

and no Regime figures left in Baghdad to protect, the Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard troops had no reason to stay and fight. There was nobody left with enough authority to actually surrender. Centralized control had broken down, and all the pieces remaining were acting in self-interest in a bid for their own survival.



Murals of Saddam were defaced by Iraqis across the city.

and making them ready for use. The rapidity of the American attack surely caught them by surprise, and did not allow them the time needed to reassemble the various agents and delivery systems into a tactical capability.

Iraqi conventional military forces received the greatest attention from the US shaping fires, and a great deal of their capability was decimated before they were able to use it. Knowing the survival rate of their equipment in a match-up with US Marines, few Iraqi soldiers were willing to go into battle at the controls of a tank or armored vehicle. The ease with which a 'soldier' could become a 'civilian' (by changing clothes and walking away) left very few with the discipline or commitment to face the alternative of certain death. The conventional military structure, gutted and misused by Saddam Hussein, was no longer a fighting force that could present a credible defense against a first order military.

The Fedeyeen and religiously motivated fighters were also greatly diminished by this time. To many of the *jihadis*, the concept of death at the hands of the Americans seemed less attractive when their human wave attacks against American firepower were mowed down mercilessly. Those that remained were of the same ilk as the anti-western terrorists that existed elsewhere. While cunning, neither their courage nor individual soldiering skills were sufficient to make them worthwhile enemies. Their lack of respect for laws of war and chivalry called into question their very manhood, as evidenced by the Fedeyeen's frequent use of women and children as human shields, and the murder of helpless non-combatants. For all the protestations of the 'thousands willing to die for Saddam', most chose a path of lesser resistance when actually given the choice.

The Division also expected to be targeted by chemical munitions at some point in the campaign, but the Iraqis had likely destroyed their last stockpiles to hide them from weapons inspectors. There was a good chance that those decision makers who could have executed the use of chemical munitions had either been killed, had gone 'underground', or had fled by this time. This would have aggravated the difficulty the Iraqis would have had in retrieving chemical weapons

At the base of the pyramid, the very Iraqi character seemed to work against a 'defense to the last' that some other cultures might adopt. At the crossroads of civilization, the Iraqis were dealmakers by heritage and culture, under the domination of a despotic regime. When the feared former Regime no longer offered the best deal, the Iraqis were happy to shift their position. Saddam had promised the Americans wouldn't come. Saddam had promised that if the Americans did come, they would be turned back with missiles. Saddam had promised that the Americans would not fight on the ground, and would be turned back by the strength of Arab manhood. Saddam had promised that the international community would somehow intervene. Promises had run out, hope was gone, and it was time to concede the end of the Saddam Hussein Regime.

Planning for the Kirkuk Operation...or Another

Planning for the Kirkuk operation continued apace. By the morning of the 11 April, less than 24 hours after receipt of the warning order, the Division had assembled a comprehensive plan to attack an additional 200 km into whatever remnants of another four enemy divisions that still existed. Brigadier General Kelly would command 'Task Force Tripoli' in the accomplishment of this mission. With the Division Main CP firmly established in eastern Baghdad, the Division Forward CP was reconfigured to the role of Task Force Tripoli headquarters, providing the command and control for General Kelly's mission. The force would be brigade-sized, largely LAR-based, with the addition of a company of truck mobile infantry and an artillery battalion. Logistics support would roll with the convoy to Kirkuk, but the seizure of temporary airstrips for both rotary wing aviation and KC-130 task force re-supply would be the linchpin of a successful effort. The G-2 had identified five airfields to choose from that offered intermediate re-supply points between Baghdad and Kirkuk. The routes had been identified, Kurdish linguist support had been arranged, and a helicopter had been dispatched all the way from Kuwait with the required maps. The critical infrastructure in the Kirkuk oilfields had been identified and objective folders had been built. The analysis of the enemy's disposition and willingness to fight was complete, and the recommendations for the scheme of maneuver developed. The LAR Battalions had conducted their physical preparation, and would be ready to roll in 24 hours. It appeared that all systems were go, so no one was surprised when the call came to change the mission.

As higher headquarters continued to adapt to the rapidly changing situation on the ground, the Division took mission changes in stride. In this case, the oilfields had fallen into friendly hands. The Kurds had been pounding on the door of the Kirkuk oilfields for years, and now the crumbling Iraqi Regime had weakened to the point that Kurdish forces, with US Special Forces advisors, were able to seize key nodes in the strategic oilfields. The Division had reacted quickly, but had been given the task about 48 hours too late to be needed. With Kirkuk in friendly hands, there was no longer a requirement for the Division to send a force there. But there was another mission.

The last Regime holdout and possible safe haven left in Iraq was the city of Tikrit, Saddam Hussein's hometown. On the afternoon of 11 April, the Division was ordered to attack to Tikrit instead of Kirkuk. Tikrit lies 200 km to the west of Kirkuk. Much of the mission planning for the Kirkuk mission remained unchanged, but the intelligence and evaluation of tactical

objectives would have to be redone. The timeline for the mission, however, was to remain the same. The Division had less than 12 hours to assemble the plan, and would be expected to LD no later than 12 April. Having proven its ability to produce a mission plan for an attack of this magnitude in 24 hours, the Division proved its ability to do it again in only 12 hours. The entire process that had been completed in support of the Kirkuk mission was repeated for Tikrit, only in less time. The changed battlespace and enemy situation demanded a renewed analysis. The G-2 went to work immediately, and was still assembling target lists when the task force rolled up to the gates of Tikrit less than 48 hours later. Task Force Tripoli was born in the saddle, and would soon be riding to its first objectives.



The sun sets on another challenging day in Iraq.

Chapter 7

Task Force Tripoli

With Baghdad increasingly secure from conventional threats, the Coalition had gained all of its military objectives in southern Iraq. On 10 April, CFLCC tasked the MEF to send a task force to secure the Kirkuk oilfields, 200 km to the north of Baghdad. The mission was passed to 1st Marine Division, who formed an LAR-based task force under the Assistant Division Commander, Brigadier General John Kelly. Task Force Tripoli was formed and completed planning for an attack to the northern Kirkuk Oilfields. The following day, however, Kurdish forces, aided by US Special Forces and the US 173^d Airborne Brigade, broke through the Iraqi defenses in the north and captured Kirkuk. With the Kirkuk oilfields in allied hands, the Coalition's attention turned to the last remaining holdout for Saddam Hussein's Regime, the northern city of Tikrit. CFLCC again turned to the 1st Marine Division to accomplish the task of taking this important objective. For the Division, the mission and timing for an attack north remained the same, but the objective became Tikrit instead of Kirkuk. With a requirement to move out later that same day, Task Force Tripoli completed its preparations without delay.

Task Force Tripoli took its name from the Marines' 1805 exploits against the pirates of the Mediterranean Barbary coast, which also included a long approach march through the desert against its objectives. Now, a set of modern-day pirates in northern Iraq required similar rough handling. In fact, Task Force Tripoli would be operating much closer to the Mediterranean Sea than the Arabian Gulf for most of its mission. As they set out on this long distance mission, the Marines of Task Force Tripoli intended to create the makings of another verse to the revered Marine Corps hymn. Now set in modern times, this operation would further demonstrate the reach of America's Marines operating from the sea.

Tikrit was Saddam's hometown, under the control of his Tikrit tribesmen and allies. During Saddam's rise to power, it had been a wellspring of support. With less than 12 hours notice, Blue Diamond redirected its Task Force Tripoli to seizing this last Regime stronghold, removing it as a possible place of refuge for Regime leadership, and eliminating it as a source of instability. The Task Force commander gave his planning guidance to the Task Force Tripoli Operations Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Robert Sinclair, the Intelligence Officer, Lieutenant Colonel Mike Groen, and the Fire Support Coordinator, Lieutenant Colonel Gary Smythe (USA). In less than 12 hours, the staff had developed a mission, routes, scheme of maneuver, and tactical objectives in the Tikrit area. By the evening of 11 April, Task Force Tripoli was prepared to launch its attack. The lead elements of the Task Force, including the Division Forward CP, began the march to the Tactical Assembly Area north of Baghdad. As the sun descended on the evening of 11 April, the Marines of Task Force Tripoli experienced an auspicious beginning to their mission. Passing north through the crowded streets of mostly Shia eastern Baghdad, the column was heralded with waves, shouts, smiles, and kisses from the newly liberated Iraqi people. The people lined the streets and continued to wave until it was too dark to see. The Task Force hoped to encounter a similar sentiment in the mostly Sunni citizens of the Tikrit region.

The Iraqis Prepare the Tikrit Redoubt

Unlike the Shia in the south, the people of Tikrit had benefited greatly during the days of the Regime. The Dictator's hometown had received more than its share of benefits, and the arrival of US forces implied the 'grave train' was over. There was a great deal of uncertainty about the reception the Marines would get from the civilians who had benefited most from Saddam's Regime.

The Tikrit area had also been assessed as a probable location for the last stand of Regime forces. Even though the central governance of Iraq was located in Baghdad, a large portion of the citizens of the Baghdad area were Shia Muslims, and there was a constant threat of insurrection from the masses. If the Regime's control of Iraq began to slip, it was expected that Saddam Hussein, other key leaders, and the Special Republican Guard would seek to escape the threat from the mob. They would likely establish a final redoubt in Tikrit, surrounded by members of Saddam's own tribe and its allies. Here, it was thought, Regime figures could 'go to ground', and would be protected by the people.

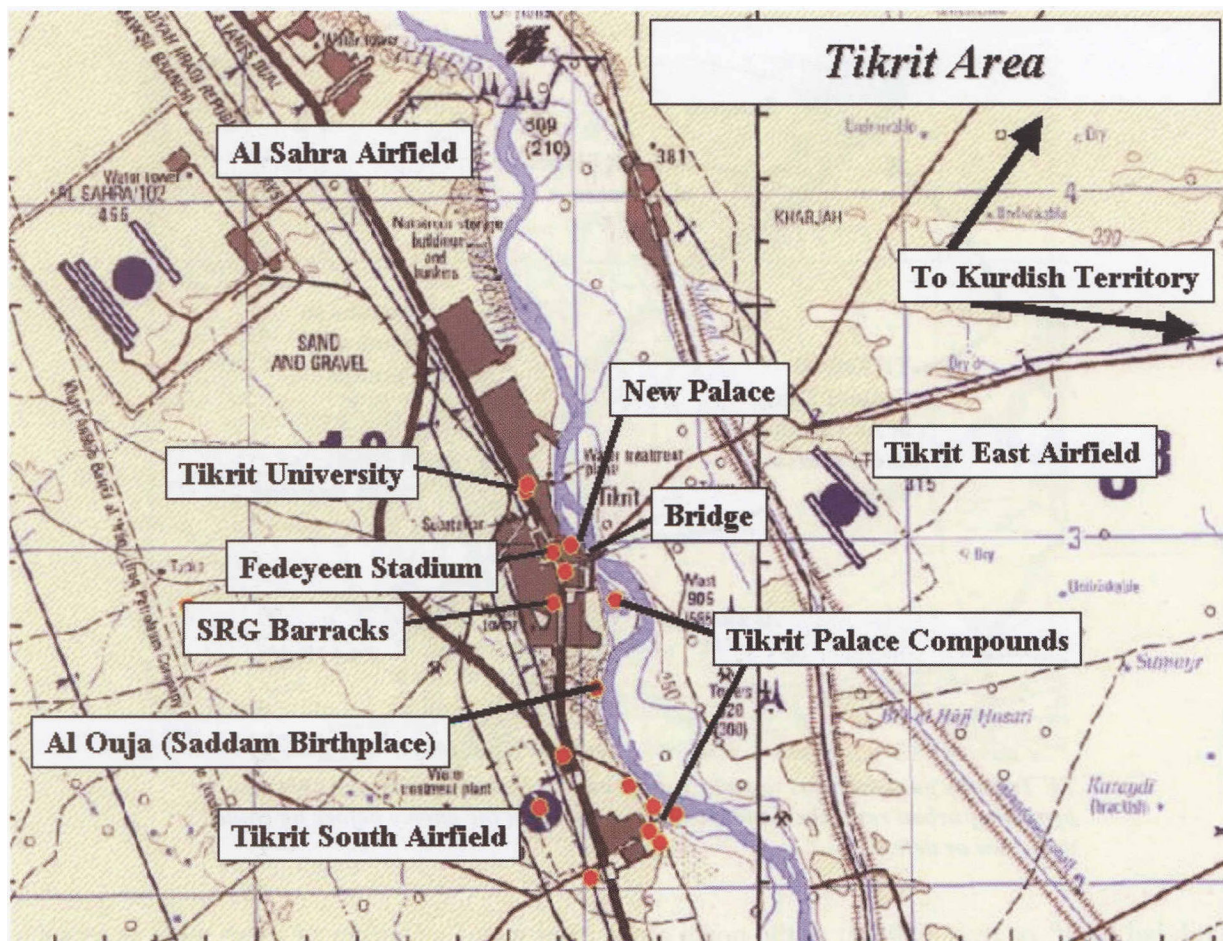


Tikrit was the final attack 1st Marine Division conducted during Phase III offensive operations. It was also the hometown of Saddam Hussein.

One brigade of the Special Republican Guard (SRG) was routinely garrisoned in the city of Tikrit. By 12 April, this Brigade had been reinforced with a number of remnants from the Republican Guard, Fedeyeen, and foreign fighters. Now that Baghdad had fallen, it was assessed that the last Regime die-hards were gathering in Tikrit. The 3^d SRG Brigade formed the core of the conventional Tikrit defenses, but it was not a significant combat force. This was, literally, the 'palace guard' of the Regime in the Tikrit area, more accustomed to standing post and intimidating civilians than fighting. The 3^d Brigade had reportedly been reinforced, however, with a mechanized battalion from the 4th SRG Brigade, which would give it a bit more punch. In addition, there were reported elements of the regular Republican Guard reinforcing the Tikrit defenses in approximately battalion strength. These units were supported by up to three battalions of artillery, as well as engineer and support assets from the Regular Army I Corps, who maintained its headquarters in the area. In addition to the conventional defense, Task Force Tripoli prepared to face up to eight hundred paramilitary fighters, to include foreign terrorists and the last of the Fedeyeen. Making the challenge even more interesting, Tikrit and the surrounding areas were allegedly home to much of Saddam's hidden stockpiles of missiles and chemical weapons. If the Regime had not used these by now, it likely never would; but Tripoli was prepared to encounter these weapons too.

Open source news reports from international media inside Tikrit reported the presence of a significant defensive force. The US intelligence community reported large Fedeyeen rallies being held in the downtown stadium area. Regime roadblocks and checkpoints were established along the major highways into and out of the city. This preparation was not entirely oriented on an attack from the south. As Tikrit lies near the Iraqi northern frontier, the Iraqi defenders had to be concerned with threats coming from multiple directions. There was a significant fear of the northern Kurds among the population of Tikrit. Because of the brutal treatment of the Kurdish people by Saddam's Regime, an invasion of vengeful Kurds was to be feared even more than an invasion by the Americans. When the Kurds seized Kirkuk on 11 April and proceeded to advance toward Tikrit from the east, the Tikrit defenders attempted to drop two spans of the Tigris River bridge that connected Tikrit to its 'suburbs' on the east side of the river. The Iraqis demonstrated their usual bridge-blowing prowess, however, and only managed to damage two of the spans beyond repair, while still leaving it passable by vehicles. The damaged bridge was to have a significant impact on Task Force Tripoli operations in the Tikrit area.

Despite the intelligence reports indicating a conventional-style defense of Tikrit, the TF-Tripoli intelligence section assessed the Iraqis would follow the pattern that the Division had seen previously. When attacked on the ground, the uniformed Iraqis would likely abandon their

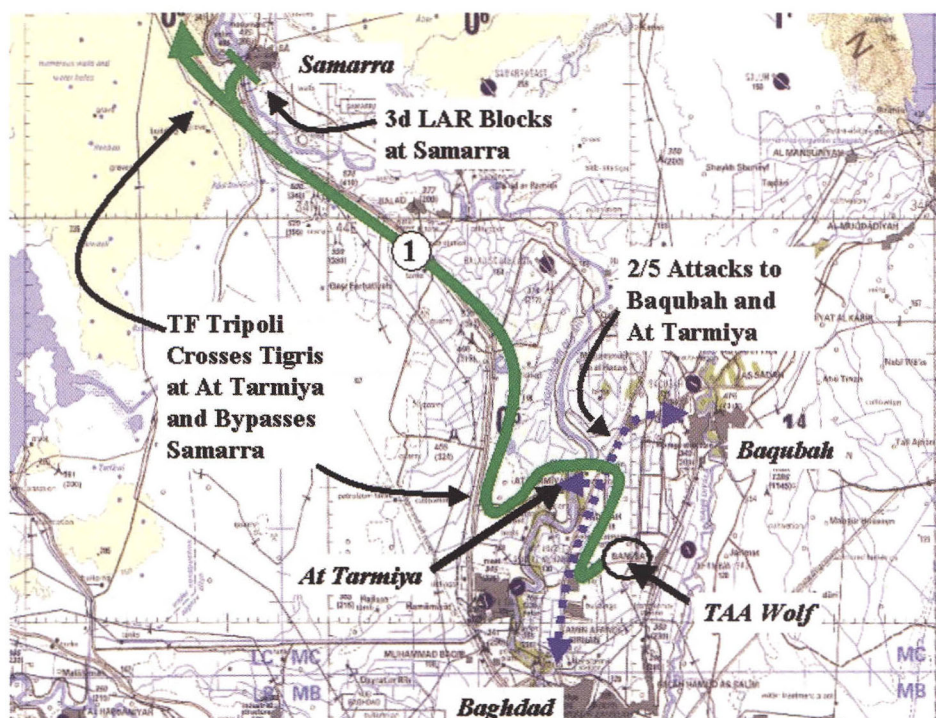


Marines occupied areas within the city of Tikrit and outlying areas to the north, south, and east.

posts while the Fedeyeen would put forward an ambitious but ineffective defense. The local populace, even though formerly among the Regime's most loyal subjects, would probably not take up arms or willingly support the paramilitaries. The Task Force was reminded of the 'deal maker' mentality of the population. The Regime no longer had much to offer in return for loyalty. Cooperation with the Americans would likely be the norm, but only after the last of the Fedeyeen and foreign fighters had been eliminated.

The Operational Design

The Highway 1 avenue of approach would be the one most expected by the Iraqis, but also offered the quickest route into the city. The Task Force judged that a rapid advance up Highway 1 would put the Marines at the outskirts of Tikrit before the Iraqis would have a chance to further prepare. The Light Armored Vehicles (LAVs) and other wheeled assets of the Task Force would support this rapid attack. The Task Force commander decided to bypass the numerous Regime targets along the way in Balad and Samarra, and sought to cordon off Tikrit as rapidly as possible. Because Tripoli's assembly area was on the northeastern side of Baghdad, the first task would be to get across the Tigris river. To gain operational speed right from the beginning, Tripoli would use one of two small bridges across the Tigris just to the north of Baghdad. These bridges were very small, and required a difficult approach over poor roads and through narrow village streets. The Tigris crossing options were limited, as the only other crossings were inside



TF Tripoli's guidance was to make a swift and violent assault on the objective, bypassing urban resistance and closing the doors on the enemy before he could withdraw or defend.

Baghdad itself, or over 150 km to the north along Highway 5. Neither of these were acceptable. Crossing in the Baghdad urban area would require coordination for passage through the Army's

zone in Baghdad. This area was reportedly still the scene of significant combat action, and passage would prove difficult. After some analysis, the Tripoli staff decided the risks posed by close ambush and restricted approaches were offset by the speed the Task Force would achieve by avoiding a cumbersome decision-making process required to pass through the Baghdad urban area. The US 3^d Infantry Division on the ground was eager to pass the Tripoli Marines through, but the approval process would require coordination at higher levels. A long roundabout road march to the north (along Highway 5) would be even worse.

Once across the Tigris, Tripoli would conduct a rapid night march up Highway 1 to just outside Samarra. Samarra lies on the east side of the Tigris, with a bridge connecting it to the Highway on the western bank of the river. There had been some threats noted from the Samarra area, but the enemy disposition there was largely unknown. At Samarra, the 3^d LAR 'Wolfpack', under Lieutenant Colonel Stacy Clardy, would be left to establish a blocking position near the bridge, while the rest of the Task Force bypassed the city on the west side. Thirty kilometers up the road, 2^d LAR's 'Barbarians', under Lieutenant Colonel Ed Ray, would use a Tikrit highway bypass to establish a blocking position to the north of the city. Once the northern exit had been blocked, the 1st LAR 'Highlanders', under Lieutenant Colonel Duffy White, with a motorized infantry company (G/2/23) attached, would attack into the city. As the Highlanders pushed up, they would clear the southern Tikrit Airfield for the CSS element that was following in trace. CSSC Tripoli, under Major Mike Callanan, would establish the airfield as a logistics base for ground operations and a FARP in support of continued air operations. A



Despite an invasion and a ground war, Iraqi civilians attempted to carry on with their normal daily activities. The Iraqi people were reassured that there was "No Better Friend" than a United States Marine.

detachment of Naval Special Warfare SEALs accompanied the Task Force, and would be used in a reconnaissance role. The NSW liaison officer to the Division, Lieutenant Commander Brad Treadway, had been a key advisor to the staff throughout the campaign, and would serve in a similar capacity for Task Force Tripoli. An attached artillery battalion, 5/11 under Lieutenant Colonel Jerry Smith, would provide fire support. Delta Company of the Combat Engineer Battalion, two HET teams, a tactical PsyOps team, a civil affairs detachment and a TOW platoon rounded out the task organization.

Task Force Tripoli's organization for combat was unique in a number of ways. First, the Task Force headquarters was formed using the Division Forward CP as a nucleus. Over the many months of rehearsals, operations and planning, only minor changes had been required to the organization of the Forward CP. The Division Forward headquarters had been scaled to be closer to a brigade-sized headquarters rather than one built for division-sized operations. With a relatively small footprint, the Forward CP configuration was still a fully functional Division Headquarters, with the robust command and control required for this long-range operation. More importantly, however, was Task Force Tripoli's integration of three Light Armored Reconnaissance battalions working under a single commander. Under General Kelly (himself a former LAR battalion commander), Tripoli was, in effect, an LAR Regiment. The 'Task Force' was formed by reinforcing this core with its own CSS element, a company of truck-mobile infantry, combat engineers, and an artillery battalion. This proved the perfect combination of speed, sustainability, and lethality for this mission.

Besides north and south, the east offered an approach to Tikrit as well. Task Force approaches to Tikrit on the east side of the Tigris were carefully considered, then discounted, as the damaged bridge would prohibit maneuver of armored vehicles into Tikrit from that direction. Forces operating on separate sides of the wide Tigris River would be (tactically) non-mutually supporting. It was decided that even if the initial attack were to come only on the western bank of the Tigris, objectives on the east side of the River could later be attended to by HMMWV mounted patrols after the rest of Tikrit was isolated.

Logistics support to Task Force Tripoli also required flexibility and resourcefulness on the part of the Division's logisticians. Developing the sustainment plan for the Task Force and forming the CSSC that would support it occurred concurrently with combat operations in parts of Baghdad and stability operations in others. Supporting Task Force Tripoli's extended supply lines an additional 200 km to the north re-emphasized the criticality of MAW and CSSG support. At the height of TF Tripoli's attack, the Division's supply lines stretched over 800 km from the ports of Kuwait. To their tremendous credit, CSSG-11 was able to quickly task organize, and simultaneously support combat operations, stabilization operations, and the newly assembled attack force.

As part of his Commander's intent, General Kelly made it clear to the Tripoli leadership that speed of attack and operational tempo were the keys to victory at Tikrit. He specifically charged the three LAR battalion commanders with utilizing the speed of their movement to achieve tactical and operational surprise. Task Force Tripoli would rapidly block the routes of retreat from Tikrit, isolate the expected enemy forces inside, and conduct a swift and complete destruction of the remaining Regime loyalists.

11 April

Task Force Tripoli Assembles

During the night of 11 April, the various elements of Task Force Tripoli assembled at Tactical Assembly Area (TAA) Wolf. TAA Wolf was at the site of a former Iraqi maintenance, storage, and staging depot to the north of Baghdad. It was littered with abandoned equipment, ammunition, and missiles. T-72s, BMPs, SAMs, and ammunition were stored throughout the compound, most in deep revetments that had been untouched during the air shaping campaign. The local citizens guided members of the Task Force to a cache of unknown missiles located in a warehouse on the nearby Iraqi military training facility. With security support from ten Marines of the headquarters DASC led by Staff Sergeant Russ Normandin, the SEALs were able to locate ten FROG missiles and four live Abibil missiles. These weapons were destroyed in place by the Task Force EOD team led by Gunnery Sergeant Tracy Jones.

Over the course of 12 April, as the last elements of the Task Force arrived at TAA Wolf, scouting elements were dispatched along the routes and bridges the Task Force expected to use. The reports received regarding the bridges just north of Baghdad were not encouraging. The northern Tigris River bridge under consideration had a low overhead obstruction and undetermined weight class that would not allow passage of some of the Task Force's larger combat service support vehicles. The southern bridge was better, but had severely restricted approaches through a number of small villages. The 3^d LAR scouting elements continued to search and found a route to the southern bridge that would offer the best approach. The route wound through the small village of Al Swash, requiring the Task Force to navigate narrow village streets and clear low-hanging wires. The ambush threat in this tight terrain was unknown. On the west bank of the Tigris, opposite Al Swash, was a larger village called At Tarmiya. There the road improved. The movement would certainly be slow until the river was crossed, but it would still be faster than driving all the way back down through the Baghdad urban area.

12 April

Baqubah Re-visited by 2/5

Since moving into Baghdad, the Division received many reports of the whereabouts of U.S. POWs. Reports pointing to a prison in the vicinity of Baqubah were determined to be potentially reliable and the decision was made to dispatch a force to investigate. TF Tripoli planners also were interested in the pontoon bridge over the Tigris at the village of At Tarmiya as a potential crossing site. Lieutenant Colonel Dan O'Donohue's, 2^d Battalion, 5th Marines (2/5), with Echo Battery (2/11) in direct support, moved out early the morning of 12 April to conduct a reconnaissance in force to search for the POWs in Baqubah and to reconnoiter the bridge over the Tigris that connected Al Swash and At Tarmiya.

Second Battalion's movement up Highway 2 was without incident. Echo Company and the battalion's attached tanks (from Bravo Company, 2^d Tank Battalion) moved into Baqubah and determined there were no American POWs present at the prison. Captain Myle Hammond's Golf Company was sited along Highway 2, as the battalion's reserve. With the word that there

were no POWs, Golf Company was ordered to move to the Tigris River to conduct a bridge reconnaissance at the bridge between Al Swash and At Tarmiya. The quiet morning would soon take on an entirely different face.

As Golf Company wound along the route to the Tigris, they passed through two small villages and were met with smiling faces, thumbs up signs and shouts of "Good, Good." The Marines were becoming accustomed to the vocal support of the Iraqi people ever since moving into Baghdad. As they approached the pontoon bridge at Al Swash, they found the single lane bridge clogged with civilian traffic, but a still receptive populace. Captain Hammond set in his overwatch and began to flow forces to the far side of the jam-packed bridge. The 2/5 after action report describes the sharp turn of events that soon followed:

"The traffic at the bridge site was fairly congested with a single lane available for transit across. Captain Hammond's instructions to Second Lieutenant Shawn Maurer, the First Platoon Commander, were to establish security on the far side, ensure that traffic flowed freely across until the battalion arrived, and then be prepared to block traffic on the far side in order to facilitate the battalion's movement. On the far side of the river there was a road that ran parallel to the river and perpendicular to the bridge, causing Second Lieutenant Maurer to position one AAV to cover down the southern avenue of approach and one AAV to cover to the north along the road axis. The Marines dismounted and began to set up positions to facilitate the movement of traffic across the bridge. Additionally, Marines were placed in over-watch positions to defend the bridge until it was time for the Battalion to cross.

Captain Hammond intended to secure the bridge until the remainder of the company and the battalion arrived to cross, which he expected to be in a couple of hours. Captain Hammond had not brought an interpreter with him, but his artillery forward observer, 1st Lieutenant Michael McDowell, was in the street attempting to communicate with the local people. Lieutenant McDowell had found an Iraqi civilian that spoke some English, and was attempting to find out as much information about the area as possible. During the course of Lieutenant McDowell's interaction with the people, the area on the east side of the bridge had become a "bottle neck," choked with about a hundred civilians and a dozen or so automobiles. At about 0850Z an Iraqi civilian drove across the bridge from the west side and motioned as if he were firing a gun and then pointed to the far bank of the river.

Captain Hammond called for Lieutenant McDowell to stop the driver and find out what the man had signaled. The English speaking Iraqi served as an interpreter, and informed Lieutenant McDowell that there were large weapons caches on the far side of the river as well as Republican Guard, Baath, and Fedeyeen forces. When Lt McDowell asked how many forces were on the far side the interpreter translated that there was a high-ranking general on the far side and that he had one thousand men. The company had encountered a number of weapons cache sites up to this date that had been abandoned by the Iraqi Army, so Captain Hammond asked the man how long it had been since they last saw the soldiers. The translator communicated that the man was saying that Iraqi forces were there now. At this point Captain Hammond had the translator go through the line of questioning again in order to confirm the information that the man had passed. After an exchange of dialogue the English speaking Iraqi confirmed the man's story, as the man sped away to the east. Captain Hammond then looked at

Lieutenant McDowell and observed that every single Iraqi person and automobile had immediately scattered back to the east. There was a surreal feeling that something was about to happen, and with this information Captain Hammond began walking to the FiST AAV. Captain Hammond ordered his Marines to get on their gear as he climbed onto the vehicle and got into the troop commander's hatch. He then reached for the communications helmet to alert the platoon that was on the far side, as well as the battalion that had intended to cross the bridge.

At 0857, just as the captain was about to get on the headset to alert First Platoon, a series of explosions detonated on the far side of the bridge. Two volleys of RPGs were fired at the AAV that sat to the left of the bridge on the far side of the river. Two RPGs scored direct hits to the front of the AAV, and two RPGs missed from the initial volleys. At that point all hell broke loose on the far side of the river. It was only a short time before the dismounted Marines on the far side were pinned down by a crossfire of small arms, machine gun fire, and waves of RPGs."

With his lead platoon split by the Tigris and the remainder of his company still on the road behind him, Captain Hammond found himself embroiled in a ferocious firefight with an enemy supported by mortars, RPGs and numerous machine guns. As Second Lieutenant Maurer led the Marines on the far side in their effort to get effective direct fires on the enemy in the village, Captain Hammond worked urgently to get supporting arms and to maneuver the First Platoon elements on the near side of the bridge into positions where they could suppress the enemy across the river. As the remainder of Golf Company moved forward, the Marines began to establish direct fire superiority over the enemy and the tide turned against the Iraqis. Approximately 20 minutes after the ambush was triggered, the guns of Echo Battery were fire capable and aircraft of 3^d MAW were in position to support. Corporal Chad Taylor of 3^d AA Battalion, wounded in the initial hail of RPGs was evacuated to the near side of the river under heavy fire and Golf Company began to take the attack to the enemy.

Captain David Yaggy, Golf Company's Forward Air Controller coordinated with an airborne FAC for air support. Within minutes, F/A-18s dropping laser guided bombs and a low level strafing run by the airborne FAC had silenced a mortar position that was delivering accurate fires in the vicinity of the bridge and had cut off Iraqi troops trying to reinforce the positions over looking the river. Golf Company began to flow across the bridge and press the attack, building by building through the village. Expertly employing mortars and artillery fire in support of their aggressive attack, Golf Company soon had the enemy on the run. Pushing to the far side of the village, a devastating fire mission from Battery E impacted a group of soldiers massing in a palm grove for a counter-attack. The Marines' ferocious attack was ready to become an exploitation.

Captain Hammond consulted with Lieutenant Colonel O'Donohue via radio and was given clearance to pursue the enemy, but was reminded that there was no intention of holding the ground at the crossing site. At this point in the battle, Lance Corporal Paul Gardner was severely wounded by a gunshot wound through the torso and required immediate evacuation. Captain Hammond decided to begin the retrograde across the bridge. Aviation and artillery continued to pound the enemy to cover Golf Company's withdrawal across the bridge. The battalion had suffered 4 WIAs. Having routed the enemy from their hideout in At Tarmiya, they moved back across the bridge, leaving approximately 60 enemy dead.

Re-assembling along Highway 2, 2/5 returned to Baghdad to continue stability and security operations. They were confident that the enemy had been roughly handled in At Tarmiya and would not be eager for a rematch.

Tripoli Launches a Night Attack

Tripoli launched its attack during the afternoon hours of 12 April. As the sun was going down, Task Force Tripoli approached the Al Swash bridge over the Tigris River, the same bridge that G/2/5 had fought its way across only hours previously. It was a very long but narrow bridge, with steep approaches on both banks. The approach to the bridge and passage through the small village of Al-Swash along the Tigris River was a surreal experience that none of the members of the Task Force would forget. The long columns of Task Force vehicles snaked through the tiny village, in many places squeezing between houses with barely room to spare on either side. The village had electricity, and in the dimly lit streets, houses, and cafes, the population turned out to welcome the Marines and wish them good luck. Many in the cheering crowd passed out candied dates and cold soda. Families with children lined every doorway and sidewalk, shouting "Hello", "George Bush good", and "What is your name?" The same phrases had been heard throughout the operation from An Nasiriyah to Baghdad, but in the surreal quiet of this recently liberated village along the Tigris, the words seemed to be shouted with a special enthusiasm. The local citizens had seen the reaction of the Marines to the presence of the enemy, and they rejoiced that the Regime fighters on the far shore had been forced to flee.



Iraqis in Al Swash welcome the Marines.

As the Task Force crossed through the village, the Marines began speaking with people along the roadside. Many of them reported that the infamous Ali Hassan al Majid (a.k.a. 'Chemical Ali') had been hiding out in the village across the river and had been forced to flee to Tikrit with an entourage of bodyguards. These were the forces that had been encountered by 2/5 on their mission to At Tarmiya earlier in the day. If true, Task Force Tripoli was hot on the heels of one of the most notorious of Iraqi war criminals. These reports were later echoed in Samarra and Tikrit, lending them credence. The elusive Chemical Ali seemed to remain just one step ahead

The street that took us through this small urban area was barely wide enough to support our LAVs. Most of the buildings were two to four stories tall. You could nearly reach out and touch the buildings on both sides of the road. At times, we literally had to duck to avoid the powerlines. It was a pitch-black night and the cultural lighting emanating from within the buildings would wash out the NVGs as we passed by each structure. Civilians lined up all along the street and down the alleyways. Most were waving and giving us the thumbs up, some were just curious, I imagine the sight of all these LAVs with its occupants staring down at them with these odd devices attached to their helmets, was something right out of their apocalypse. We crossed over a pontoon bridge and over to the urban area on the opposite side. This was a little weird as well but in a much different way. This town, At Tarmiyah, seemed totally abandoned. No lights, not even from inside the buildings, no people, not a single car. It looked like a ghost town right out of a western movie. We continued on to Highway 1 and headed north. It was a long road march. 'Li'l Sister', our driver, fell asleep twice so we replaced him with our comm tech, Corporal Pasqual. Corporal Walker, the mortar FO, stood in as the VC. The rest of the crew took the opportunity to get some sleep while we traveled north. It was a cold night, I remember that.

of the Marines. Task Force Tripoli passed through At Tarmiya on the far bank of the Tigris. The eerie silence of this Regime-loyal village was a stark contrast to the warm reception the Marines had experienced in the friendly village of Al Swash. (In fact, some of the village elders in Al Swash told of the bitter rivalry between the two towns, even before the war. The tribal factionalism of the Iraqi people lay just under the surface. Once the controlling hand of the Regime was removed, much of the violence that followed was a consequence of this factionalism.)

The restricted approaches were the cause of hours of delay, and Tripoli was well behind schedule when it finally cleared the Tigris. The decision was made to continue to press through the night all the way to Tikrit. The lead elements of the Task Force pushed out onto the hard surface road and immediately picked up speed. After the excitement of passing through the village, the drivers now had to stay up all night in a fast approach to Tikrit, denying the enemy a chance to react.



Abandoned vehicle on the Highway 1 approach to Tikrit.