

With the 1st Marine Division in Iraq, 2003 No Greater Friend, No Worse Enemy



Cover: In early April 2003, Marines of Company C, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, move to secure the area following a firefight south of Baghdad.

(Photo No. 030409-M-4419R-023 Sgt Kevin R. Reed)

With the 1st Marine Division in Iraq, 2003

No Greater Friend, No Worse Enemy



by Lieutenant Colonel Michael S. Groen
and Contributors

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Foreword

The narrative that follows was compiled and submitted as part of the 1st Marine Division's command chronology for 2003. It is reproduced without further editing or revision.

With the 1st Marine Division in Iraq, 2003, is a unit history written by the participants in the same vein as its predecessors—*The Old Breed*—written at the end of World War II and—*The New Breed*—authored during Korea. It is a narrative describing the actions of Marines in combat during the liberation of Iraq. Portions of the story have been told by embedded journalists—but this full account is told by those who made it happen.

The 1st Marine Division, in concert with the U.S. Army's 3d Infantry Division, captured Baghdad and toppled Saddam Hussein's dictatorship. The division's 28-day "march up" from Kuwait to Baghdad, a distance of 250 road miles, was a remarkable achievement. It represented a validation of the Corps' maneuver warfare strategy, particularly the seamless integration of air into the ground scheme of maneuver and the Marine logistics command's innovative support.

"Blue Diamond," the 1st Division's Operation Iraqi Freedom *nom de guerre*, consisted of some 20,000 Marines and sailors and 8,000 vehicles organized into three regimental combat teams. Designed to be light and self-sufficient, the regiments "conducted the longest sequence of coordinated overland attacks in the history of the Corps," according to Lieutenant General Wallace C. Gregson, then commander of Marine Forces Pacific. The authors of this account were somewhat more colloquial, preferring to state that it "focuses on the collective action of Marines who served as part of the 'Blue Diamond.' It is not a story of each of them, but the story of all of them." Their story is an authentic documentation of the feel, concerns, triumphs and tragedy of the campaign in Iraq.



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Colonel,
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Preface

In the final analysis, Saddam's regime and its threat could not be defeated except by fighting it. Yet, in the history of war, the two U.S. divisions that carried the brunt of the fighting, the 3d Infantry Division and the 1st Marine Division are not impressive in numbers. History has seen much larger forces. But on the shoulders was placed the burden of liberating the Iraqi people, and planting the seeds of freedom in the Middle East. In the chaos, confusion, and uncertainty of an ever-shifting and always dangerous battlefield, the young men and women who faced this enemy distinguished themselves for their presence of mind, their steadfast commitment to each other, and their willingness to pay the price for our freedom and the freedom of the Iraqi people, a people they barely knew.

The events chronicled here capture the story of the Marines of the "Blue Diamond" as they prepared for war, conquered an army, and liberated a nation. From across America and beyond, they chose the demanding path, to become Marines. These Marines marched in the ranks of this national treasure that we call the 1st Marine Division. And, at a time when timid souls or cynical pundits grew loudest, these men shouldered their weapons and moved without hesitation against the enemy. Our victory was not inevitable. It was the courage, unselfishness, and skill of the young men of Blue Diamond to whom we owe our victory.

Unit histories such as this cannot capture what we will remember of those men we lost. The young smiling faces of these men will carry more inside us than our words can ever convey. For young as they were, they proved themselves to be the very best of warriors. We record history so that others may share our story. We record history so that others may learn from it. We record history to remind us of what happened on these battlefields when we grow old. Most of all, we record history as a monument to our men and their families' sacrifice. We will always remember those we lost. Someday we will smile and laugh when we recall them amongst us, of how we were happy besides them, or even exasperated with them, but how we trusted them always with our dreams and with our very lives.

And as we look today at the men and women of the 1st Marine Division, we can take heart at what we see. The courage to defend our country is still there. That awesome determination to defend our freedoms will never die. In Iraq, those who followed in the footprints of the heroes of Guadalcanal, Inchon, Hue City, and Desert Storm proved themselves worthy to be counted among their number.

No mere narrative can fully capture the efforts, risks, and sacrifices of the men and women of the 1st Marine Division during Operation Iraqi Freedom. No words can capture the tears of family members as they sent their loved-ones off, perhaps for the last time. Nothing we can say will bring back our beloved comrades that made the ultimate sacrifice on the battlefield. Yet, "unsung the noblest deeds die." This is the story of the noble deeds of a special group of Marines who chose to serve their nation in the cause of freedom in a distant place.

Missing from this narrative are many of the individual stories of heroism that were a daily part of this operation. The accounts of squads, platoons, and companies would fill volumes, and cannot be included here. This narrative focuses on the collective action of these Marines who served as part of the "Blue Diamond." It is not a story of each of them, but the story of all of them. *Semper Fidelis*.

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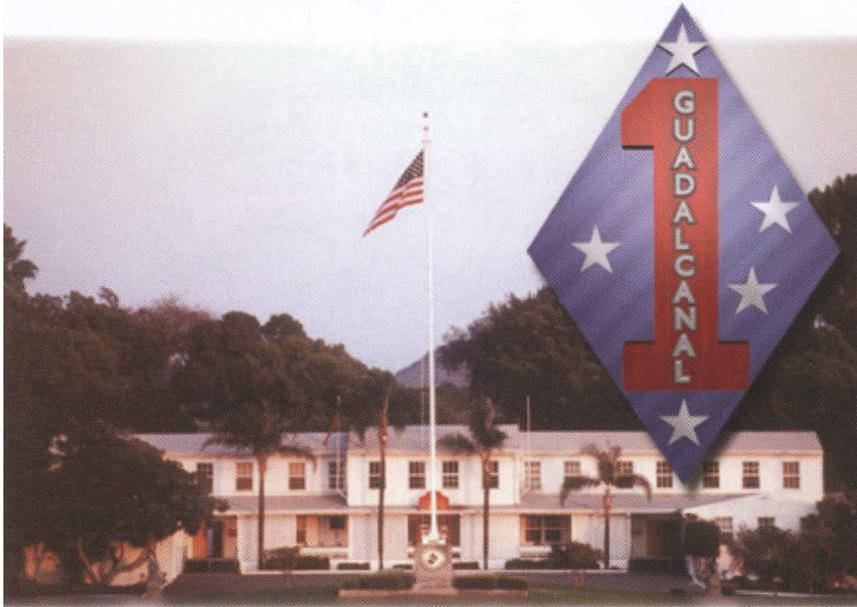
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“I want you to get yourself spiritually ready for this fight, and to seek forgiveness for what we are about to do to the Iraqi Army.”

Chapter 1

Planning and Preparation



The 'White House' at Camp Pendleton, California; Headquarters for the 1st Marine Division. The Division's logo, the 'Blue Diamond' recalls the Division's first campaign in Guadalcanal and its time spent in Australia during World War II.

Gathering of Commanders

On the quiet afternoon of 2 August 2002, the commanders, sergeants major, and staff principals of the 1st Marine Division gathered in a conference room on-board Camp Pendleton, California. That very morning they had seen the Division's change of command, and this gathering was to be the first opportunity for the new Commanding General (CG) to give his intent. It became immediately obvious he had gathered them for a single purpose; to provide a warning order for the invasion of Iraq. The Division had prepared for combat operations on the Arabian Peninsula for years, and some of these Marines were veterans of Desert Storm. They had planned hundreds of deployments and exercises using an Iraq scenario before, but it was clear that this session was different. During this meeting, the CG laid out a vision of the coming war. By this late date, it appeared that only an unexpected diplomatic cave-in by Saddam could prevent war, and sharing a common vision for the fight ahead was crucial. The leaders gathered here would oversee the preparation, training, deployment, and combat victory of the 1st Marine Division over the Nation's foes in Iraq. The commanders gathered this afternoon were sternly reminded of their responsibility for the destruction of the Iraqi Army should the President call, and were challenged to prepare their Marines to live up to the Corp's high standards in combat. They had no doubt that they would leave a proud legacy for those who came after them.



Iraq 2003 with Governate boundaries depicted. The Division's operations were to extend from the ports of Kuwait all the way to Baiji in northern Iraq.

'Blue Diamond' (the collective call-sign for the 1st Marine Division, adopted from the Division logo) had been sharpening its blade in preparation for combat operations in Iraq for some time, and the Marines shared the CG's vision. The vision of this fight was one of speed and lethality, accompanied by the highest moral principles. The Division would wreak havoc on those who opposed it, yet extend a helping hand to those liberated by its actions. The motto, 'No Better Friend, No Worse Enemy' captured the essence of how 1st Marine Division would defeat the Iraqi Regime and liberate its people. Blue Diamond would fight with unprecedented lethality, guided by a strong moral compass and relying on the core values inherent in every Marine. Marines would be ruthless with the enemy, yet retain their humanity. In combat, the Division would fight with an entire faith; each with a faith in himself, and all with a faith in each other. The commanders understood the value of ideals, and would blend the psychology and tactics of war into a single whole. If Napoleon was correct, and the 'moral was to the physical as three is to one,' then the 1st Marine Division would overwhelm their foes with aggressiveness, endurance, and moral courage.

Tactically, the Division would fight lean. This meant eliminating unnecessary logistical drains. All members of the Division would live frugally and with the same quality of life standard as an infantry Lance Corporal. The Division deployed with fuel test kits and funnels to enable them to utilize captured enemy fuel supplies. The Marines would not run vehicles when stationary in order to conserve fuel, and would install special 'gypsy racks' that enabled their vehicles to carry additional fuel and water. Hanging *Flexcells* (fuel bladders) on M1A1 tanks and *FAST* fuel storage devices on Amphibious Assault Vehicles (AAVs) provided commanders with even greater range and decreased reliance on combat trains. These measures and more would extend the Division's logistics culminating point closer and closer to Baghdad.

The Division would fight swiftly towards its ultimate objectives, taking calculated risks along its flanks and rear to strike at the heart of the enemy. Some of these risks would receive criticism to be sure, but the Blue Diamond vision



All Marines of the Division were going to have the same living conditions as a basic rifleman. Pictured here are Marines manning fighting positions during the operational pause along Highway 1.



To extend the Division's logistical culminating point, vehicles were fitted with external fuel reserves, such as these FLEXCELL fuel bladders on an M1A1.

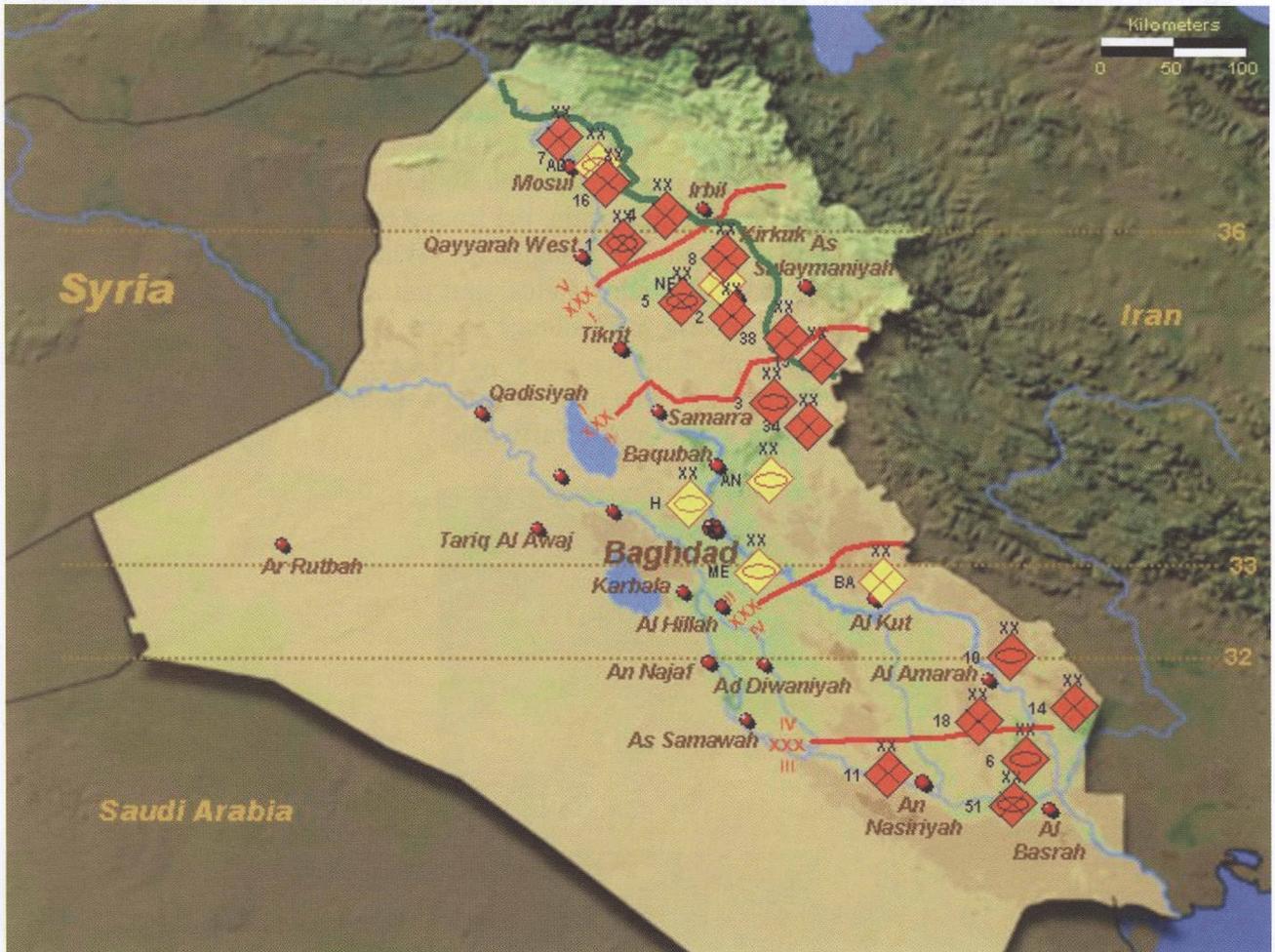
saw beyond the risks of individual tactical engagements to the lives of those saved by a rapid end to the conflict. The commanders pictured a map, with thin blue lines representing maneuver forces, moving in a continuous and relentless attack toward Baghdad, bypassing major urban areas and the enemy's prepared defenses. The commanders pictured support forces, tethered to their supported commands, capable of fighting their way up through bypassed enemy units to deliver supplies. The vision included boundaries that would rapidly snap up as follow-on forces relieved 1st Marine Division of battlespace. This would have the dual impact of keeping Lines of Communication (LOCs) open and sustaining massed combat power at the point of impact. Speed was to be the order of the day; speed of information flow, speed of decision making, and speed of maneuver.

As part of the vision, the Division planned to be the most 'air-centric division in history', crushing the Iraqi indirect fire capability with air power, preserving artillery ammunition for the fights it could not win by air alone. The Division would be well trained and confident in its abilities to operate in a Nuclear, Biological, Chemical (NBC) environment, able to continue the attack under the worst of scenarios. The Division would have integrated logistics capabilities, anticipating demands and maneuvering logistics to the right place and time. Perhaps most importantly, the vision included a Division that had a well-understood commander's intent, from the Commanding General to the youngest Sailors and Marines. This intent would allow the Division to continue the attack in an extended command and control environment under the most arduous of circumstances. The CG's guidance went out to every Marine in the Division, "I want you to get yourself spiritually ready for this fight, and to seek forgiveness for what we are about to do to the Iraqi Army."

Orienting on the Enemy: The Iraqi Battlespace

By the CG's design, operations would be based on sound intelligence. During this early planning stage, the Division G-2, under Colonel Jim Howcroft, provided a detailed understanding of the enemy that enabled the Division to focus its combat power to devastating effect on the vulnerabilities of the Iraqi Army. The Division's intelligence team led the effort to provide a sound basis for planning, allowing the enemy (through the lens of intelligence) to drive the Division's operations. This theme would ring true to the completion of combat operations, as the CG and Commanders refused to become wedded to a single plan, retaining a flexibility that would ensure their success as conditions changed. The Division was unwilling to prioritize the synchronization of operations, preferring a looser construct that used commander's intent to take advantage of opportunities that could be exploited through rapidity of action.

A significant planning consideration was the large size of the Iraqi Army itself. The initial planning efforts called for the 1st Marine Division to attack through the historic Mesopotamian plain of southeastern Iraq, including the strategic city of Al Kut. The Iraqis defended this zone with six divisions of the Iraqi Regular Army and the Baghdad Infantry Division of the Republican Guard. In addition to these conventional forces, the Iraqi Regime could call upon a significant number of Baath party militia, paramilitary troops from the Saddam Fedeyeen (a Regime-loyal group known for its suicide tactics) and Iraqi Special Forces units. Before combat operations were complete, the 1st Marine Division would defeat or bypass elements of nine Iraqi divisions, and would destroy thousands of these paramilitary fighters.

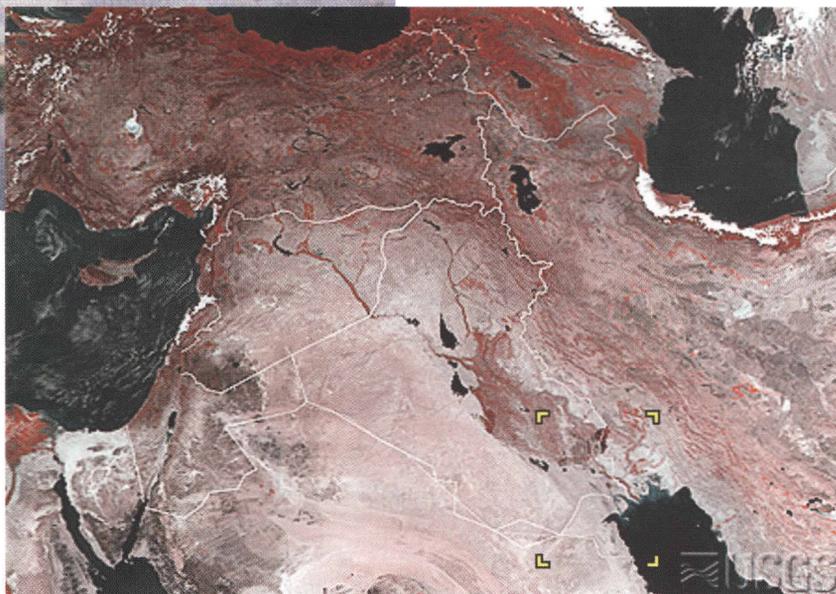
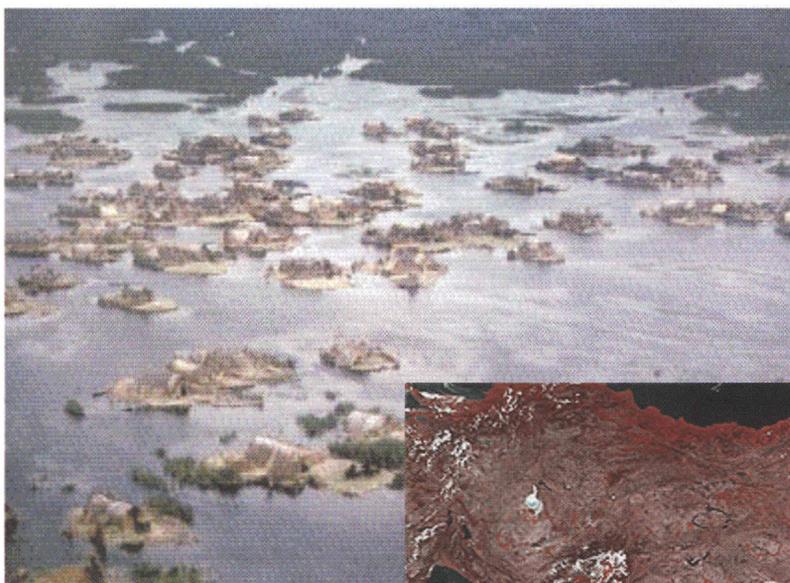


General disposition of Iraqi forces, Fall 2002. The Regular Army (Red) was planned to absorb many of the initial blows of the Coalition assault, while the Republican Guard Divisions (Yellow) were arrayed to protect the Regime in Baghdad and the surrounding urban centers.

Even though only a third the size of the Iraqi Army during the first Gulf War, this force posed a significant conventional combined arms challenge. The Iraqi Army during the first Gulf War fought poorly, but had been defending ground seized by an unjust aggression. This time, the Iraqi Army would be fighting in defense of their homeland. Perhaps even more threatening, the 1st Marine Division would be attacking to remove potential Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). It was considered likely that the Regime would use these weapons at some point as Division forces advanced into Iraq. Given the Regime's previous use of these weapons against Iranians and Kurds, the Division was not willing to 'wish away' this capability.

A second major planning factor for the Division's operations was the terrain in southern Iraq. Although the first 50 km of Iraqi territory was the same desert terrain the Division had encountered in the first Gulf War, the marshes of the Fertile Crescent lay just to the north. This

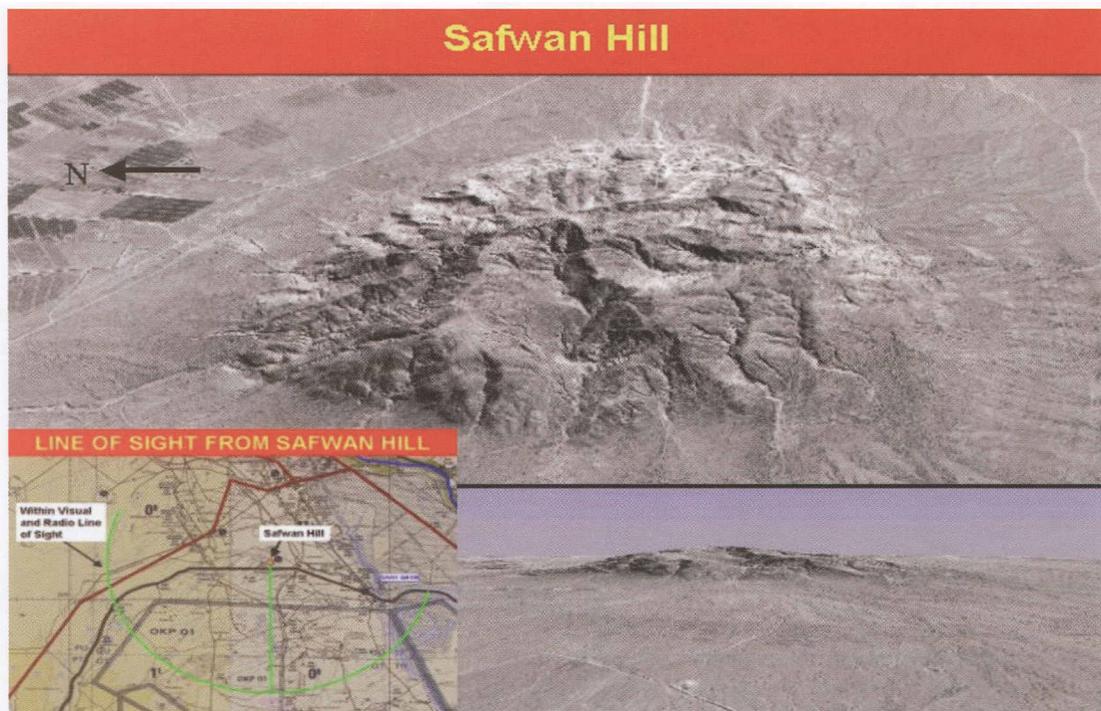
terrain had repeatedly stymied British forces attacking north during World War I, and left a British Division stranded in Al Kut (where it was eventually besieged and captured by Turkish forces.) Well-thumbed copies of *The Siege* by Jonathon Braddon (which chronicled the British disaster) were passed around the staff, providing a solid appreciation for the effects of terrain and weather on the British Expeditionary Force. The area between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers had once been a vast reed marshland, and the home of the Shiite ‘Marsh Arabs’. Because of the insurgent threat posed by these people and the terrain, the Iraqi Regime had conducted a massive engineering effort during the 1980s to drain the marshlands. What had been marsh before was now a dense network of drainage canals, muddy fields, and untrafficable terrain. Planning to fight in this terrain would quickly become a challenge to the Division, as the day after the Combined Forces Land Component Commander’s (CFLCC) staff assigned I Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) its battlespace, they also released a mobility study describing almost the entirety of the 1st Marine Division’s zone as ‘untrafficable.’



By draining the marshes of Mesopotamia, Saddam's engineers had transformed Marshland to Wasteland throughout Southern Iraq. The Division would be limited to movement along major roads in it's zone.

This difficult terrain posed a significant challenge to off-road maneuver, and served to canalize the Division's attack to the north. The identification of alternative cross-country mobility corridors became a major intelligence challenge. Little was known about trafficability over the vast swaths of former marshland, and even less about the load-bearing capacities of the few roads and bridges through this terrain. In any serious defensive effort, the Iraqis would certainly take maximum advantage of this terrain; destroying bridges, mining culverts, and using inundation warfare to delay the Division advance. During planning, this fight was often characterized as the 'war of the bridges', and nearly every stage of the Division's plan was tied to a water obstacle in some way.

The most pronounced feature in southern Iraq was *Jabal Sanam*, also known as 'Safwan Hill,' or 'Hill 451' for its map designation. The dominating heights of this hill, only 3 km north of the Kuwaiti border, provided near continuous line of sight well into northern Kuwait. It was known to hide several Iraqi observation posts and a signals intelligence gathering facility. This particular terrain feature was also to dominate a great deal of the Division staff's attention later, when faced with the almost impossible task of pre-staging large scale ground forces in Kuwait without giving clear signals of the Division's tactical intent to the enemy.



Jabal Sanam or 'Safwan Hill' was the dominant terrain feature in Southern Iraq, giving the Iraqis a line of sight that extended 30 Kilometers into Kuwait. The Division placed heavy emphasis on the destruction of the Iraqi forces occupying these heights.