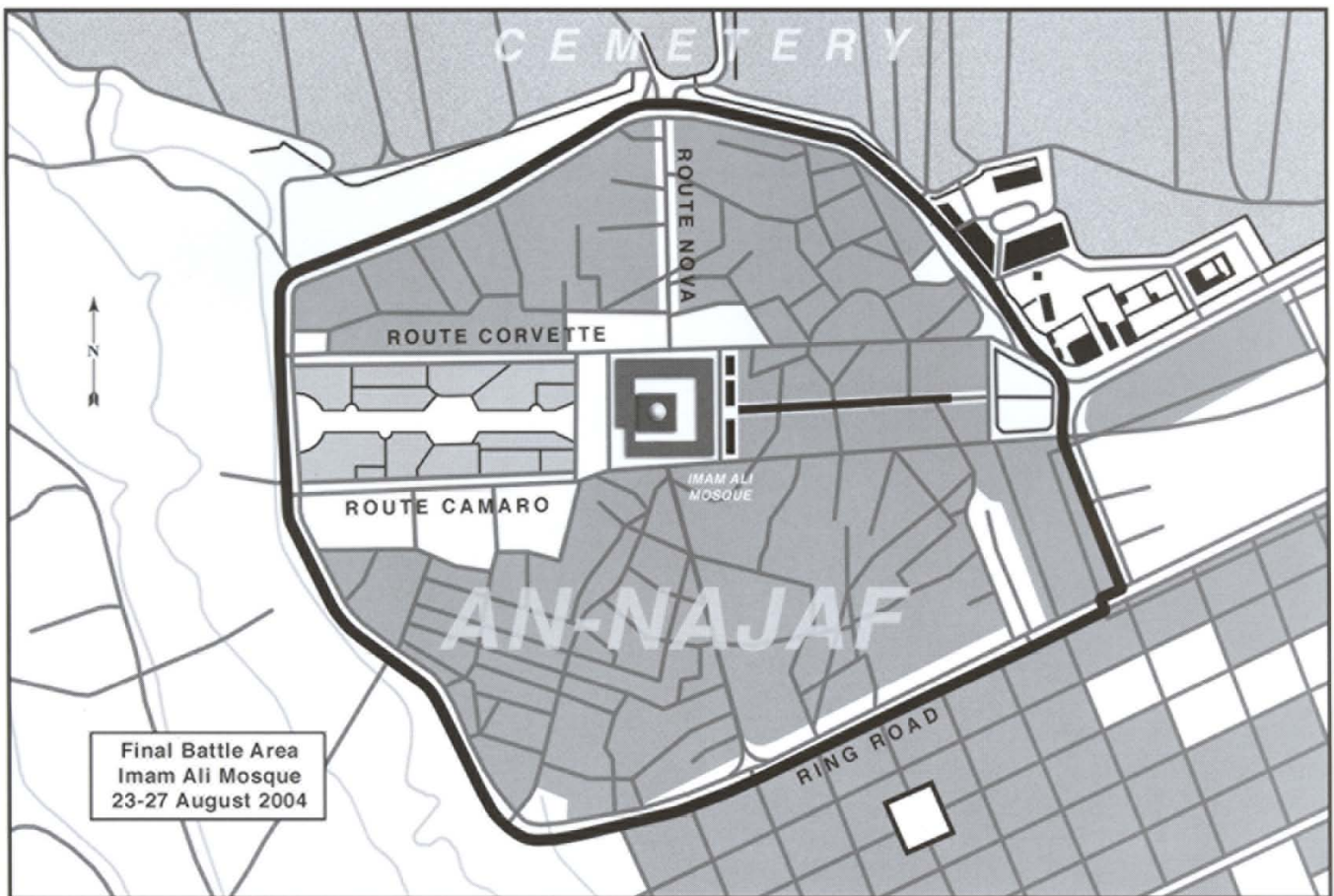
*Marines and Iraqi National Guard soldiers set up a checkpoint using a Humvee equipped with TOW guided missile and machine gun.*

the west, which would pass around a hotel parking garage complex, but they needed to reconnoiter the precise avenue of approach. Lieutenant Colonel Mayer launched a probe during the early hours of 22 August that found the attack route more difficult than previously assumed.

The probing attack consisted of 5th Cavalry tanks and began shortly after 0100. The force encountered 11 improvised explosive devices while en route to the target. The raid focused on the southwest corner of the parking garage, where the attackers quickly met enemy resistance. The engagement started as the cavalry's guns and close air support began taking on targets at about 0130. The intense resistance forced the tanks to expend half their ammo in less than 30 minutes. Major Moran described this engagement as the most violent action he had seen in the Najaf campaign to this time, including the cemetery fight.<sup>160</sup> Close air support joined the fight with the AC-130 and Cobra gunships firing their Gatling guns and Hellfire missiles, respectively. Each made several runs during the next half hour, destroying various targets. Lieutenant Colonel Mayer decided to disengage at about 0200 and had an AC-130 cover the withdrawal. The aircraft stayed on station, making more runs until 0230.<sup>161</sup>

The resistance convinced Lieutenant Colonel Mayer to change his direction for the assault to a road a few hundred meters to the north. The fierce engagement also demonstrated that no matter where the attack began, a tough fight lay ahead—and it would begin the next day. Although cease-fire talks continued concurrently with the assaults, not enough progress had been made to deter or delay the final assault. As BLT 1/4 Marines prepared, they had no delusions about the future engagement. Based on this raid and the cemetery fight earlier, they felt the worst was yet to come.<sup>162</sup>





Map by Vincent J. Martinez

### *The Final Assault*

The Marine commanders completed their planning, and the maneuver units moved into position. The 11th MEU had gathered overwhelming resources for the fierce few days of fighting that the planners and troops both anticipated might make the cemetery fight seem mild by comparison.

The leaders of the expeditionary unit had confidence that they now had more than enough resources on hand to accomplish the mission. Operations officer Lieutenant Colonel Gary Johnston labored diligently to use all of them in the battle plan, as the Marines had difficulty billeting all the units. Forward Operating Base Duke, where most of the augmentation units stayed, increasingly resembled a carnival with its overflow of tents, equipment, and people.

The units available for the final assault amounted to a formidable force. It included the 11th MEU and all its generic forces, and U.S. Army units including 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, a squadron of Apache helicopter gunships, an engineer battalion, and Special Forces advisors for the Iraqi units.

The Iraqi units included four regular battalions, the 36 Commando, and the counterterrorist team. As part of the international Coalition, the Polish GROM commando unit also offered its services.<sup>163</sup> All together, this force amounted to between 5,000 and 6,000 troops against about 2,000 of al-Sadr's militiamen. The Coalition intended to send al-Sadr a strong message. As Colonel Haslam put it, "[We wanted to] show 'em [the Mahdi] that we could come into their world."<sup>164</sup>

With all the resources available, the plan of attack intended to achieve quick victory with minimal casualties. The planning carefully considered various options of approach, and deciding on the scheme involved several days of nonstop debate and planning.<sup>165</sup> The primary objective remained the Imam Ali Mosque, and for political reasons, only Iraqi forces would undertake the actual mosque assault. In the end, planning came down to two options: a swift 250-meter attack from Ring Road north of the mosque moving south along Route Nova; or a 400-meter eastward thrust along the axis of Routes Corvette and Camaro and the a hotel parking garage complex, which included a portion of the Old City to the north. The latter option presented a route



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

*Marines setting up tactical positions on the edges of the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery prior to the final push toward the Imam Ali Mosque.*

with less dense urban terrain and an initial deployment from an open area.

At the final assault rehearsal of concept meeting, 11th MEU planners convinced Lieutenant General Conway, who favored the Nova plan, that it was the more dangerous of the two options. Not only did the route run through a denser urban area, it also led directly into the mosque. Any direct movement down Nova risked hitting the mosque—the very idea of which inspired all the fire mission restrictions. Conway conceded this point. So did Lieutenant General Metz, who remained quiet during Conway’s questioning. He and Conway soon agreed to the Corvette-Camaro plan, with a modification from Lieutenant Colonel Mayer.<sup>166</sup> Since the generals favored a more methodical attack than a thrust, Mayer created a plan that would establish a toehold in the western part of the Old City, north of Route Corvette, from which to operate until the way opened for the eastern thrust through the dangerous hotel parking garage complex. The plan, originally called “Thunder Road,” would remain as the basis, but with the Mayer “toehold” modification. Thunder Road referred to Routes Camaro and Corvette, with the Imam Ali Mosque listed as Objective A and with al-Sadr as the target.

The probing raid of 22 August had influenced Mayer as well. That night, Mayer saw that leading off an assault from Ring Road down Camaro and Corvette would produce more casualties than anyone wanted to contemplate. The modified Thunder Road provided a better option since the original lightening thrust to the mosque presented too much danger.<sup>167</sup>

The plan called for American units to surround the mosque and then send in Iraqi assault elements using small arms to mitigate damage to the mosque as much as possible. In fact, many of the Marines perceived the original Thunder Road plan as dangerous, especially the seizing of the building next to the mosque numbered 74 in operation orders graphics. They viewed this building as the heart of enemy defenses around the objective, the seizing of which might result in high casualties. Mayer’s modification relieved some of the anxiety.

The battle order identified the intersection of Route Ash and Ring Road, about 150 meters north of the Route Corvette intersection, as the point of deployment. This location offered a largely unexposed troop delivery to Ring Road. Route Ash and several ancillary roads came through a largely deserted area and up an escarpment of a long-extinct lake. This approach made the Corvette and



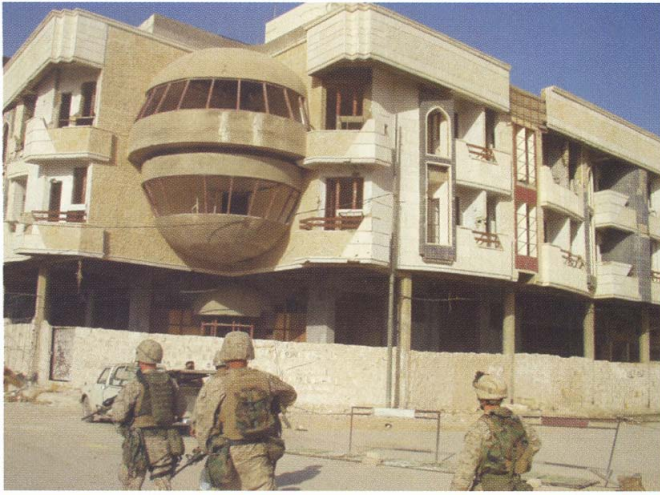


Photo by LtCol John R. Way

*Building 77 was a hotel and the site of vicious fighting during the final push toward the Imam Ali Mosque. It was during this ferocious fighting that PFC Ryan Cullenward ran into a militiaman in the basement of the hotel and engaged the militiaman in hand-to-hand combat. Ultimately, Cullenward was successful, using his KA-BAR knife.*

toehold plan even more attractive. Planners expected explosive devices and perhaps some minor opposition but arranged for the engineers and combined antiarmor teams to take care of those matters.

The Marine tanks would lead the way, followed by an engineer sweep. Companies A and C would follow in P7 amphibious assault vehicles.<sup>168</sup> At the intersection where Ash meets Ring Road, Company C would deploy south and occupy two buildings designated 60 and 77. These several-story buildings would serve as bases for the toehold and cover the movement of Company A along the northeast section of Ring Road west to building 61, which, along with another, would serve as its toehold operating base. From there, Company A would occupy a portion of the Old City necessary to make Thunder Road successful. Planners expected both companies to encounter fierce resistance during deployment to and at the objectives.

From the area of building 61, the plan tasked Company A with clearing about 400 square meters of the Old City. The unit would then merge with 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, whose mission was to clear the Old City both east and west of Route Nova, also a total of about 400 square meters. Meanwhile, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, would suppress enemy activity east and south of the mosque. After accomplishing these missions, the Americans would have the mosque surrounded and would halt further advance. At this point, the 36 Commando and the Iraqi counterterrorist team would assault and clear the mosque complex. This would end the battle—and al-Sadr's control of Najaf.

While Company A and the cavalry battalions completed their missions, the landing team's tanks would protect the insertion area. This would include the Company C toehold and the area on both sides of Ring Road between routes Camaro and Corvette as well and Ring Road east to Company A's position. Battle planners expected several buildings in the area, including 16 multi-story hotels on the way to the mosque, to cause serious problems. In fact, anticipating this resistance prompted Mayer's modification to the original Thunder Road plan.<sup>169</sup>

The air controllers and artillery forward observers expected another period of intense activity. The operation required them to destroy dozens of buildings as well as to interdict the militia reinforcements they expected to pour into militia strongholds. Intelligence reported that unmanned reconnaissance aircraft had spotted more than 150 carloads of militiamen entering the area.<sup>170</sup>

Much to the relief of Marine planners, Lieutenant General Metz assured the 11th MEU staff that restrictions, in terms of both area and time, would be minimized.<sup>171</sup> General Casey gave approval to destroy two major hotels and the parking garage located within the rows of hotels between routes Camaro and Corvette on the way to the mosque. This preauthorization would allow the attacking force to deal with major obstacles to Thunder Road more expeditiously. Planners expected supporting arms to do most of the work. However, even with the relaxed restrictions to fire support missions, during the battle it still took about 20 minutes for major fire mission approval.<sup>172</sup>

Mayer's toehold operation began at 2230 on 23 August. The Marines' movement did not surprise the militiamen, and they sporadically opposed the assault convoy with mortars and rolled 55-gallon drums of burning fuel down the escarpment beside the attack convoy road along Routes Ash and Oak.<sup>173</sup> Aside from this token resistance, the assault force rolled to Ring Road almost uninterrupted.

The Marines moving at the intersection of Route Ash and Ring Road did not enjoy such a quiet advance. Once they came within shooting range, the militiamen opened up on the Marines with a heavy volume of small-arms fire. Consequently, deployment took some time as the tanks and fighting vehicles (a 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, platoon reinforced BLT 1/4's tanks) suppressed enemy fire as best they could in the chaotic fighting.<sup>174</sup> The armored vehicles did so much firing that they ran out of ammunition in half an hour.



Photo by Cpl Annette Kyriakides

*A Marine sniper looks for enemy snipers in the Old City area of an-Najaf. Marine snipers proved to be the most effective counterforce against militia snipers.*

The assault plan called for Company C to attack and clear buildings 60 and 77, both hotels. These buildings would function as the unit's operating base and serve as an observation and fire position for the rest of the battle. From these points, observers could view the entire west side of Old City, the whole line of hotels, and the parking garage between routes Corvette and Camaro. After securing that point, other nearby objectives would follow.

As Company C approached to within 30 meters of the first building, the amphibious vehicles disembarked their Marines. Supporting fires lifted their barrages at 0100 on 24 August to allow them to execute their assault. They immediately met strong resistance as the militiamen opened up with small arms, machine guns, mortars, and rockets from adjacent buildings. First Platoon entered and cleared building 60 without incident. Second Platoon encountered more stubborn opposition at building 77. The militia's fierce volume of fire slowed their advance, and four Marines sustained wounds from enemy grenade shrapnel. As its Marines moved in closer to the enemy positions, the platoon engaged in close-quarters combat, hampered by nearly zero visibility.<sup>175</sup>

In the frenzied fighting that followed, Private First Class Ryan Cullenward rushed around a corner in the dark hotel basement and ran straight into a militiaman. The forceful collision knocked both men to the ground, and each dropped his weapon. Cullenward quickly leaped onto the militiaman and grappled with him in hand-to-hand combat, ultimately stabbing the militiaman to death with his KA-BAR fighting knife.<sup>176</sup> This altercation demonstrated an extreme in the intensity of combat required to clear the remainder of the building. The Marines killed four militiamen and sustained 10 wounded, one seriously, in the process of securing the structure.<sup>177</sup>

As 2d Platoon secured its objective, the tempo in its area decreased markedly, and the mission shifted to maintaining control of the toehold position. The unit continued to take mortar and sniper fire over the next two days and responded by setting up a handful of counter-sniper positions. Lieutenant Sellars's platoon took one light casualty when a sniper hit Lance Corporal Isaac W. Justice in the heel through a peephole in the building. On the night of 25 August, one member of the platoon shot and killed a militia rocket team member. Otherwise, the Company C Marines spent their time "looking around for something to shoot at."<sup>178</sup>



Captain Peter M. Gibbons and his forward air control team remained busy calling in air strikes throughout Company C's movement. The strikes destroyed several of the hotels, the parking garage, and finally building 74 near the Imam Ali Mosque.<sup>179</sup> Otherwise, the day dragged on in the intense heat and inactivity, punctuated by the lingering smell of the four dead militiamen decomposing nearby in the unbearable 130-degree temperature. Hardened as they were, the Marines felt compelled to have the bodies removed.<sup>180</sup>

Compared to Company C, Company A endured a nearly opposite experience in their area of responsibility. The unit did not have the same pauses between contacts, nor did they have to actively seek out militia fighters. The enemy found Captain Sotire's Alpha Raiders the moment the vehicle ramps went down, and they did not break contact with the Marines until the battle ended. In fact, the amphibious vehicles had been under fire as they rumbled to the insertion point. Third Platoon, reinforced with Weapons Platoon machine gunners, dismounted first and led the way to the objective, building 61, and their secondary objective, an adjacent school. Both were situated about 200 meters east of Company C so that they covered Company A's flank.

Although it was under small-arms, mortar, and rocket fire throughout its movement, 3d Platoon took building 61 with no trouble. First Platoon followed by attacking and clearing the schoolhouse. From these positions, both platoons sent elements eastward toward new positions that offered better observation and fields of fire. Along the way, 1st Platoon engaged a squad-sized enemy unit in a firefight that resulted in two enemy killed. A support-by-fire position was established that allowed 1st Platoon to continue east. It then maneuvered to make contact with the 5th Cavalry as it moved down Route Nova.<sup>181</sup> In the meantime, the support-by-fire position took a direct mortar hit wounding six Marines, one seriously. With the urgent casualties evacuated, the platoon succeeded in taking its last objectives. Once accomplished, Company A assumed a stationary posture like Company C had earlier.<sup>182</sup>

Both units had accomplished their night's missions, effectively securing the Old City north of Route Corvette with only a handful of "mopping up" operations for the following day. Companies A and C then waited for the Army's 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, to finish their missions controlling the north, south, and east of the Imam Ali Mosque.

While Company C quickly secured its objectives, Company A continued its hard fight against the militiamen. One might label the 25–26 August period of

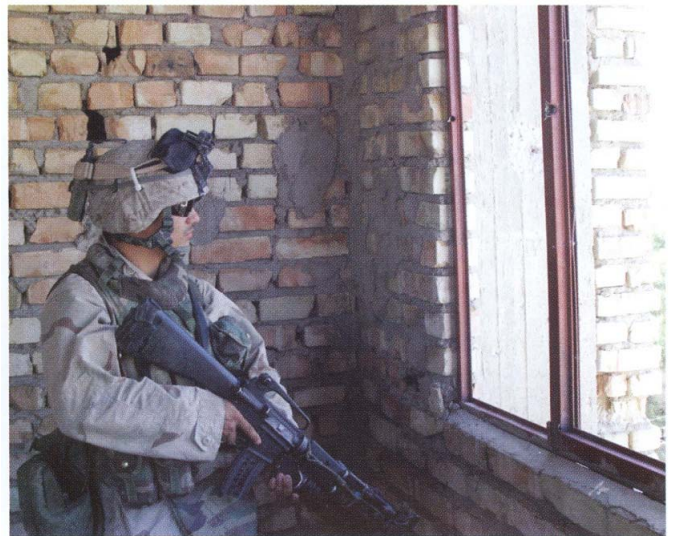


Photo by Cpl Annette Kyriakides

*LCpl Christian Bauzo of Alpha Company, BLT 1/4, scans for militiamen while standing guard in the Old City of an-Najaf.*

Company A's battle as the sniper phase. Like Company C, Company A took steady fire for the remainder of the battle, but in this period it was more intense and more accurate, perhaps due to reinforcement by better-skilled militia marksmen. Militia snipers killed two Marines—Lance Corporal Alexander S. Arrendando and Private First Class Nicholas M. Skinner. As Lieutenant Colonel Mayer said, the Marines learned the hard way that snipers needed to go after snipers. When regular riflemen engaged enemy snipers, they became targets themselves rather than shooters. The Marines also learned to keep low when inside the buildings and especially when on the roofs.<sup>183</sup> The Alpha Raiders adapted quickly, not just with counter-sniper tactics, but to the use of snipers in general. Coalition snipers tallied 60 confirmed kills in a 24-hour period.<sup>184</sup>

In one unconventional anti-sniper tactic, Captain Sotire requested tank support. The militia snipers, firing from positions on an extended overhang attached to building 61, Company A's base, continued to give the unit's own attached snipers a difficult time. Upon request, one of Lieutenant Thomas' tanks sent a 120mm round into the enemy building and brought down the entire structure, killing all the militia snipers who had nested there. Alpha's own snipers did not sustain any injuries.<sup>185</sup>

With the operations of 25 August succeeding as much as the previous day, enemy resistance began to wane significantly. Despite the militia snipers and other isolated resistance, Company A firmly secured the entire Old City in its objective area north of Route Corvette and halted to wait for the Army's 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, to tie in with Marine lines.<sup>186</sup> While they waited, the Marines still contended with sporadic engagements from fervent

enemy fighters. In one notable encounter on the 25th, Lieutenant Thomas' tankers observed militiamen running across Route Nova to attack Company A. The tanks fired special obstacle-reduction rounds to clear fields of fire and thus allowed the Marines to stop the free movement of militiamen through the area. The tactic worked perfectly, and over the next two days, the tanks prevented al-Sadr's fighters from crossing that road.<sup>187</sup>

Fighting on 25 August raged on all other fronts around the mosque. Marine tanks, supported by the platoon of the Army's Abrams and Bradleys, blasted militia targets, particularly along Ring Road between Routes Corvette and Camaro. That day and the next, they ran out of ammunition during that first half hour of battle. The Army's armor had to make frequent runs to the resupply point at the intersection of Ash and Ring Roads to restore their ammunition just as Lieutenant Thomas' Tiger platoon had done over the past day.<sup>188</sup> The 130-degree heat also necessitated the same replenishment and hydration technique used during the cemetery fight. Thomas' sections fought in two-hour shifts, with crews sometimes having two or three hydration needles in their arms. Major Moran noted that in a few cases, tank crewmen had hydration IV bags hanging in the tanks during the fighting.<sup>189</sup>

While Thomas' tanks held the militia fighters in check, the Army's 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, and 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry, wrought the same devastation on the militiamen in their sectors. With no discernable front line, the Coalition forces treated the entire area inside Ring Road as a combat zone. Coalition forces continued to attack from all directions, including from the air. By this point, the Imam Ali Mosque provided the only safe haven for the militia fighters as the Army and Marine forces slowly secured control of all the areas around the mosque. The Americans' strict fire discipline and the engagement restrictions kept the mosque absolutely off limits to any kind of fire. The troops stringently followed this order, despite militia mortar fire from the mosque grounds. As Lieutenant General Metz promised, the restricted zones had been shrunken again and again, but the mosque itself remained non-negotiable.\*

The militia was a determined foe, but the intense violence and breadth of the Coalition attack took a major toll on the militiamen's willingness to continue the fight. Al-Sadr's attitude regarding negotiations reflected this decline in his men's motivation.<sup>190</sup> Even before the final

assault, the al-Sadr camp began actively pursuing a negotiated settlement. On 25 August, the *Los Angeles Times* reported sagging militia morale in its coverage of the battle. The newspaper quoted a militia spokesman, Ali Smeisim, as saying that al-Sadr "is ready for any peaceful solution aimed at solving the problem."<sup>191</sup> The article also noted that al-Sadr's support had been declining in recent days and that militiamen had been "slipping away" after the previous night's air bombardment. Unmanned reconnaissance flights confirmed an increasing number of militia deserters away from their fighting positions.<sup>192</sup> The commanding officer of the Army's 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, Lieutenant Colonel Myles Miyamasu, made the point clearly when he stated that "I think they're tired of us beating on them."<sup>193</sup>

The Army cavalry units had also noticed reduced resistance in several areas. Even before the final assault began, intelligence reports noted that significant numbers of militiamen had been "either killed or left," although a number of dedicated fighters remained in the area. After the final assault began, the militiamen demonstrated their reluctance to fight. Lieutenant Colonel James Rainey, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry's commanding officer, observed early in the attack that "this is the first day we have not seen a lot of enemy coming at us." One tired-looking militiaman told a *Washington Post* correspondent that "we have many killed and wounded and we cannot count them because of the situation."<sup>194</sup>

Despite the militia leadership's proclaimed desire to the end the fighting, cease-fire talks had reached a standoff, and the Iraqi government continued to take a hard line. One government official said that "if [al-Sadr] continues to resist, there will be no option for him other than death or prison." The hard line combined with the assault seemed geared at "sparking a resolution."<sup>195</sup>

This approach seemed to be working, but the government wanted insurance, so it pressed even harder. After the pounding the militia fighters endured during the night of 24–25 August, Sheikh Ahmed al-Shibani, a senior al-Sadr aide, stated that the militiamen wanted to come out of the mosque right away. The Coalition, with the Iraqi government's endorsement, not only rejected the offer, but proceeded with the second day of armor and air attacks, which included a night bombing even more devastating than the previous one.<sup>196</sup> These attacks included destruction of the hotels and parking garage that served as the militia's headquarters and logistical base. By the next day, 26 August, the militia leadership recognized its predicament: accept the government's conditions or face complete annihilation.

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\* Despite the intense fighting that took place around the Imam Ali Mosque, the only damage observed on the mosque itself was a missing chip off one corner, apparently caused by a militia mortar misfire.





Photo by Cpl Matthew S. Richards

*Iraqi police and security force members secure their positions with lightweight utility trucks while 1/4 Marines conduct a raid near the Imam Ali Mosque.*

As 26 August dawned, the fighting continued, with the situation worsening for the militia resistance. Fighters continued to desert, and those who remained faced almost certain death. By 1500, the Coalition forces had surrounded the Imam Ali Mosque within 100 meters, and the Iraqi commando units stood poised to make their assault.<sup>197</sup> Militia leaders requested a cease-fire to negotiate surrender, which the Coalition commanders granted. At 1515, General Casey issued Fragmentary Order 582, which directed offensive actions in Najaf to cease.<sup>198</sup> At 0200 the next morning (27 August), the Iraqi government announced that a truce had been reached and that hostilities would officially end at 1000, 27 August 2004.<sup>199</sup>

Ultimately, immediate credit for the truce belonged to Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani, the leading Shi'a cleric in Iraq, who brokered the deal on behalf of the Iraqi government. His moderate political position on negotiated solutions to problems won him the trust of Iraq's new leaders. The militia would turn over the keys to the Imam Ali Mosque to him.

Both sides agreed to a series of straightforward conditions for the truce. The militia commanders agreed to lay down their weapons and leave the Old City, including the Imam Ali Mosque in particular. In addition, the militia would turn the entire Najaf-Kufa area over to the Iraqi government, specifically the Iraqi police and the Iraqi National Guard. The agreement called for al-Sadr to relinquish all political control and use his influence for peaceful means, supposedly forcing him to work within the political mainstream of Iraq.

### *Aftermath*

In 24 days of intermittent fighting for control of Najaf, the Marines lost seven killed in action and the Army cavalry two men. In addition, the 11th MEU suffered 94 wounded.<sup>200</sup> With nearly all of these casualties coming from BLT 1/4's approximately 800 service personnel, this represented about a 12 percent casualty rate. Coalition dead also included one American soldier (Captain Michael Tarlowski) and a significant number of Iraqi soldiers killed and wounded. These numbers paled in

comparison to militia losses. The 11th MEU estimated 1,500 of al-Sadr's fighters killed and an undetermined number wounded, most likely in the thousands.<sup>201</sup> By any standard, the Coalition forces, led by the 11th MEU, had clearly defeated the enemy tactically.

Coalition forces achieved not only a tactical victory in the battle of Najaf, but a political one as well. They removed al-Sadr and his forces from the city and eliminated the restrictions and exclusion zones created during the May truce. The battle reduced the restricted areas, which began as large sections of Najaf and Kufa, first to 1,000 meters from the mosque, then ending up only 100 meters from it.<sup>202</sup> The final restriction adjustment allowed Coalition forces to drop a 2,000-pound bomb on building 74, which may have been the breaking point that led to al-Sadr's decision to accept the government's deal. After that particularly devastating blast, Marines spotted militiamen running away through the streets and alleys of the Old City.<sup>203</sup> The Coalition victory also gave the Iraqi government the confidence it needed to follow through with the second assault on Fallujah in the months to come in order to eliminate militia control there.

The implementation of the truce appeared to progress smoothly, with the militiamen abandoning their weapons to the Coalition's satisfaction.<sup>204</sup> Several Marine officers, however, expressed skepticism about the success of the weapons collection. They said that several militiamen simply hid their weapons in nearby houses.<sup>205</sup> Lieutenant Thomas, the tank platoon leader, said that he saw militiamen hauling weapons out of the mosque area in wheelbarrows.<sup>206</sup> Subsequent Marine raids in the area validated these claims, as they discovered dozens of weapons caches.<sup>207</sup>

The battle's conclusion placed a new face on Najaf and Kufa. With the truce, the 11th MEU shifted from combat to security and stability operations, the unit's originally assigned mission. This phase of the operation moved along with remarkable efficiency. BLT 1/4 Marines altered their activities to manning traffic control points in order to search for weapons and to control traffic flow. As far as people's activities and human relations were concerned, the only physical evidence of the battle was that it was easy to tell the former militiamen on the streets. Instead of their black uniforms, they now wore street clothes as well as scowls and stares of hatred directed at the Marines.<sup>208</sup> This challenge with identity continued as the Marines found themselves immediately engaged in reconstruction projects in an attempt to win the good will of the people of Najaf, so badly affected by the battle.

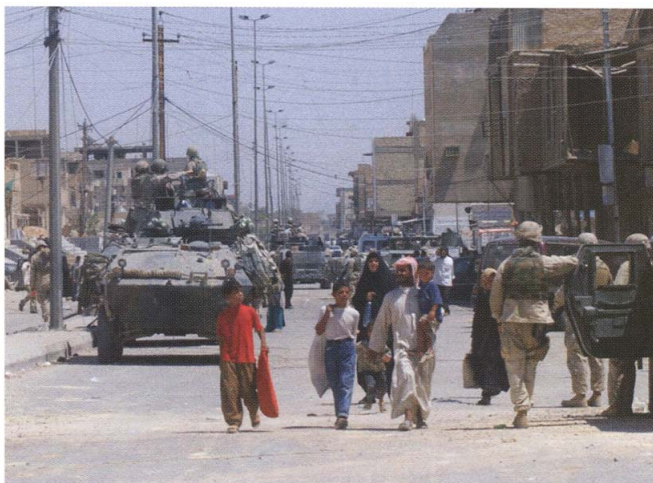


Photo by Cpl Daniel J. Fosco

*Marines with Company C, BLT 1/4, keep watch to ensure the safety of civilians in an-Najaf, Iraq.*

Almost all of the work took place in the Old City, which had suffered most of the damage. The Marines struggled initially to gain the Iraqi people's confidence after such a violent ordeal, but they acted quickly and sincerely and eventually won favor.

Colonel Haslam traveled door to door for weeks handing out compensation money to affected families. Over the next few months, the 11th MEU distributed almost \$45 million in condolence and compensation payments, as well as funding for infrastructure repair and construction projects. These included eight new schools and repairs to 24 more. The funds also reconstituted 36 police stations and checkpoints.<sup>209</sup>

The general population warmly accepted these efforts. The political situation stabilized quickly, and on 30 November 2004, an appreciative Iraqi government returned local control of Najaf to its citizens. The 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit left Iraq in February 2005 to return to its home station at Camp Pendleton, California.

Among Marines, the opinions of the way the battle of Najaf ended varied. Many were disappointed. They wondered why they could not just finish it by taking the mosque. But in time, most concluded that the negotiated deal and the restrictions on fire missions that satisfied Iraqi sensibilities were the right thing.<sup>210</sup> It legitimized the new Iraqi government at a critical time, and, in the eyes of many at the time, gave it firmer footing for it to move forward.



## Notes

1. Maj Coby M. Moran interview with LtCol John R. Way, 23 Oct 2004 (Marine Corps History Division [MCHD], Quantico, VA)—hereafter Moran interview.
2. LtCol Gary S. Johnston interview with LtCol John R. Way, 28 Dec 2004 (MCHD)—hereafter Johnston interview.
3. Moran interview.
4. The area al-Sadr controlled included the Imam Ali Mosque, considered the third most important site by Shi'a Muslims, and the adjacent 15-square-kilometer Wadi al-Salam Cemetery.
5. Johnston interview; Moran interview.
6. "Prime Minister Allawi, Interim Prime Minister," White House news release, 1 June 2004.
7. GySgt Chago Zapata, "11th MEU Battles Anti-Iraqi Forces in Najaf," 6 Aug 2004, Public Relations Report #2020048120100.
8. Col Anthony M. Haslam interview with LtCol John R. Way, 29 Dec 2004 (MCHD)—hereafter Haslam interview; Johnston interview.
9. "The Conflict in Iraq: Combat; U.S. holds Back from Attacking Rebels in Najaf," *New York Times*, 12 Aug 2004, p. 2.
10. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004; Johnston interview.
11. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 8 (Gray Research Center, Quantico, VA).
12. The burial site of Muhammad's cousin, Ali ibn Abi Talib.
13. LtCol Eugene N. Apicella interview with LtCol John R. Way, 30 Dec 2004 (MCHD)—hereafter Apicella interview.
14. Moran interview.
15. Apicella interview.
16. Cpl Matthew S. Richards, "11th MEU Arrives in Iraq," 26 Jul 2004, Public Relations Report #20200472613498—hereafter 11th MEU PA report 26 Jul 2004.
17. 1stLt Jeremy T. Sellars interview with LtCol John R. Way, 29 Dec 2004 (MCHD)—hereafter Sellars interview.
18. Apicella interview.
19. Moran interview.
20. Sellars interview.
21. Sellars interview.
22. Sellars interview; Moran interview.
23. Sellars interview.
24. Johnston interview.
25. Cpl Matthew S. Richards, "11th MEU Recon Out in Open in Iraq," 5 Oct 2004, Public Relations Report #20200410564454—hereafter 11th MEU PA report 5 Oct 2004.
26. Haslam interview.
27. LtCol Gary S. Johnston email to author, 28 Nov 2006—hereafter Johnston email 28 Nov 2006.
28. Haslam interview; Johnston interview; Johnston email 28 Nov 2006.
29. Maj Coby M. Moran email to author, 28 Nov 2006—hereafter Moran email 28 Nov 2006; 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004.
30. Johnston interview; Johnston email 28 Nov 2006.
31. 1stLt Michael J. Borneo interview with LtCol John R. Way, 23 Oct 2004 (MCHD)—hereafter Borneo interview; Maj Coby M. Moran phone conversation with author, 13 Nov 2006—hereafter Moran phone conversation 13 Nov 2006.
32. Haslam interview.
33. Johnston interview; Borneo interview; Moran phone conversation 13 Nov 2006.
34. Borneo interview.
35. Borneo interview; Moran interview.
36. Moran interview.
37. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, pp. 14–15; Borneo interview; Moran interview.
38. Borneo interview.
39. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 14.
40. Ibid.
41. Borneo interview.
42. Ibid.; Moran interview; BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 14.
43. Borneo interview; Moran interview.
44. Johnston interview; Johnston email 28 Nov 2006; BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 15.

45. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, pp. 11–14.
46. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 11; Consolidated Combat Action Ribbon List with Summary of Actions—hereafter BLT 1/4 CAR summary.
47. Borneo interview.
48. Moran interview.
49. Haslam interview; Moran interview.
50. Cpl James T. Jenkins and Cpl Calvert C. Wallace interview with LtCol John R. Way, 31 Dec 2004 (MCHD)—hereafter Jenkins and Wallace interview.
51. 11th MEU PA report 6 Aug 2004.
52. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 14.
53. 1stLt Russell L. Thomas interview by Frank Kozlowski, 24–26 Oct 2004 (MCHD)—hereafter Thomas interview; Sellars interview.
54. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 41.
55. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 15.
56. Ibid.
57. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, Weapons Platoon After Action Report—hereafter Mortar AAR.
58. Haslam interview; Borneo interview; Mortar AAR.
59. Moran interview.
60. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 16.
61. Borneo interview; BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 16.
62. Moran interview; Borneo interview; Thomas interview.
63. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 16.
64. Maj Glen G. Butler interview by LtCol John R. Way, 15 Jun 2005 (MCHD)—hereafter Butler interview.
65. BLT 1/4 CAR summary, p. 4.
66. Butler interview; HMM–166 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 24.
67. LtCol John L. Mayer interview by LtCol John R. Way, 20 Oct 2004 (MCHD)—hereafter Mayer interview; BLT 1/4, CAR summary, p. 21.
68. Mayer interview; BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, S–2 Section.
69. Moran interview.
70. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 16.
71. Ibid.
72. BLT 1/4 CAR summary, pp. 8, 20.
73. Sellars interview.
74. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, pp. 16, 17.
75. Ibid., p. 18.
76. Moran interview; Mayer interview.
77. Haslam interview; Mayer interview; Johnston interview.
78. Haslam interview; Johnston interview; Moran interview.
79. Moran interview.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.; Maj Coby M. Moran phone conversation with author, 30 Jan 2007—hereafter Moran 30 Jan 2007.
82. Jenkins and Wallace interview; BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 12.
83. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 19; Borneo interview.
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**Back Cover:** *The logotype reproduced on the back cover has as its major element the oldest military insignia in continuous use in the United States. It first appeared, as shown here, on Marine Corps buttons adopted in 1804. With the stars changed to five points, the device has continued on Marine Corps buttons to the present day.*



### *About the Author and Acknowledgments*

Francis X. "Frank" Kozlowski served as an enlisted machine gunner and engineer officer between 1969 and 1972. He earned his doctorate in history from the State University of New York at Binghamton in 1990.

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*Marines from Alpha Company, BLT 1/4, 11th  
MEU, on patrol looking for militiamen in the Old  
City of an-Najaf, Iraq.*

Cpl Annette Kyriakides



