

## IRAQ 2003 (PART 2)<sup>1</sup>: THE ROAD TO BAGHDAD

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### **The operational plans**

The attack on Iraq, or Operation Iraqi Freedom as it was called, would be very different from its predecessor Operation Desert Storm, 12 years before. The main strategic difference was, of course, the fact that Desert Storm encompassed an enormous international military coalition, with ground, air and naval forces being supplied by America, Britain, France, Italy, Australia, Argentina, Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Syria. Iraqi Freedom was shouldered by only two countries, the US and the UK, with Australia supplying a small contingent of SAS troops, the Czech Republic a platoon of chemical warfare troops and Spain a hospital ship.

To drive the Iraqi occupying forces out of Kuwait in 1991, an enormous force of 15 divisions had been amassed. These had been organised into 3 American corps (XVIII Airborne Corps, consisting of two airborne divisions, a mechanised infantry division, as well as a French light armoured division; VII Corps, consisting of three US and one UK armoured divisions and one US mechanised infantry division; and a US Marine corps, consisting of two Marine divisions), a Saudi Arabian corps of two divisions, an Egyptian corps of two divisions, and a Syrian division.<sup>3</sup> For Iraqi Freedom, only a single army corps (V), consisting of two mechanised infantry divisions and an airborne division, together with a marine division, an understrength composite British armoured division, and some smaller independent units, was available. And because of political wrangling, one mechanised infantry division arrived far too late on the battlefield to participate in

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<sup>1</sup> This is the second part in a series of three articles.

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<sup>3</sup> See battle map in Rick Atkinson: *Crusade. The untold story of the Gulf War* (London, HarperCollins, 1994), p. 517; as well as Tom Clancy & Fred Franks: *Into the storm. On the ground in Iraq* (London, Sidgwick & Jackson, 2000), p. 239.

the fighting. So, compared to 15 divisions in 1991, the job would now have to be done by only four. Nevertheless, with the new American weapons of precision and the extremely able Abrams tank, a repeat of Gulf War I was not really necessary.

To digress somewhat: There is a story, told by Tom Clancy, which illustrates the extreme toughness of the Abrams tank which was to play an important role in the coming offensive, and which was by far the superior of the antique T-55's, T-62's and even the more modern T-72's which the Iraqis got from the Soviet Union. During the war of 1991, an Abrams of the 24<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Infantry Division got stuck in a mud hole and had to wait for a recovery vehicle, while the rest of the unit moved on. "Suddenly, as they were waiting, three Iraqi T-72 tanks came over a hill and charged the mud-bogged tank. One T-72 fired a high-explosive anti-tank (HEAT) round that hit the frontal turret armour of the M1, but did no damage. At this point, the crew of the M1, though still stuck, fired a 120mm armour-piercing round at the attacking tank. The round penetrated the T-72's turret, blowing it off into the air. By this time, the second T-72 also fired a HEAT round at the M1. That also hit the front of the turret, and did no damage. The M1 immediately dispatched this T-72 with another 120mm round. After that, the third and last T-72 fired a 125mm armour-piercing round at the M1 from a range of 400 meters. This only grooved the front armour plate. Seeing that continued action did not have much of a future, the crew of the last T-72 decided to run for cover. Spying a nearby sand berm, the Iraqis darted behind it, thinking they would be safe there. Back in the M1, the crew saw through their Thermal Imaging Sight (TIS) the hot plume of the T-72's engine exhaust spewing up from behind the berm. Aiming carefully through the TIS, the M1's crew fired a third 120mm round through the berm, into the tank, destroying it."

But this was not the end of the story. Even two recovery vehicles, coming to the rescue could not dislodge the stuck tank. So other M1's started firing on it. Two rounds failed to penetrate. The third penetrated the turret, causing the ammunition to detonate. But the blast was vented upwards through a blow-out panel, and the onboard fire-suppression system stopped the fire before any real damage was done to the electronics. Finally, with the help of additional recovery vehicles, the tank was towed out. "Upon examination, the M1 was found to be operational, with only the sights out of alignment from the blast of the ammunition cooking off." The tank was repaired and returned to action.<sup>4</sup> A truly remarkable story that illustrates the almost unbelievable toughness and striking power of the M1A1/2 Abrams.

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<sup>4</sup> Tom Clancy: *Armoured warfare: A guided tour of an armoured Calvary regiment* (London, HarperCollings, 1996), pp. 57-58.

Interestingly, the final coalition operational plan was the result of intense political infighting, both internally in the Pentagon, and internationally. As the infighting in the Pentagon progressed, successive versions of the operational plan were leaked to the press as the one side or the other tried to discredit their opponents. Apparently, defence secretary Donald Rumsfeld was furious, but powerless to stop it.

The first version, leaked to the *New York Times*, was an orthodox heavy offensive with an overwhelming armoured force of 250 000 ground troops, coming from three sides – from Kuwait in the south, Jordan in the west and Turkey in the north.<sup>5</sup> The next version was the exact opposite, dubbed “Baghdad first” by the media. It would consist of an airborne force of only a few thousand men, and it would mean the capture of Baghdad in one fell swoop, thereby decapitating the Saddam Hussein regime right at the start.<sup>6</sup> (Contrast this extraordinary lapse of operational security with Gulf I, when General Norman Schwarzkopf, the then overall commander, fiercely forbade his officers to discuss operational matters with the media. “I will deal brutally with anyone who compromises anything from operations,” he threatened them.<sup>7</sup>)

This infighting about the battle plan was directly connected to the power struggle between Rumsfeld and most of the army generals about transforming the army into a much lighter and more mobile force, depending much more on special forces, the latest technology and precision weapons, and air strikes. Both sides were obviously very anxious to have Operation Iraqi Freedom prove the correctness of their vision.<sup>8</sup>

In the process, Rumsfeld, who is known as an arrogant, impatient man, probably overstepped his competency as political head of the department of defence. His job was to oversee the armed forces being prepared for war, period. He was, therefore, quite within his rights to demand the transformation of the army. But he went considerably further than that. According to one credible-sounding exposé, the secretary micromanaged the development of the battle plan to an incredible degree. His inner circle of civilian planners even “took over crucial aspects of the day-to-day logistical planning”. As one source put it, “He thought he knew better. He was the decision-maker at every turn.”

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<sup>5</sup> Eric Schmitt: “U.S. plan for Iraq is said to include attack on 3 sides” (*New York Times*, 5.7.2002).

<sup>6</sup> Tom Shanker: “Bush hears options including Baghdad strike” (*New York Times*, 7.8.2002).

<sup>7</sup> Clancy & Franks: *Into the Storm*, p. 192.

<sup>8</sup> CF. Julian Borger et al: “How the Pentagon’s promise of a quick war ran into the desert sand” (*The Guardian*, 28.3.2003).

The generals drew up six successive plans, of which Rumsfeld rejected the first five, demanding every time that the number of ground troops be reduced. At first, the idea was for an air bombing campaign lasting 20 days, which was changed to 10 and then to 5 days. (In the event, there was no preparatory bombing campaign at all.) Rumsfeld insisted that a smaller, faster-moving attack force, combined with overwhelming air power, would suffice. “You’ve got too much ground force – go back and to it again,” he reportedly told his generals. He even vetoed the moving of the 3<sup>rd</sup> mechanised Infantry Division’s own armour to Kuwait, relying on prepositioned weapons in the Middle East. Thereby, he made further deployments by other divisions all but impossible. One general spoke about “an atmosphere of derision and challenge”.<sup>9</sup>

Another anonymous but apparently informed observer was quoted thus: “Rumsfeld ridiculed what he called unimaginative, traditional military thinking that proposed large numbers of conventional forces to engage in the attack on Iraq. He did this frequently, and the result was an initial plan in which the attacking forces consisted of two Army brigades and a Marine Expeditionary Unit – no more than 10 000 in the ground manoeuvre formations (most destruction was to be achieved by special forces and air power). ... Rumsfeld exacerbated the first point by creating an environment in which alternative points of view were exposed to criticism and those who challenged were ostracised.”<sup>10</sup>

To be fair, after the war Franks categorically denied any bad feelings between Rumsfeld and the generals. In an interview, which unfortunately gives the impression of spinning the message, he made the discussions out to be part of a normal process of debate and planning. He told a journalist that 15 to 20 different “what ifs” – likely scenarios – were drawn up, and the “two bookends”, as he called it, the original army heavy plan and Rumsfeld’s original light plan, were then balanced “by using computer modelling, force-on-force constructs, until we decided we had hit about the best point, and that is how the plan was created. It evolved.”<sup>11</sup>

While one has to assume that Franks is telling the truth, it very much looks like being only part of the truth.

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<sup>9</sup> Seymour M. Hersh: “Offense and defense” (*The New Yorker*, 4.7.2003); Rowan Scarborough: “ ‘Decisive force’ now measured by speed” (*The Washington Times*, 7.5.2003).

<sup>10</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman: *Iraq war note: Non-pause, the true logistics story, and blaming Rumsfeld*, 29.3.2003, at [www.csis.org/features/030329\\_warnote.pdf](http://www.csis.org/features/030329_warnote.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> Joseph L. Galloway: “General Tommy Franks discusses conducting the war in Iraq” (*Knight Ridder*, 19.6.2003).

Be that as it may, in the end a compromise of sorts was reached. Rumsfeld's airborne attack on Baghdad was replaced with a lightning armoured and airborne march on Baghdad from two sides, from Kuwait in the south and Turkey in the north. From the north would come the army's "digitalised" division, the 4<sup>th</sup> mechanised Infantry. From the south would come the 3<sup>rd</sup> mechanised Infantry Division (reinforced with a composite brigade of attack and transport helicopters from US forces in Germany, as well as the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment, which normally was part of the 1st Cavalry Division), the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division (augmented by a brigade-strength Marine unit, known as Task Force Tarawa), the rather weak 1 (UK) Armoured Division (the latter being a composite unit, consisting of 7 Armoured Brigade, the famed "Desert Rats", as well as 16 Airmobile Brigade, and a brigade of Royal Marines). Simultaneously, the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division (later reinforced with a brigade of the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne) would carry out massive airborne attacks, possibly on the airport of Baghdad, but also to seize oilfields, dams and banned weapons. The south-east of Iraq, the capture of Basra, would be left to the British division, while the British Royal Marine Brigade, assisted by some American Marines, would capture the Faw peninsula right at the start. In addition, about 10 000 special force troops – the most ever in a single campaign – would be deployed. In total, about 130 000 ground troops were to be involved.<sup>12</sup>

According to Franks himself, the plan had several characteristics. Firstly, it involved surprise. Secondly, it had to be flexible enough "to either have airpower first or ground power first. To either have Tomahawks first, or Tomahawks someplace else. To introduce Special Operations forces in large numbers in order to come to grips with each potential problem we thought we might face". Five fronts were identified: The northern front, the western desert bordering Jordan, the Baghdad-Tikrit area (being the enemy centre of gravity), the southern areas between Kuwait and Baghdad, and the information war. (As far as the last was concerned, special forces cut Iraq's fibre optic cables, which could not be tapped, so that the Iraqi's were forced to use radio, satellite and cellular phone communications, which could be intercepted.)<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Esther Schrader & Tyler Marshall: "War shapes up as huge land attack" (*Los Angeles Times*, 27.1.2003); William M. Arkin: "The dividends of delay" (*Los Angeles Times*, 23.2.2003); Richard T. Cooper & Aaron Zitner: "3 Divisions with 3 histories, 3 styles and 1 goal: Baghdad" (*Los Angeles Times*, 6.4.2003); Julian Borger: "New plan to land first US troops deep inside Iraq" (*The Guardian*, 14.2.2003); Michael Smith: "US forced to consider 'battle lite' options" (*The Telegraph*, 10.3.2003); Kim Burger et al: "What went right?" (*Jane's Defence Weekly*, 28.4.2003).

<sup>13</sup> Joseph L. Galloway: "General Tommy Franks discusses conducting the war in Iraq" (*Knight Ridder*, 19.6.2003).

However, even this plan could not be carried out fully. The Turkish government, whose co-operation was needed for the deployment of the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry, played hardball by demanding a considerable say in how the Iraq problem was to be handled after the war, as well as billions of dollars in development aid. After an accord was reached, the Turkish parliament, however, rejected it narrowly. This meant that the northern front would be reduced to special forces and possibly airborne troops, and that the heavy 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry became effectively *hors de combat*. Even though its equipment was brought by sea from the shores of Turkey, where it waited to be disembarked to Kuwait, the war was over before a single soldier from this division could see action.<sup>14</sup>

This was a great disappointment for the US Army. The 4<sup>th</sup> was a prototype, the first digitalised division in the world, and officers had been very keen to see how it would perform under modern battlefield conditions. Nevertheless, the Americans immediately transformed the problem into a strategic asset. After the war, Donald Rumsfeld told Central Command military personnel at the coalition HQ in Qatar that General Franks deliberately waited before diverting the division's equipment from the sea off Turkey to the Gulf, to fool the Iraqis into believing that the offensive was not imminent. It also transpired that Saddam was being fed deliberate disinformation, that the Turkish hard-headedness was only a sham and that the main offensive would come from the north after all.<sup>15</sup> If Saddam, in the absence of a northern front reinforced his defences in the south, coalition planners worried that it would create big problems for the offensive.<sup>16</sup>

Even so, the absence of a Turkish front still created huge problems for the campaign plan. The offensive had to be reconfigured to take place only from the south and with one heavy division less, it meant a sizeable reduction in the coalition firepower on the ground. An American mechanised infantry division is not that different from an armoured division. Whereas the latter consist mostly of five tank and four mechanised infantry battalions, a mechanised infantry division – such as the 3<sup>rd</sup> and the 4<sup>th</sup> – consists of four tank and five mechanised infantry battalions, plus, of course, artillery and a wide range of divisional support units. (The 3<sup>rd</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Amberin Zaman & Paul Richter: "Turkish demand risks impeding war strategy" (*Los Angeles Times*, 19.2.2003); Owen Bocott et al: "Bush's war timetable unravelling" (*The Guardian*, 20.2.2003); Louis Meixler: "U.S. forced to rethink Iraq war strategy" (*Washington Post*, 3.3.2003).

<sup>15</sup> Paul Martin: "Rumsfeld fires up U.S. forces in Qatar" (*Washington Times*, 29.4.2003); Evan Thomas & Martha Brant: "The education of Tommy Franks" (*Newsweek*, 19.5.2003). Cf. also Steve Coll: "Hussein was sure of own survival" (*Washington Post*, 3.11.2003).

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Patrick Wintour: "Either Tony knows something that the rest of us don't know, or he's insane" (*The Guardian*, 26.3.2003).

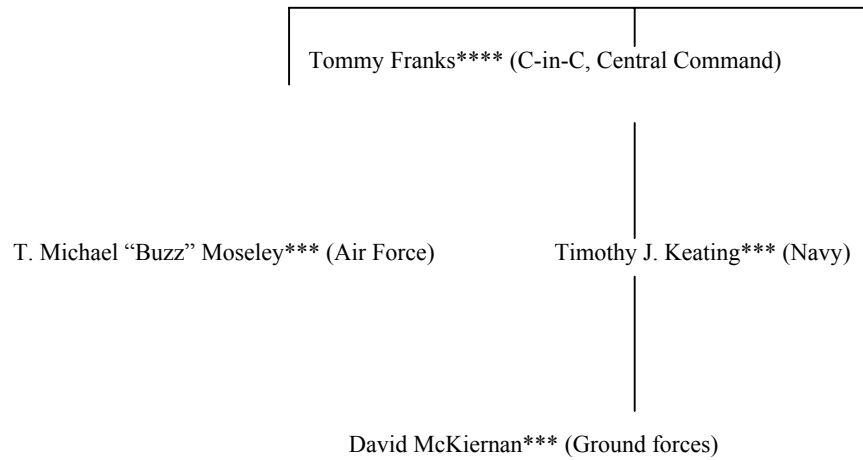
Infantry, bolstered with additional forces, was almost 20 000 men strong, with more than 250 Abrams tanks and more than 280 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and more than 150 gunship and utility helicopters.<sup>17)</sup>

Compared to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry, which was the US army's specialised desert warfare division, the other American units were fairly light. The 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division had only two tank battalions, the rest being infantry mostly transported in lightly armoured and armed amphibious tracked vehicles, plus divisional artillery and other support units. Both the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry and the 1<sup>st</sup> Marines also had their own organic helicopter brigade, including gunships. On the other hand, the 101<sup>st</sup> and 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne Divisions were meant to be extremely mobile, being able to be helicoptered very fast and fairly far into battle. They had, therefore, to be lightly armed with all weapons (including artillery and at least some vehicles) having to be transportable by the division's own helicopters. They did, however, have their own organic gunship units.

The coalition order of battle looked something like this:

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<sup>17</sup> Steven Lee Meyers: "Doubt and death on drive to Baghdad" (*The New York Times*, 10.4.2003).



William Scott Wallace\*\*\* (V Corps)      James T. Conway\*\*\* (1st Marine Expeditionary Force)

Buford Blount III\*\* (3rd mech. Inf. Div.)      James N. Mattis\*\* (1st Marine Div.)

David Petraeus\*\* (101st Airborne Div.)      Richard E. Natanski\*(Task Force Tarawa)  
Brigade of 82nd Airborne Div.

7th Cav. Regt. Robin Brims\*\* (1st UK Armoured Div.)

11th Attack Helicopter Regt.

173rd Airborne Brigade



It ought to be clear that the coalition forces were taking a chance, especially because it was not known whether especially the heavily armed Iraqi Republican Guard would stand and fight tenaciously, as they did in 1991. If that was the case, the advance could get into great trouble.

The final coalition operational plan cannot be properly understood without knowledge of the Iraqi intentions and their order of battle. When the war started, US intelligence estimated that Iraq still had an army of roughly 700 000 men. These were organised into five regular army corps and two Republican Guard corps. The regular army had 17 divisions, of which 11 were low-capability infantry divisions, mainly staffed with badly trained, equipped and led conscripts with low morale and without any stomach for the fight. The other six – three armoured and three mechanised infantry divisions – were not much better off, but at least they had heavy, if obsolete, weapons. Their tanks, for instance, were mostly old T-55's, which stood absolutely no chance against the modern American Abrams and British Challenger 2 main battle tanks. The regular army was also thought to have two special forces divisions.

The much better equipped, trained and led Republican Guard had two corps with six divisions – three armoured and three mechanised infantry. They were mainly equipped with the T-72, the best in the Iraqi arsenal, but still no match for either the Abrams or the Challenger 2. However, because of Republican Guard officers having led several attempts to depose Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi president did not allow these formations inside Baghdad. Only the four Special Republican Guards brigades with 14 battalions of motorised infantry, which were viewed as the elite of the elite, were permitted in the capital. (It must be noted that Iraqi divisions were much weaker than their coalition counterparts, being modelled in the old Soviet army's divisions and having 8 000-10 000 men each.) Finally, according to US estimates, Iraq had 19 reserve brigades and 15 People's Army Brigades, as well as the so-called Saddam Fedayeen, a militia of 18 000-20 000 men.<sup>18</sup>

Some of these were sent into Kuwait before the shooting started to gather intelligence on the coalition forces there.<sup>19</sup> It is, however, not clear whether these spies succeeded in passing anything of value to their superiors. Even if they did, in the end it did not matter much.

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<sup>18</sup> Anthony H. Cordsman: *If we fight Iraq: Iraq and the conventional military balance* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 28.6.2002), p. 3, at [www.csis.org/burke/mb/fightiraq\\_mb.pdf](http://www.csis.org/burke/mb/fightiraq_mb.pdf).

<sup>19</sup> Peter Baker: "A prosaic description of unspeakable torture" (*Washington Post*, 22.4.2003).

US intelligence further reported a very interesting deployment of Iraqi forces. To start with, a total of 14 divisions were positioned north of Baghdad, clearly to ward off the expected invasion of the US 4<sup>th</sup> mechanised Infantry Division from Turkey and to control the rebellious Kurds. Perhaps participation of the Turkish Army was also feared. In central Iraq there were three divisions, with six in the south. Furthermore, only regular army formations were stationed at the northern and southern extremes of the country. The six Republican Guard divisions were around Baghdad – three to the north and the other three to the south.<sup>20</sup>

Two conclusions may be drawn from this.

First, in the light of the Turkish front having decreased drastically in importance, the Iraqi forces were hopelessly wrongly positioned to defend the country against a coalition invasion. The Iraqis put their heaviest punch in the north, whereas the only assault would now come from the south. But even when the northern invasion was still on the cards, only one division would come from there, compared to four from the south, which makes the Iraqi dispositions downright silly. Clearly, the US disinformation fed to Saddam was having the desired effect, making the greater part of the Iraqi forces irrelevant to the battle even before it began.

Secondly, it was clear that Saddam had no serious plans to try and stop the invading forces as far away from the capital as possible, his most useless troops being placed out on a limb. It seems as if he *wanted* the Americans to come to Baghdad, where he could decimate them in urban warfare. In urban war, the advantages of the Americans – their technology and firepower, their command of the air and their mobility – would, after all, be neutralised to some extent. He evidently placed his hope on a lot of American casualties, probably supposing that Vietnam showed the American inability to tolerate a lot of filled body bags. Also, he probably banked on a lot of civilian blood being seen on the world's TV screens, with the hope of international pressure forcing the coalition forces to leave with their tails between their legs.<sup>21</sup>

Some public pronouncements tend to confirm this view. Already in September, 2002 a senior member of the Iraqi cabinet, Mohammed Mehdi Saleh, was reported to have said, "Take the desert. What's in the desert? If they want to change the political system in Iraq, they have to come to Baghdad. We will wait for

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<sup>20</sup> Anthony H. Cordsman: *If we fight Iraq: Iraq and the conventional military balance* (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 28.6.2002), pp. 3-4, at [www.csis.org/burke/mb/fightiraq\\_mb.pdf](http://www.csis.org/burke/mb/fightiraq_mb.pdf).

<sup>21</sup> See also Peter Beaumont: "Allies fear Iraq plotting 'scorched earth' war" (*The Observer*, 23.2.2003); Michael R. Gordon: "Reading Saddam's mind" (*The New York Times*, 3.3.2003).

them here.”<sup>22</sup> And during the same time, deputy prime minister Tariq Aziz responded to a question: “People say to me,” he had said, “‘you are not the Vietnamese, you have no jungles or swamps to hide in.’ I reply ‘let our cities be swamps and our buildings jungles.’”<sup>23</sup>

Certain commentators opine that the Iraqis made a study of the US experience in Somalia in 1993, when American troops were badly mauled in Mogadishu by irregulars.<sup>24</sup> Especially the *bakkies* used by the Somalis (the Americans called them technical vehicles), with light or heavy machine guns mounted on the back, were copied by the Iraqis with the idea of attacking the American lines of communication and eventually bleeding the advance to death by preventing the flow of supplies.<sup>25</sup>

After the Turkish fiasco, the amended coalition plan now called for a landing by Royal Marines on the Faw peninsula, a British drive behind the US Marines towards Basra, and a lightning two-pronged advance to Baghdad with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry in the west towards Karbala and the 1<sup>st</sup> Marines more or less along the Tigris towards Kut. “Shock and awe” was the catchword being used in all the media briefings, probably to intimidate the Iraqis beforehand. In view of the northern invasion from the direction of Turkey being out of the question, some reports suggested a huge airborne operation by the 101<sup>st</sup> to northern Iraq. Baghdad was seen as the Iraqi centre of gravity, the capture of which would deal the Iraqi regime and war effort a death blow. The idea was further not to soften up the Iraqi forces on the border by a protracted air campaign as in 1991, but to encourage them to surrender, rather than fight. Also, much emphasis was placed on speed, speed and more speed, in the hope of dislocating the Iraqi defence.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Rajiv Chandrasekaran: “Iraqi military may plan urban warfare in case of U.S. attack” (*Washington Post*, 27.9.2002).

<sup>23</sup> R.W. Apple jr.: “US commander, evoking MacArthur, hops past cities to Baghdad” (*New York Times*, 4.4.2003).

<sup>24</sup> Julian Borger et al: “How the Pentagon’s promise of a quick war ran into the desert sand” (*The Guardian*, 28.3.2003). The movie *Black Hawk down* and the book by Mark Bowden with the same title (*Black Hawk down: A story of modern war*, London, Penguin, 2000) was based on this event.

<sup>25</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack: “Reassessing the Iraqi adversary” (Brookings Institute, Iraq memo #14, 3.4.2003) at [www.brook.edu/views/op-ed/pollack/20030403.htm](http://www.brook.edu/views/op-ed/pollack/20030403.htm).

<sup>26</sup> Dan Plesch: “Operation regime change” (*The Guardian*, 19.2.2003); Sean Rayment & Julian Coman: “Paras will make lightning assault on Baghdad airport” (*The Telegraph*, 9.3.2003); Michael Smith: “US forced to consider ‘battle lite’ options” (*The Telegraph*, 10.3.2003); Michael E. Gordon: “Allied plan would encourage Iraqis not to fight” (*The New York Times*, 11.3.2003); Julian Borger: “Short, sharp shock will avoid street fighting, say Pentagon planners” (*The Guardian*, 11.3.2003); Patrick Bishop: “Allied plan gives Iraqis chance to topple Saddam” (*The Telegraph*,

It was not without reason that the British were being relegated to the south-east of Iraq, with the Americans getting the lion's share of the offensive. As General Wesley Clark, C-in-C of the Nato forces attacking Yugoslavia in 1999, explained, the British forces were "badly in need of increased resourcing. Already, the forces are perhaps a generation behind the best available technology in some areas, and are hard-stretched in support."<sup>27</sup> Besides, the Brits used different ammunition and even different types of fuel, so that they needed their own supply lines. Their radio communications were based on technology from the seventies. All of this would create a lot of extra problems.<sup>28</sup>

It was also thought that the Iraqi regime might crumble before it became necessary to get embroiled in costly street fighting in Baghdad. The idea was to encircle the city, carrying out precision strikes at military strongholds until the defences collapsed.<sup>29</sup> The advance would be accompanied by a sustained air campaign, aimed at decimating the Iraqi defences even before the fight really started. However, for political reasons, military lawyers would have the last say to determine whether targets were either wholly or predominantly civilian in nature. In fact, many targets were taken off the list, especially during the first few days.<sup>30</sup>

Obviously, viewed without hindsight (which is always 20-20), much could go wrong with the plan. Donald Rumsfeld used to keep a document in his drawer which he continually updated after talks with his officers and advisors. In the document, Rumsfeld expressed concern that Saddam might use weapons of mass destruction against American troops, blow up his oil fields, and use civilians or even coalition prisoners as human shields. And, of course, the duration of the war worried him and people around him. "How long will this go on?" an administration official asked. "Three days, three weeks, three months, three years?"<sup>31</sup>

General Franks was not very sanguine. After the war he told a journalist that he expected the war to last 120 days, rather than the three weeks it actually did.<sup>32</sup> Other American officers were more hopeful. "We literally could be in Baghdad in

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15.3.2003); Michael E. Gordon: "Baghdad's power vacuum is drawing only dissent" (*The New York Times*, 21.4.2003).

<sup>27</sup> Wesley Clark: "Brits brilliant but short in resources" (*The Times*, 17.4.2003).

<sup>28</sup> Julian Borger et al: "How the Pentagon's promise of a quick war ran into the desert sand" (*The Guardian*, 28.3.2003).

<sup>29</sup> Julian Borger: "Short, sharp shock will avoid street fighting, say Pentagon planners" (*The Guardian*, 11.3.2003).

<sup>30</sup> Richard Norton-Taylor: "Lawyers scrutinise strike plan" (*The Guardian*, 20.3.2003).

<sup>31</sup> David E. Sanger & Tom Shanker: "War planners begin to speak of war's risks" (*The New York Times*, 18.2.2003).

<sup>32</sup> Evan Thomas & Martha Brant: "The education of Tommy Franks" (*Newsweek*, 19.5.2003).

three or four days,” one general in Kuwait told the well-known military analyst Rick Atkinson, writing for the *Washington Post*. “How audacious do you want to be?”<sup>33</sup>

#### **Opening shots: the ‘decapitation strike’**

The world first learned of the US offensive late the evening of March 20<sup>th</sup>, when the American and British forces crossed the Iraqi border. But in fact, special forces had already been engaged for some days. It is not known exactly when they went in, but they were introduced into the western areas of Iraq, adjacent to Jordan. By the time the operations started in the south, the coalition forces – according to General Franks – already had between 15 and 20 teams operating there. To aid their operations, about 50 visual observation posts on the border with Jordan were taken out the first night and the other 50 the second night. Through this gap the special forces moved in and, in fact, controlled 25% of western Iraq even before the border in the south was crossed. And this with the regime in Baghdad having only the foggiest idea of what was going on.<sup>34</sup>

The shooting war started controversially. The date set for the beginning of the attack was originally March 21<sup>st</sup>, 2003, and the military planned accordingly. But more than a day before, their plans were severely disrupted.

On the morning of March 19<sup>th</sup>, President George Bush polled his war council in the White House Situation Room for any last-minute reservations about the campaign plan. There were none. He then issued the “execute” command to General Tommy Franks, who participated via a video link, saying: “I believe the military forces of the country are in position to do what must be done, so you have the execution order, H Hour will be this time.” Franks answered with a salute, an eyewitness told the *New York Times*, “You could have heard a pin drop in that room. It was silent for a couple of minutes.” Then the secretary of state, Colin Powell, reached out to touch the president’s hand in a gesture of support, of an understanding of the risks they are were taking.<sup>35</sup>

Less than six hours later, the plan had to be adjusted again. During the early afternoon, CIA director George Tenet learnt from a spy that Saddam would be in a certain bunker in Baghdad that night. Franks had already ordered two F-117 Stealth Fighters, loaded with heavy bunker buster bombs, into the air. Bush, Tenet,

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<sup>33</sup> Rick Atkinson & Thomas E. Ricks: “Audacious mission, awesome risks” (*Washington Post*, 16.3.2003).

<sup>34</sup> Joseph L. Galloway: “General Tommy Franks discusses conducting the war in Iraq” (*Knight Ridder*, 19.6.2003).

<sup>35</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller et al: “How 3 weeks of war in Iraq looked from the Oval Office” (*The New York Times*, 14.4.2003); Joseph L. Galloway: “General Tommy Franks discusses conducting the war in Iraq” (*Knight Ridder*, 19.6.2003).

Rumsfeld, General Richard B. Myers (chairman of the joint chiefs of staff), national security advisor Condoleezza Rice and White House Chief of Staff came together to discuss the matter. At 1912, three minutes before what Franks said was the latest a decision could be made, Bush made up his mind. “Let’s go,” he said.<sup>36</sup> Because of the built-in flexibility, the disruption was minimal.

Within a few minutes, the bunker busters were dropped, and Baghdad was rocked by a loud explosion. According to reports at the time, Saddam apparently escaped. CIA sources reported that he was ostensibly carried off on a stretcher, blue in the face and taking oxygen. A dozen or so Tomahawk missiles were also launched on Iraqi government buildings in downtown Iraq. A few minutes later, in a four minute TV speech Bush announced that the nation was at war.<sup>37</sup>

This was the official version, widely reported in the media. However, what happened on this night is something of a mystery. Some weeks after the war, CBS Evening News astoundingly reported that the bunker, in fact, never existed. Based on the testimony of US Colonel Tim Madere, the officer in charge of inspecting key sites in Baghdad, the TV network stated that there never seems to have been a bunker on the site where the bombs exploded. “When we came out here, the primary thing they were looking for was an underground facility, or bodies, forensics, and basically, what they saw was giant holes. No underground facilities, no bodies,” Madere told the network. CBS, saying it was the first news organisation to visit the site, reported that the CIA had searched it once and Madere had searched it twice as part of the efforts to find traces of DNA that could indicate if Saddam or his sons had been killed or wounded. The network said the main palace in the compound remained standing despite the surrounding destruction. It quoted Madere as saying anyone who had been in the building could have survived the raid.<sup>38</sup>

Whether the Americans had been misinformed or whether it was a case of deliberate disinformation is not clear. Whatever the case may be, it completely disorganised the campaign plan. The beginning of the air attacks was supposed to have started on the 21<sup>st</sup>, and the ground offensive a day later. Now everything had to be hurriedly moved up a day.<sup>39</sup> And then, in the afternoon of the 20<sup>th</sup>, word came

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.; Jim Hoagland: “The Franks strategy: Fast and flexible” (*Washington Post*, 1.4.2003); Joseph L. Galloway: “General Tommy Franks discusses conducting the war in Iraq” (*Knight Ridder*, 19.6.2003).

<sup>38</sup> News report by Reuters, 29.5.2003, as sent out to the media.

<sup>39</sup> Jim Hoagland: “The Franks strategy: Fast and flexible” (*Washington Post*, 1.4.2003); Romesh Ratnesar: “Awestruck” (*Time*, 31.3.2003).

that the Iraqis were torching some oil wells, and the attack was moved up several hours.<sup>40</sup>

As discussed, American troops – special forces – were already in Iraq. Two days beforehand, 12-member teams of the special forces were sent in by helicopter in southern and western Iraq to hunt for Scud missiles and pinpoint bombing targets. Navy Seals moved to oil terminals and pumping stations in preparation for the amphibious landing of the Marines.<sup>41</sup>

### **The march to Baghdad, phase I**

Thus, late in the evening of Thursday, March 20<sup>th</sup>, the first shots of the ground war fell. A huge artillery bombardment began on the Iraqi units immediately north of the border, and shortly afterwards, the lead elements of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry and 1<sup>st</sup> Marines crossed the sand berms, fences and electrified razor wire through a series of breaches on the border, almost without any resistance being encountered.<sup>42</sup> High overhead, a strong bomber group, consisting of 3 bat-like stealthy B-2's, 12 veteran B-52s and an assortment of tanker aircraft, electronic warfare aircraft and fighter escorts, flew towards Baghdad to hit airfields with aircraft capable of dropping chemical weapons.<sup>43</sup> A few hours later, Royal Marines from the helicopter carrier HMS Ocean and the aircraft carrier HMS Ark Royal made an amphibious and helicopter landing on the Faw peninsula, the only small piece of Iraqi coastline. Almost immediately, Iraqi troops, especially from the 51<sup>st</sup> Mechanised Infantry Division, started surrendering. (Later, it transpired that a junior officer masqueraded as the divisional commander, causing the Americans to cheer prematurely.<sup>44</sup>) Many others simply ran away. Within a few hours, the Americans seized the town of Safwan and reached the harbour of Umm Qasr, while the Royal Marines secured Faw – with its oilfields – so rapidly that the torching of most of the oil wells was prevented.<sup>45</sup>

Right from the beginning, the Iraqi regular forces fought mostly very badly or not at all. This did not apply to the irregulars.

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Baker: "Overtaken by events, the battle plans are tossed aside" (*Washington Post*, 21.3.2003).

<sup>41</sup> James Dao: "War plan drew US commandos from shadows" (*The New York Times*, 28.4.2003).

<sup>42</sup> William Branigin: "Infantry confront scant resistance" (*Washington Post*, 21.3.2003).

<sup>43</sup> Seth Stern: "A new flight path for the 'invisible' bomber" (*Christian Science Monitor*, 13.5.2003).

<sup>44</sup> Michael R. Gordon: "Battle for 'Red Zone' around Baghdad gets under way" (*The New York Times*, 24.4.2003).

<sup>45</sup> Romesh Ratnesar: "Awestruck" (*Time*, 31.3.2003).

The original idea was that 1 (UK) Armoured Division would wait for two days before following in the Marines' footsteps, while the Marines would by-pass Basra, the second Iraqi city, and then press on northwards. However, the Iraqis started bombarding Kuwait and the Faw with missiles, creating the fear that Iraqi resistance might prove more serious than expected. The decision was then made, according to admiral sir Michael Boyce, chief of the UK defence staff, to throw in the British tanks and infantry immediately and have them advance directly on Basra.<sup>46</sup>

The British reached the city quickly, but rather than trying to storm into Basra and conquer the city by street-to-street-fighting, they invested it. While on the outskirts, rumours came of an uprising in the city, but nothing came of it. Divisional artillery did, however, take out enemy mortars and cannon seen in the city.<sup>47</sup> A day or so later, some Challenger tanks of the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards encountered an Iraqi convoy of T-55 tanks and armoured vehicles, apparently trying to break out. The Challengers took them on with gusto, and altogether 14 tanks and several other vehicles were destroyed without a single British casualty.<sup>48</sup>

While the British moved in the direction of Basra, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry and some elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marines meanwhile advanced at a blistering pace north-westwards, the former moving through the desert more or less parallel with the Euphrates in the west, and the latter more eastwards towards Nasiriyah on the Euphrates. In their wake a huge train of supply convoys followed. "On the Kuwaiti side," a journalist who witnessed the scene from a helicopter reported, "the lines of tan U.S. military vehicles stretched as far back as the eye could see: massive five-ton trucks pulling trailers loaded with supplies; fuel trucks; ambulances; Humvees with trailers behind them."<sup>49</sup> In the wake of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry came the lead elements of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne with the idea of establishing refuelling bases before launching deep helicopter-borne troop attacks towards Baghdad.<sup>50</sup>

Before describing the Americans' advance, one has to point out an interesting innovation. The spearpoints of their advance, in the form of 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry and 1<sup>st</sup> Marines, did not move as they normally would, by brigade. On the contrary, the brigades were all mixed up into brigade combat units or Marine combat units,

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<sup>46</sup> John Keegan: "Speed was the secret of the coalition's success" (*The Telegraph*, 10.4.2003).

<sup>47</sup> Martin Benham: "Bloody uprising in Basra" (*The Telegraph*, 26.3.2003).

<sup>48</sup> Martin Benham: "Dawn attack by British tanks 'a triumph'" (*The Telegraph*, 28.3.2003).

<sup>49</sup> Mary Beth Sheridan: "We want to be up there" (*Washington Post*, 21.3.2003).

<sup>50</sup> Rick Atkinson: "The 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division moves into Iraq" (*Washington Post*, 21.3.2003).



either infantry- or armour-heavy. According to Williamson Murray and Major-General Robert H. Scales, “[e]ach was essentially a self-contained close combat unit which, thanks to the speed and killing power of Bradleys and Abrams tanks, had the ability to command as much ground as an entire division during the Cold War.”<sup>51</sup> This was similar to the *Kampfgruppen* which the Germans employed often and with great success during the Second World War.

On the first day, other elements of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marines secured their first objective, the oil fields around Rumaila, about 30 km west of Basra. After a fast dash in their vehicles, they dismounted and advanced on foot, encouraging the Iraqis by loudspeaker to surrender. This was achieved within a few minutes.<sup>52</sup>

On day 2, the Marines reached the Euphrates at Nasiriyah with its strategically important bridges over the river, where they had to fight hard to take the crossings, losing 15 vehicles and 60 wounded in the process.<sup>53</sup> The following day, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry reached a position north of Najaf, also on the Euphrates and only about 90 km from Baghdad.<sup>54</sup> This meant that the latter division had advanced about 500 km in less than 72 hours. This made it one of the fastest armoured advances in all of military history. In May, 1940, the advance of General Heinz Guderian’s panzer corps took six days from its breakthrough at Sedan on the Meuse on May 14th until reaching the sea near Abbéville on the 20<sup>th</sup> – a distance of about 300 km.<sup>55</sup> More than a year later, in Russia, the initial advance was even more rapid. The two panzer corps of Colonel Generals Hermann Hoth and Guderian, both belonging to Army Group Centre, separately marched more than 400 km in six days, before closing the trap east of Minsk to surround several hundred thousand Russians troops.<sup>56</sup> And in June, 1967, the lead elements of Major-General Israel Tal’s armoured division reached the Suez Canal about 60 hours after starting the advance, a distance of just over 240 km.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Williamson Murray & Robert H. Scales, jr.: *The Iraq war. A military history* (Cambridge, Mass., Belknap, 2003), p. 97.

<sup>52</sup> Jonathan Finer: “Marines lay their hands on a ‘jewel’” (*Washington Post*, 22.3.2003); Bing West and Ray L. Smith: *The march up. Taking Baghdad with the 1st Marine Division* (New York, Bantam, 2003), pp. 32-33.

<sup>53</sup> Peter Baker: “A ‘turkey shoot’, but with the Marines as the targets” (*Washington Post*, 28.3.2003).

<sup>54</sup> Romesh Ratnesar: “Sticking to his guns” (*Time*, 7.4.2003); Steven Lee Myers: “Doubt and death on drive to Baghdad” (*The New York Times*, 13.4.2003).

<sup>55</sup> See map in B.H. Liddell Hart: *The Second World War* (London, Cassell, 1970), p. 64.

<sup>56</sup> See map in Walther Nehring: *Die Geschichte der Deutschen Panzerwaffe 1916-1945* (Stuttgart, Motorbuch, 2000), p. 218.

<sup>57</sup> George Forty: *Tank commanders. Knights of the modern age* (London, Caxton, 2002), pp. 174-175. Perhaps the fastest advance of all times – albeit without any resistance – must be marshal R. Malinovsky’s march through Manchuria to the north of Korea in

The significance of this extremely rapid advance was, of course, lessened by the fact that it was made through open desert. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry encountered very little resistance, having outflanked the Iraqi defensive lines in the extreme south and avoiding all defended centres during the march. Only one sizeable fight was reported – in “a town south of the Euphrates river”, where 45 Iraqi soldiers were killed by US artillery fire.<sup>58</sup> Here at Najaf airport, the Iraqis for the first time resisted fiercely. A force of militiamen opened fire on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade’s Abrams and Bradleys and kept the Americans busy for several hours. Pickup trucks with machine guns mounted on the back and with RPG-7 rocket launchers carried out several charges, amounting to suicide attacks, storming at the US armour. The Americans massacred them. As Major Kevin Dunlop told a reporter, “It’s not a fair fight. Trucks with machine guns against tanks and Bradleys can have only one outcome. We are slaughtering them.”<sup>59</sup> Then some 30 Iraqi armoured vehicles attacked the Americans from the north. Before the Americans could counterattack, however, air strikes and artillery fire wiped out the Iraqi force.<sup>60</sup>

At Najaf, the division became stuck here for several days, having outrun its supply lines.<sup>61</sup> Besides, after three days with only catnaps possible, the troops were dead tired. Some vehicles were damaged in accidents, the drivers falling asleep behind the controls.<sup>62</sup>

Further east, the 1<sup>st</sup> Marines drove northwards, after having crossed the Euphrates at Nasiriyah, fighting their way through repeated ambushes, towards Kut. Reinforcements came from the south-east, where other Marine units left Basra and its surroundings to the UK 1 Armoured Division.<sup>63</sup> To facilitate the rapid march, the division at first left 75% of its vehicles behind. Colonel Mike Oehl, a Marine tank battalion CO, put fuel bladders on each side of the tanks to lessen their dependence on logistics.<sup>64</sup>

It is a very relevant question why the regular Iraqi forces fought so badly, or, in some cases, not at all. Why were the vital bridges over the Euphrates allowed to

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August 1945 – 1 120 km in just 5 days. Cf. Raymond L. Garthoff: *How Russia makes War. Soviet military doctrine* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1954), p. 142.

<sup>58</sup> William Branigin: One ‘good fight’ but little else” (*Washington Post*, 23.3.2003).

<sup>59</sup> Jim Lacey: “On the road to death at Najaf” (*Time*, 7.4.2003).

<sup>60</sup> William Branigin: “Iraqi militia no match for armored column” (*Washington Post*, 24.3.2003).

<sup>61</sup> Steven Lee Myers: “Doubt and death on drive to Baghdad” (*The New York Times*, 13.4.2003).

<sup>62</sup> William Branigin: “Dash to Baghdad earns a day of rest” (*Washington Post*, 26.3.2003).

<sup>63</sup> Jonathan Finer: “One shot, and war becomes real” (*Washington Post*, 27.3.2003).

<sup>64</sup> Jim Landers: “Alone and unafraid” (*Dallas Morning News*, 18.5.2003).

fall undamaged into the hands of the Americans? One answer must be, undoubtedly, the Americans' rapid deep penetration into the country, which stunned and paralysed the Iraqis. But there was also another important reason. After the war General Tommy Franks disclosed that US special operatives had bought off certain Iraqi senior officers not to fight. This happened well before hostilities started, and the payments were made to officers who were in key positions and whose support were considered necessary for a rapid and relatively bloodless victory. As an anonymous senior Pentagon official was quoted: "How much does a cruise missile cost? Well, a bribe is a PGM [precision-guided missile]: it achieves the aim but it's bloodless and there's zero collateral damage."<sup>65</sup>

Things were about to go wrong. The first sign of this was when the 7th Cavalry encountered a worrisome new phenomenon near Samawah – bands of irregular *fedayeen* – which attacked the Americans with death-defying courage, if not very intelligently.<sup>66</sup> Furthermore, a unit of maintenance troops took a wrong turn in Nasiriyah and were led into an ambush by a group of these fighters. Although they fought hard, several were killed and five – four men and a woman – taken prisoner. (The female prisoner, Jessica Lynch (19), was later freed by special forces.<sup>67</sup> Later, General Franks conceded that this was for him the low point in the campaign.<sup>68</sup>) At the same time, Marines in the city were ambushed at least twice, and although they beat off the attackers, they apparently were shaken by the fact that Nasiriyah, contrary to what they had been led to believe, was not secured.<sup>69</sup>

Apparently, groups of *fedayeen* and other irregulars capitalised on the coalition approach to bypass potential points of resistance, so as to keep up the pace of the advance. For several days, every time an American supply convoy wanted to cross the bridges over the Euphrates, irregulars took them under fire, and they had to fight their way through time and again. Some Marines talked of "ambush alley"; others of a "turkey shoot" – themselves being the turkeys.<sup>70</sup>

The irregulars were helped by the fact that they were not under the operational command of the army – at least this is what one deduces from their independent attitude. Traditionally, the Iraqi army – like its mentor, the Soviet army

<sup>65</sup> Andrew Buncombe: "Why the Iraqis didn't fight: they were bribed" (*Sunday Independent*, 25.5.2003).

<sup>66</sup> Murray & Scales: *The Iraq War*, pp. 101-102.

<sup>67</sup> Jodie Morse: "Saving private Jessica" (*Time*, 14.4.2003).

<sup>68</sup> Joseph L. Galloway: "General Tommy Franks discussed conducting the war in Iraq" (*Knight Ridder*, 19.6.2003).

<sup>69</sup> Romesh Ratnesar: "Sticking to his guns" (*Time*, 7.4.2003).

<sup>70</sup> Peter Baker: "A 'turkey shoot', but with Marines as the targets" (*Washington Post*, 28.3.2003).

– operated under a rigid control from a headquarters, with very little leeway for independent thought and conduct allowed for local commanders. In this case, the irregulars used their own initiative. They also used every dirty trick in the book, and some not in it. Pretending to surrender or mixing with civilians, they would suddenly open fire.<sup>71</sup> A suicide bomber killed four GIs at a checkpoint north of Najaf.<sup>72</sup> Becoming extremely jittery, these type of events caused a Marine to open fire on a civilian vehicle, killing all inside. A search was made, but no weapons was found inside.<sup>73</sup> If the guerrillas’ purpose was to drive a wedge between the Americans and the civilian population, it seemed to be succeeding.

More or less the same happened on the Marines’ march towards Kut. “In the south we fought their regular army,” Lieutenant-Colonel Christopher Conlin, CO of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion, 7<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment, told a reporter. “Here we are fighting against a group that employs mostly guerrilla tactics. It has some of the feeling of the conflict in Afghanistan, because we have to fight both conventional and unconventional forces.”<sup>74</sup>

By March 28<sup>th</sup>, the exhausted 1<sup>st</sup> Marines could go no further. A journalist with the 11<sup>th</sup> Marine Regiment reported that the force “had all but exhausted its supplies of fuel, food rations, ammunition, and morale was at an all-time low. The officers said that it lacked everything: ‘beans, bullets and Band-Aids’.” As Lieutenant-Colonel Neil Gentry, in charge of logistics, said, first it was the sheer pace of the dash towards Baghdad. Then there were some awful mud storms. Now he had to cope with Iraqi “civilians” who wave and smile at his supply convoys, and then lob mortars and grenades as they drive past. “Everybody’s taken a few potshots,” he said.<sup>75</sup> The tank crews were limited to a little water and two, sometimes one meal a day. At one stage, the Marines who were guarding command vehicles had only 30 rounds each.<sup>76</sup>

A counterattack by regular Iraqi forces with T-55 tanks in the dead of night was stopped in its tracks and obliterated by American F-16 fighter-bombers.<sup>77</sup>

At the same time, British and American Marines had to fight hard for control of Umm Qasr, which was secured only on March 27<sup>th</sup>.<sup>78</sup> The Iraqis – and this

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Romesh Ratnesar: “Sticking to his guns” (*Time*, 7.4.2003).

<sup>73</sup> David Zucchino & Tony Perry “Allied forces may be quicker to fire” (*Los Angeles Times*, 29.3.2003).

<sup>74</sup> Jonathan Finer: “Marines in south struggle to identify roving militiamen” (*Washington Post*, 28.3.2003).

<sup>75</sup> Anon.: “Beans and bullets in short supply” (*The Times*, 29.3.2003).

<sup>76</sup> Jim Landers: “Alone and unafraid” (*Dallas Morning News*, 18.5.2003).

<sup>77</sup> Anon. “Stranded, 90 miles from Baghdad” (*The Times*, 28.3.2003).

included a few units of the regular army – fought much better and harder than expected. The anticipated uprising of the oppressed Shiite Iraqis in the south did not take place. Wary of American promises of help, which did not materialise when they rebelled in 1991 against Saddam, they stayed neutral, watching how things went. As an American officer remarked at the time, “It’s always bad to build plans based on the co-operation of the enemy.”<sup>79</sup>

Another sign of trouble was the big helicopter gunship attack by the 11<sup>th</sup> Attack Helicopter Regiment, an independent unit attached directly to V Corps, on the evening of March 22<sup>nd</sup>, on the Republican Guard’s Medina mechanised infantry division near Karbala. According to Lieutenant-General William S. Wallace, commander of V Corps, the idea was to demonstrate that Army aviation could devastate a heavy division. But everything went wrong. Instead of attacking in co-operation with the Air Force – at the very least to take out AA fire – the 34 AH-64D Apache Longbow gunships went in alone. A wall of fire greeted them. “It was as if we had stirred a hornet’s nest,” one of the pilots told CNN. Also, the Iraqis were warned by a network of observers with mobile phones. One Apache was shot down by small-arms fire and the two-man crew taken prisoner. The rest were peppered by 23mm cannon, which chewed up their rotor blades and blew gaping holes in their hulls. When they limped back to base, having destroyed as little as five tanks and some vehicles, it was determined that at least 27 were not serviceable any more, having been damaged too severely.<sup>80</sup> The regiment was unfit for further combat. Clearly, a rethink about helicopter gunship operations was needed, as the Army’s most important deep-attack weapon appeared to be neutered.

That evening, the military historian Rick Atkinson, embedded with the HQ of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne, was present during a teleconference discussion between pilots of the 11<sup>th</sup> Aviation Regiment and some of their counterparts with the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne. According to his book about his experiences, the following points were made:

- No precise intelligence about the location of the targets was available, only vague indications. “The attack therefore required what the Army called a

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<sup>78</sup> Anthony Cordesman: *The “Instant” lessons” of the Iraq war: Main report, eighth working draft, May 14, 2003*, p. 58, at [www.csis.org/features/iraq\\_instantlessons.pdf](http://www.csis.org/features/iraq_instantlessons.pdf).

<sup>79</sup> Julian Borger et al: “How the Pentagon’s plans for a quick war ran into the sand” (*The Guardian*, 28.3.2003).

<sup>80</sup> Mary Beth Sheridan: “Copter unit retools tactics after fight” (*Washington Post*, 26.3.2003); Rowan Scarborough: “Apache operation a lesson in defeat” (*Washington Times*, 22.4.2003); Observer reporting team: “The reality of war” (*The Observer*, 30.3.2003).

movement to contact – groping for the enemy – rather than the deliberate attack preferred by the marauding helicopter units”;

- Due to the speed of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry’s advance, the attack was advanced by 24 hours, which allowed precious little time for proper planning;
- Instead of the flanking attack from the west favoured by the regiment’s planners, V Corps allowed only a direct attack from the south because of fear that the flanking movement might encroach on 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne’s air space;
- While in the air, US intelligence eavesdroppers identified at least 50 cell phone calls by Iraqi observers, being a very effective early warning system. (The direct route enabled the defenders to bring their defences up to speed in time);
- The Americans preferred not to disable the area’s power grid. This left the defenders with a very useful command and control device – at a certain juncture, all the lights were centrally turned off and on again. The next moment, all hell broke loose as everybody with a gun started firing on the Apaches;
- The unbelievably long time of 30 minutes was allowed between suppression of enemy air defences and the actual attack. Normally, the one should follow immediately after the other to prevent the enemy from regaining his breath.<sup>81</sup>

It would not be until April 3<sup>rd</sup> that the 11<sup>th</sup>, its choppers patched up, was able to return to the battle – and even then not in full strength.<sup>82</sup>

In general, it was apparent that the advance was in trouble. To make things worse, a blinding sandstorm broke out, making life for the troops exceedingly difficult and movement on the ground impossible. Eyewitnesses with the Marines reported: “Around midnight above the wind came a low, coughing growl that then grew into a roar, followed by lightning. The thunderstorm lasted an hour, the rain lashing them, hardening into sleet pellets and finally into hail. Then the wind shifted from the south to the west and blew in as icy as winter. Throughout that night of wind, dust, rain, and biting cold [sergeant] Johnson trooped the line, rotating his men to the cramped shelter of an Amtrac. Each took turns out of the wind for half an

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<sup>81</sup> Rick Atkinson: *In the company of soldiers* (New York, Henry Holt, 2004), pp. 147-153. Cf. Also Murray & Scales: *The Iraq war*, pp. 105-109.

<sup>82</sup> Mary Beth Sheridan: “Apache helicopters flying more cautious missions” (*Washington Post*, 4.4.2003).

hour, recovering body warmth and then following the communications wire back to their fighting holes.”<sup>83</sup>

Back home, some people started to doubt that the war was a good idea after all.

### **The operational pause**

The operational pause that followed was forced on the Americans for several reasons. They simply needed to sleep and rest – a body can, after all, only take so much punishment and not more. They had to replenish their food, fuel, ammunition, spare parts, medical supplies – there was a shortage of almost everything an army on the march needs. Perhaps more importantly, it was a chance to reflect on how to extricate themselves from what some observers feared was a morass in which they had become bogged down.

Especially since Gulf I, a new phenomenon popped up in warfare. This was the intense way the war was instantly being dissected in the media. The major TV news networks – the BBC, Sky News, CNN, Fox – as well as newspapers commissioned knowledgeable journalists or retired officers to comment on the operational and tactical approach. Invariably, without all the facts at their disposal, and (this especially applied to retired generals who had no reason to love Donald Rumsfeld and took the opportunity to snipe at him), they sometimes got it wrong. This was, after all, merely, the first draft of history, so to speak. But they also helped creating the agenda for public debate. And therefore, for a few days, the Pentagon had to divert considerable energy to defend itself against critics.

Halfway into the war, *Time Magazine* perhaps summed up the problem best: “If the Pentagon’s plan was to fight from the ‘inside out’ – a lightning drive on Baghdad to decapitate the regime and then liberate the rest of the country – Saddam has counterattacked from the outside in. He let allied forces plunge deep inside Iraq, leaving their rear and flanks ill protected so that his forces could harass and ambush them. His aim was shrewd and twofold: to pester and wear down allied forces and to lure the US into inflicting politically costly civilian casualties.”<sup>84</sup>

And the London *Observer* asked: “Should the US and British military planners have anticipated this combination of tactics? The answer, say some military sources, is yes. It has long been known that Saddam is an admirer of the tactics of Stalin, particularly his order of ‘Not One Step Back’, issued for the defence of Stalingrad, where the German 6<sup>th</sup> Army was sucked into a street-by-street and

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<sup>83</sup> West & Smith: *The march up*. pp. 60-61.

<sup>84</sup> Johanna McGeary: “3 Flawed assumptions” (*Time*, 7.4.2003).

building-by-building attack. Intelligence officers have known for some time that Iraqi officers have been making studies of US military failures, from Vietnam to Somalia, to assess weaknesses in US technology and military planning, and vulnerability to unconventional tactics ...”<sup>85</sup>

With the offensive stalled and with the background of infighting between Rumsfeld and his Pentagon civilian advisors on the one hand, and a lot of generals on the other, the knives came out. Suddenly, a lot of leaks were made to the media. One such leak, particularly damaging to Rumsfeld, was of a wargame in 2002, called Millennium Challenge, in which a retired Marine General, Paul van Riper, acted the part of a rogue Middle Eastern military leader. By using more or less the tactics which now were practised by Saddam Hussein, he inflicted huge losses on a US force. A British newspaper reported: “He was so successful the wargame had to be stopped, and the old general was instructed to play ‘by the rules’. He pulled out of the exercise in protest.”<sup>86</sup>

Another leak was about a CIA assessment before the war, warning of “hit and run tactics” and using “RPG’s and small arms”.<sup>87</sup> In addition, all the details of the whole infighting between Rumsfeld and the generals before the war was leaked to *The New Yorker* magazine.<sup>88</sup> But perhaps the most damaging comment to Rumsfeld came, quite openly and on the record, from Lieutenant-General William S. Wallace, commander of V Corps. “The enemy we’re fighting is different from the one we’d war-gamed against,” he said during a visit to the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne’s HQ. Referring to the suicide attacks, he said, “The attacks we’re seeing are bizarre – technical vehicles [*bakkies*] with .05 calibers and every kind of weapon charging tanks and Bradleys. It’s disturbing to think that someone can be that brutal.” Asked whether this meant that the war could last much longer than planners had made provision for, he answered, “It’s beginning to look that way.”<sup>89</sup>

And col. (ret.) Ralph Peters, a well-known military commentator and novelist, said pointedly, “No secretary of defence at least since Robert McNamara

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<sup>85</sup> Observer reporting team: “The reality of war” (*The Observer*, 30.3.2003). For a similar view, see also Sebastian Rotella: “Hussein hopes to draw US into urban combat” (*Los Angeles Times*, 28.3.2003).

<sup>86</sup> Julian Borger: “Knives come out for Rumsfeld as the generals fight back” (*The Guardian*, 31.3.2003).

<sup>87</sup> Evan Thomas & John Barry: “A plan under attack” (*Newsweek*, 7.4.2003).

<sup>88</sup> Seymour M. Hersh: “Offense and defense” (*The New Yorker*, 4.7.2003).

<sup>89</sup> Rick Atkinson: “General: a longer war likely” (*Washington Post*, 28.3.2003).



has made himself so hated by the people in uniform, because he treats them absolutely arrogantly and General Franks begged for more troops.”<sup>90</sup>

The question was indeed: Were there enough troops to do the job? Were the three American divisions, of which only one was a really heavy formation, adequate? No, said General (ret.) Barry R. McCaffrey, who commanded the 24<sup>th</sup> Mechanised Infantry Division in the Gulf War. “In my judgement, there should have been a minimum of two heavy divisions and an armoured cavalry regiment on the ground – that’s how our doctrine reads.”<sup>91</sup> (Of course, there were two heavy divisions in the initial invasion force, but one was prevented by Turkey’s refusal to let the 4<sup>th</sup> Infantry invade Iraq from the north.)

Some commentators did indeed leap to the troops’ defence. British Major-General (ret.) Julian Thompson pointed out that wars “rarely go precisely to plan”. Despite “the worst sandstorm in years, and tougher than anticipated resistance ... US troops have advanced impressive distances.” As wars go, he wrote, “this one has progressed quite well so far, but there is a long haul ahead”.<sup>92</sup> Colonel Richard Hart Sinnreich, former director of the Army School of Advanced Military Studies and one of the most respected military observers in the US, cautioned that there was “still a lot of [US] combat power in the region that has not yet engaged with Iraqi forces”. The attacks by the Fedayeen and some Iraqi regular army forces on the American lines of communication were “pinpricks”, he added.<sup>93</sup> And an irritated White House official snapped, “Imagine if FDR had to put up with this between D-Day and the fall of Berlin.”<sup>94</sup>

On March 25<sup>th</sup>, Lieutenant-General David D. McKiernan, commander of the coalition ground forces, officiated over a video teleconference with his top officers to decide what to do next. According to one eyewitness, some of the generals were “pessimistic about continuing to Baghdad without first securing overextended supply lines and cleaning out fierce pockets of resistance in the south”. On the other hand, Lieutenant-General James T. Conway, the senior Marine officer in the theatre, “argued that in just five days, the US ground force had seized Iraq’s southern oil fields, captured two critical bridges over the Euphrates River and raced up the road

<sup>90</sup> Julian Borger: “Knives come out for Rumsfeld as the generals fight back” (*The Guardian*, 31.3.2003).

<sup>91</sup> Vernon Loeb & Thomas E. Ricks: “Questions raised about invasion force” (*Washington Post*, 25.3.2003).

<sup>92</sup> Julian Thompson: “It’s not going quite to plan – but these things never do” (*The Observer*, 30.3.2003).

<sup>93</sup> Richard T. Cooper & Esther Schrader: “The ‘whens’ of war blow up a storm” (*Los Angeles Times*, 29.3.2003).

<sup>94</sup> Elisabeth Bumiller et al: “How 3 weeks of war in Iraq looked from the Oval Office” (*The New York Times*, 13.4.2003).

toward the capital.” Conway conceded that there were casualties, but, he continued, “as a result of this action, we are now ready for the push to Baghdad”.<sup>95</sup> It is not known what decisions, if any, were taken during this conference. Deducing from what happened afterwards, it may be assumed that it was planned to resume the advance as soon as possible.

A few days later, on March 29<sup>th</sup>, those who were in favour of pressing on as soon as possible, received powerful backing out of Washington. On that day, president Bush convened a teleconference from Camp David with his senior national security advisors and officers, and, according to one report, “decided to keep the military’s sights fixed on Baghdad, calculating that the Iraqi capital remained the primary objective in the war”. Again the word went out to the troops: “Speed, speed, speed!”<sup>96</sup>

Because of the pressing need to safeguard the long lines of supply, it was also decided not to use the airborne troops in the way planned. Instead, they were pressed into service in the rear areas. During the March 24<sup>th</sup> teleconference, it was decided to use 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne to subdue Najaf, while General Tommy Franks released the extra brigade from 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne from the operational reserve to V Corps to mop up Nasiriyah.<sup>97</sup> Some soldiers of the latter unit told a reporter that this represented a clear deviation of their original mission, which was to make an airborne attack on the Saddam Hussein International Airport just outside Baghdad. The threat to the American lines of communication meant that the brigade had to be diverted.<sup>98</sup> Lieutenant-General William Wallace, CO of V Corps, himself conceded that the Iraqi irregulars, who “were more fanatical and aggressive than we expected them to be”, caused him headaches. It meant that places which the Americans planned to bypass now had to be fought for.<sup>99</sup> He conceded that he could not “discount the fanaticism with which the paramilitaries fought”. He was “not willing to ignore the threat it posed”. Although he had “a very strong point of the spear with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division”, he did not have “a heavily mobile secondary force”. At the time, the mobility of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne was restricted, as the division did not

<sup>95</sup> Rick Atkinson et al: “Confused start, decisive end” (*Washington Post*, 13.3.2003).

<sup>96</sup> Thomas E. Ricks: “What counted: People, plan, inept enemy” (*Washington Post*, 10.4.2003).

<sup>97</sup> See for example Rick Atkinson: “101<sup>st</sup> Airborne tightens noose on Najaf” (*Washington Post*, 30.3.2003); Rick Atkinson: “As battle escalates, holy site is turned into a battleground” (*Washington Post*, 1.4.2003); Murray & Scales: *The Iraq War*, p. 196. For a comprehensive description of the division’s pacifying of Najaf, see Rick Atkinson: *In the company of soldiers* (New York, Henry Holt, 2004), pp. 195-213.

<sup>98</sup> Monte Reel: “For 82<sup>nd</sup>, a skirmish over major supply route” (*Washington Post*, 30.3.2003).

<sup>99</sup> Steven Komarow: “General recounts key moments in Baghdad’s fall” (*USA Today*, 14.4.2003).

have enough vehicles at the front, the bulk still being either in Kuwait or underway. This, General Wallace said, “was the low point of the entire campaign for me”.<sup>100</sup> Later, the 101<sup>st</sup> did bring its helicopters forward to landing strips in the western desert on March 26<sup>th</sup>, but these weapons were not able to take on the Republican Guard by itself.<sup>101</sup>

At the same time, according to another report, the original plan regarding the British had to be amended as well. The British 7 Armoured Brigade was originally intended to move northward after the fall of Basra (which was expected fairly quickly) and establish a rear base for the advancing US Marines. In the face of the continuing resistance in the city the Desert Rats could not be released.<sup>102</sup>

The continuing fight to safeguard the American lines of supply was at times hairy, but was helped by the fact that the Iraqis did not fight very intelligently. Rather than scatter their guerrilla forces, as guerrilla doctrine demands,<sup>103</sup> the Iraqis concentrated their fighters in a few buildings, typically the local headquarters of the Baath Party. In an interview after the war Franks observed a pattern: Rather than defending the cities, the paramilitaries “simply collapsed back into the city and went to the intelligence HQ or SSO [Special Security Organisation] HQ or Baath Party HQ, drove their trucks up to the building and went inside to do whatever it is they do. Our troops identified this early. Thus the solution to the Fedayeen challenge was to fight them on the lines of communication until they withdrew to Baath Party headquarters and then to destroy the headquarters.” Large numbers of fighters were killed in this way. The Americans also noticed that when they moved armour into the cities, “the Fedayeen would sacrifice themselves by climbing up on the tanks. They had no tactics to deal with armour. The Marines moved very successfully through and cleared a major headquarters in Nasiriyah ... It was determined that this technique was very effective in dealing with the paramilitary: to move armour into urban areas. First the Brits moved into Basra. Then the Marines made a move into Nasiriyah with armour formations. Very effective. Same thing with 101<sup>st</sup> [Airborne] as it moved into Najaf. So what later turned out to be the thunder runs into Baghdad had been informed by fights in each one of these cities, and that was how [Lieutenant-General David] McKiernan [CO of all the coalition ground forces in the

<sup>100</sup> Cited in Anthony Cordesman: *The “instant” lessons” of the Iraq war: Main report, eighth working draft, May 14, 2003*, p. 119, at [www.csis.org/features/iraq\\_instantlessons.pdf](http://www.csis.org/features/iraq_instantlessons.pdf).

<sup>101</sup> Julian Borger et al: “How the Pentagon’s promise of a quick war ran into the desert sand (*The Guardian*, 28.3.2003).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. André Beaufre: *Strategy for tomorrow* (London, MacDonalds & Jane, 1974), pp. 39-40.

theatre and Lieutenant-General] Scott Wallace [CO of V Corps] determined the tactic and technique to secure Baghdad.”<sup>104</sup>

The Americans also used to broadcast through loudspeakers that the Iraqi fighters were sexually impotent. For the Iraqi macho *fedayeen*, this insult frequently was too much to bear, with the result that they recklessly charged the Americans, only to be killed *en masse*.<sup>105</sup>

In a slap to Rumsfeld, the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division at Fort Knox, Texas and the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division in Germany were alerted to deploy to Iraq. (This would, however, take some weeks, as the formations had to be moved by sea.) As an interim measure, it was decided to rush the independent 2<sup>nd</sup> Armoured Cavalry Regiment by air to the theatre of operations to augment the forces already there.<sup>106</sup> This unit, however, did not arrive in time to see action.

In the meantime, possibly as a result of the video conference, the air attacks by the Air Force, Navy and the Marines’ organic air support were redoubled. The Air Force commander, Lieutenant-General T. Michael “Buzz” Moseley, ordered a dramatic escalation in the assault on the Republican Guard divisions which were positioned astride the southern approaches to the capital. “We’re killing the Republican Guard,” he reportedly told his staff officers at a daily briefing at the US operations centre in Saudi Arabia. “But I want you to kill them faster.”

As a result of this, the air battle was rearranged. Tanker aircraft were ordered into Iraqi air space to give American fighter-bombers more time over the target areas. JSTARS and AWACS planes were also sent into Iraq. Combined, these lumbering aircraft, based on the Boeing 707 airframe (and quite defenceless) were able to survey hundreds of square kilometres at once. The sandstorms whipping across central Iraq which made any ground movement almost impossible at that time, were no impediment to the big planes, whose sophisticated sensors could see right through the dense dust clouds. Every time the Iraqis moved in a coherent formation, the JSTARS detected them at once and fed the information in real time to the relevant ground HQ’s. This meant, said the air operations director, Brigadier-

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<sup>104</sup> Joseph L. Galloway: “General Tommy Franks discusses conducting the war in Iraq” (*Knight Ridder*, 19.6.2003); Evan Thomas & Martha Brant: “The education of Tommy Franks” (*Newsweek*, 19.5.2003).

<sup>105</sup> Evan Thomas & Martha Brant: “America at war” (*Newsweek*, 21.4.2003). Murray & Scales (*The Iraq War*, p. 172) also refer to this remarkable incident.

<sup>106</sup> News report of Associated Press, 31.3.2003, as sent out to the media.

General Dan Darnell, that US commanders “knew the layout of the Republican Guard forces better than their own division commanders did”.<sup>107</sup>

The result was a heavy, sustained air assault on the Republican Guard, the results of which would prove to be dramatic. Carpet-bombing by heavy B-52 and B-1 bombers destroyed dozens of tanks and other vehicles. Aircraft on a variety of missions over Iraq were ordered to unload whatever ordnance they still had on board on the Republican Guard before returning to base. Apparently, the Iraqis believed that the sandstorms would protect them. In one instance, a number of Republican Guard T-72's stayed concentrated so tightly near Najaf that a US air strike destroyed 30 of them with just four JDAMS or satellite-guided bombs. It was an example of the awesome power and precision that the new weapons conferred on aircraft. In addition, the airstrip at Najaf was turned into a refuelling point for A-10 attack planes, giving them extra time over the battlefield.<sup>108</sup>

The Army also joined in the fray. Some 40 Apache gunships of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne struck targets around Karbala on the evening of March 28<sup>th</sup>. This time, different tactics were used compared to the previous time, when the 11<sup>th</sup> Attack Helicopter Regiment was badly mauled by the Medina Division. Their attack was integrated with that of fixed-wing fighter-bombers of the Air Force and the Marines, and although they did not discover large concentrations of troops, they were able to pinpoint six heavily defended targets to the Air Force and Navy, which promptly took them out. Ground artillery also joined in, bombarding suspected air defence sites beforehand to lessen the defence's ability to resist the Apaches.<sup>109</sup>

The Republican Guard was, indeed, the key to the expected coming Battle of Baghdad. Of the six divisions, three were stationed to the south and three to the north of Baghdad – a strange disposition, if one takes into account that the northern front never really materialised as was envisaged in both Washington and Baghdad before the war. However, Saddam now appeared to see his mistake, and started moving two of the northern divisions round to the south. At one stage, the Medina Division, considered to be the best-armed Iraqi formation, even threatened the 3<sup>rd</sup> Squadron of the 7<sup>th</sup> Cavalry Regiment. However, on the way, the Iraqis were badly mauled. First, in spite of the weather, hundreds of satellite-guided JDAMS were unloaded on them. Then came the B-1B and B-52 bombers, saturating the area with carpet-bombing, inflicting horrific destruction. On the southern approaches, the

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<sup>107</sup> Bradley Graham & Vernon Loeb: “An air war of might, coordination and risks” (*Washington Post*, 27.4.2003).

<sup>108</sup> Ibid.

<sup>109</sup> Rick Atkinson: “A flotilla of army helicopters joins attack on Karbala” (*Washington Post*, 29.3.2003); Murray & Scales: *The Iraq war*, pp. 109-110.

Americans now faced five divisions – or the remnants thereof – the Adnan, Medina, Baghdad, the Hammurabi and the Nebuchanezzar.<sup>110</sup>

The need was to destroy all six divisions, to neutralise them as coherent fighting formations capable of undertaking operations before Baghdad could be approached. In case Saddam transformed Baghdad into another Stalingrad, it was imperative that the Republican Guard be rendered ineffective before they could pull back into the capital, thereby adding to Saddam's forces there, and making it much more difficult for the attackers. In this, the coalition succeeded devastatingly. By March 31<sup>st</sup>, intelligence officers estimated that the Medina Division's combat readiness was cut in half, with one particularly hard hit brigade down to as little as 20%.<sup>111</sup> Four days later, the estimate was that the Medina had only 18% of its firepower left and the Hammurabi 44%.<sup>112</sup> But first, the Americans had to break through the Iraqi defence lines at Karbala and Kut. And the general expectation was still that the Iraqis would fight determinedly.<sup>113</sup>

### **The air war**

In fact, there was no air war from the Iraqi side. Not a single sortie was flown by the Iraqi air force during the entire three weeks of hostilities. After the shooting stopped, Australian special forces discovered a cache of 50 Iraqi fighter aircraft and AA missiles – including three Russian-built MiG-25s – at a base in the west of the country. Most of the aeroplanes were in good condition. Most were hidden in buildings or under camouflage netting, while others were even buried.<sup>114</sup>

This meant that American and British air superiority fighters had very little to do, other than to escort bombers without seeing any action. The “mud-movers”, by contrast, had plenty to do, and this has been and will be discussed elsewhere. Nevertheless, statistics show that the airmen mostly had it relatively easy. By the beginning of April, only 17 aircraft had been lost, all in accidents or friendly fire.<sup>115</sup>

<sup>110</sup> Edward Epstein: “Tank battle seen as start of real war” (*San Francisco Chronicle*, 27.3.2003); William M. Arkin: “Fliers rose to occasion” (*Los Angeles Times*, 1.6.2003).

<sup>111</sup> Rick Atkinson: “As battle escalates, holy site is turned into a battleground” (*Washington Post*, 1.4.2003).

<sup>112</sup> Bradley Graham & Vernon Loeb: “An air war of might, coordination and risks” (*Washington Post*, 27.4.2003).

<sup>113</sup> Michael R. Gordon: “March to Baghdad slowed, US forces weigh strategies” (*The New York Times*, 27.3.2003); Paul Richter & John Hendren: “US aim is to defeat Republican Guard on outskirts” (*Los Angeles Times*, 28.3.2003).

<sup>114</sup> Neil Tweedie & Toby Harnden: “Half of Saddam's combat fighter force unearthed” (*The Telegraph*, 19.4.2003).

<sup>115</sup> Kevin Sack & Alan C. Miller: “Accidents chief foe for allied aircraft” (*Los Angeles Times*, 3.4.2003).

Interestingly enough, when compared to the Gulf War of 1991, it looks at first glance as if the air forces did considerably less than then. In 1991 there were 120 000 sorties of all kinds, including 40 000 strike stories, and 265 000 bombs were dropped. In 2003 there were only 41 404 sorties, of which 15 500 were strike sorties, dropping 27 000 bombs. But bear in mind that only 10% of the bombs dropped in 1991 were “smart”, whereas this percentage now was about 68. Also, in 1991 the focus of the strategic bombing campaign was on destroying the Iraqi infrastructure. Now, roads, railways, bridges, etc., were not targeted, only “regime targets”, in order to spare as much of the country as possible. And even these targets did not bear the brunt of the air campaign. The tactical bombing was concentrated on the Iraqi troops in the field – 82% of all the targets attacked from the air, were troops and/or their vehicles.<sup>116</sup>

Technology made this possible. In the Second World War, it typically took about 3 000 air sorties to eliminate a single target like a tank or a building. In the Gulf War, it took only 10 sorties. Now, one plane could – and frequently did – take out 10 targets.<sup>117</sup>

The intimidatory effect of this on both the Iraqi military and civilians was considerable. Exactly how helpless the Iraqis were against the overwhelming, sustained coalition air attack is illustrated by the following account of a British Tornado bomber which bombed targets in Baghdad: “Baghdad was ablaze,” the pilot recounted. “There were explosions going off every few seconds. We had anti-aircraft fire to one side and multiple rocket launches were used against us, putting up about eight to ten missiles. We could see them, but they were never a threat ... When we got up we had to fly through a wall of coalition aircraft waiting to go in behind us. We found our way through. It was in some ways the most dangerous part. There was so much up there. I have never seen anything like it ... When we approached Baghdad it was a red glow on the horizon. The missiles were already doing their work ... I would not have wanted to be on the receiving end.”<sup>118</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Lt.gen. T. Michael Moseley: “Operation Iraqi Freedom – By the numbers”, at [www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2003/uscentaf\\_oif\\_report\\_30apr2003.pdf](http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/report/2003/uscentaf_oif_report_30apr2003.pdf); Nick Childs: “America’s air war on Iraq”, at [news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/29950837.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/29950837.stm); John H. Cushman jr. & Thom Shanker: “A war like no other uses new 21<sup>st</sup>-century methods to disable enemy forces” (*The New York Times*, 10.4.2003).

<sup>117</sup> Evan Thomas & Martha Brant: “The education of Tommy Franks” (*Newsweek*, 19.5.2003).

<sup>118</sup> Murray & Scales: *The Iraq war*, pp. 166-167.

## The march to Baghdad, phase 2

On Sunday morning, March 31<sup>st</sup>, the Americans started moving again. It seems that the idea was, at first, somewhat more limited than a full-scale resumption of the march. The first attacks were most likely only probing in nature, to establish the state of the Iraqi defences. During his daily briefing to the media in Qatar, Brigadier-General Vincent Brooks two days later spoke of “simultaneous, limited objective attacks near Al Hilla, Karbala, and As Samawa”, with the intention of creating “vulnerabilities in the Republican Guard defenses, and also to isolate the remaining pockets of resistance for destruction at a time of our choosing”.<sup>119</sup>

The renewed offensive started with two classic feints. On the eastern front, Major-General James N. Mattis, CO of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Division, sent his 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment along the highway to the southern edge of Kut, while the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> Regiments took off directly in the direction of Baghdad. This was meant to make his direct opponents, the Baghdad Division of the Republican Guard, believe that the Marines were splitting up, and that the attack on Kut would not be pressed to full strength. However, the 5<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> then circled back and slammed into the Iraqi rear, cutting up what remained of them after several days of intense air strikes. (Everything did not quite go according to plan, inducing the very aggressive Mattis to fire the commander of the 1<sup>st</sup> Regiment, Colonel Joe W. Dowdy, for not pressuring the Iraqis hard enough.)<sup>120</sup> As a result, the division was, in the clinical military parlance, made “irrelevant to the battle” of Baghdad.<sup>121</sup> In other words, it was for all intents and purposes destroyed.

When the Marines swept further forward, the Iraqi soldiers simply melted away. As Lieutenant-Colonel Doug Fairfield of the 1<sup>st</sup> Marines described it, “By the time we got here [Kut] there was no one left. They just went home, I guess. Tanks are everywhere. They have just been abandoned with helmets, uniforms and piles and piles of ammunition lying around.” The lead elements reached Hilla, well on the way to Baghdad.<sup>122</sup>

Already by April 1<sup>st</sup>, it was clear that the Iraqi resistance was crumbling, and what started as probing attacks turned into a headlong offensive towards Baghdad as the Americans exploited the situation.

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<sup>119</sup> Briefing at [www.centcom.mil/CENTCOMNews/Transcripts/20030401.htm](http://www.centcom.mil/CENTCOMNews/Transcripts/20030401.htm).

<sup>120</sup> Rick Atkinson et al: “Confused start, decisive end” (*Washington Post*, 13.3.2003); Jim Landers: “Alone and unafraid” (*Dallas Morning News*, 18.5.2003).

<sup>121</sup> Tony Perry & Geoffrey Mohan: “US troops break through Iraqi lines” (*Los Angeles Times*, 2.1.2003).

<sup>122</sup> News report by Reuters, 21.4.2003, as sent out to the media.



Three days later, the Iraqis tried to mount a counterattack to stop the Marines. A large force of Iraqi artillery and armoured vehicles moved out of the capital under cover of darkness, but was picked up by a Hunter reconnaissance drone. A good example of how the new technology helped to overwhelm the enemy, Marine officers watched the Iraqi column live on a video screen, while they coordinated a devastating air attack. Some officers called out grid co-ordinates, while other passed them on directly to the aircraft either by telephone or Internet chat rooms. Then the Marine F/A-18 Hornets and AV/8B Harriers struck. According to an eyewitness, on the video screen “tiny figures could be seen running from the vehicles. At times a giant flash of light would blind the Hunter camera, and all that would be left on the highway would be smoking wreckage. On a few occasions, the initial hit was followed by repeated secondary explosions and crackling fireworks, suggesting that an ammunition truck had been struck. A bomb-assessment report indicated that about 80 vehicles were destroyed in what amounted to a turkey shoot.”<sup>123</sup>

In the west, another feint of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry apparently completely fooled the Iraqi defenders. Upon receiving intelligence that the air strikes of the previous days had badly mauled the Medina Division, the US divisional CO, Major-General Buford Blount III, decided to deviate from the agreed plan. This would have been an orthodox concentrated assault through the so-called Karbala Gap. But he then took a calculated risk, namely to spread out his division. He ordered his 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade to veer eastwards to the south of Karbala to draw the Iraqis’ attention away from his major thrust by the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade northwards to the Karbala Gap. What was left of the Republican Guard divisions positioned themselves to the north-east on the road between Karbala and Baghdad. The 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade encountered only isolated resistance and seized the bridge over the Euphrates by nightfall on April 1<sup>st</sup>. Two days later, while the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade engaged remnants of the Medina Division (which was already on the verge of disintegration because of the air attacks<sup>124</sup>) from the front, the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade advanced around their back and hit them suddenly with a hammer-blow. At the same time, the Air Force bombed them relentlessly from the air. This was the only orthodox tank battle of the war, and according to Brigadier-General Lloyd B. Austen, “the decisive battle of the war”. “We absolutely decimated what was left of Medina,” he told a reporter. According to other reports, about 800 soldiers of the

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<sup>123</sup> Bradley Graham & Vernon Loeb: “An air war of might, coordination and risks” (*Washington Post*, 27.4.2003).

<sup>124</sup> Cf. William Branigin: “A brief, bitter war for Iraq’s officers” (*Washington Post*, 27.4.2003).

Medina were killed, without a single American casualty. And furthermore, the division advanced almost 70 km in a single day.<sup>125</sup>

Another source describes something which may have been the same fight. After what seemed like a fierce battle, all the Iraqi tanks were destroyed or disabled, and the surviving crews fled. The Americans suffered no losses. Upon examination of the ambush, it became clear that the enemy tanks were very well and professionally placed, but their salvos failed to hit a single US vehicle. The cause of this, an observer surmised, was that the Iraqis never got the chance to exercise with their guns and that the cannon themselves grew inaccurate with age.<sup>126</sup> This must have been a great relief to the attackers.

Another eyewitness, who apparently saw only the air strikes, reported that by the time the Air Force was finished with the Medina, “there was practically nothing for the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade to fight, only burned-out hulks of vehicles with no Iraqi soldiers in sight.” As the army vehicles moved further, a growing number of white flags fluttered from civilian houses and buildings along the way. Only 24 hours later, on the evening of April 3<sup>rd</sup>, the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade occupied the Saddam Hussein International Airport on the outskirts of the capital. A counterattack by irregulars and Republican Guards were beaten back with heavy losses.<sup>127</sup>

The division was now fighting through terrain entirely different from the desert they had moved through earlier. Now they were “in lush farmland, criss-crossed with canals”. Everywhere they looked, the soldiers saw “the smoking carcasses of cars and trucks hit by American air power and artillery. Occasionally they see the burnt-out hulk of a Russian-made Iraqi tank.”<sup>128</sup>

In Baghdad itself, not far away, the rumbling of a new sound to the south startled the inhabitants. They had grown used to the loud explosions of bombs dropped on their city, but this was different. This was the sound of artillery, proof that the American steamroller was inexorably on the march. As an American reporter in Baghdad wrote: “They have come, just over the southern horizon. No one

<sup>125</sup> Steven Lee Myers: “Doubt and death on drive to Baghdad” (*The New York Times*, 10.4.2003); Johanna McGeary: “Target: Saddam” (*Time*, 14.4.2003); William M. Arkin: “Good news from the front” (*Los Angeles Times*, 11.5.2003).

<sup>126</sup> David Mulholland: “Luck or good judgement?” (*Jane’s Defence Weekly*, 15.4.2003).

<sup>127</sup> William Branigin: “Troops take control of highway in push north” (*Washington Post*, 31.3.2003); Patrick E. Tyler: “2 US columns are advancing on Baghdad defenses” (*The New York Times*, 1.4.2003); Tony Perry & Geoffrey Mohan: “US troops break through Iraqi lines” (*Los Angeles Times*, 2.4.2003); R.W. Apple jr.: “US commander, evoking MacArthur, hops past cities to Baghdad” (*The New York Times*, 4.4.2003); Steven Lee Myers: “Doubt and death on drive to Baghdad” (*The New York Times*, 13.4.2003).

<sup>128</sup> Kevin Peraino & Evan Thomas: “The Grunts’ War” (*Newsweek*, 14.4.2003).

in the city has seen them yet, but the steady drumroll of bombs, the steady thunder of artillery and the impunity with which allied airplanes roamed the sky all day left no doubt that the long-expected US forces had reached almost to the city's edge."<sup>129</sup>

For the time being, things inside the city went on relatively normal. People turned up for work, the telephones, water and electricity and public transport still worked. And Mohammed Saeed al-Sahad, the Iraqi minister of information, dubbed "Comical Ali" by some, still churned out his propaganda barrage to the effect that the attackers were being badly beaten. The journalists to whom he spoke had stopped believing him a long time ago. Now even the Baghdadi's started doubting him.<sup>130</sup>

In the meantime, the Marines were closing in from the south-east as well. After having routed the Iraqis at Kut, they crossed the Tigris on April 2<sup>nd</sup> on a pontoon bridge and other bridges which had been taken intact. Company-sized units only of the enemy were encountered, and these did not stay around to fight for very long.<sup>131</sup> Moving forwards, the Marines hit remnants of the Medina Division and scattered them. An Iraqi lieutenant taken prisoner, told them that they had been completely surprised by this rapid advance.<sup>132</sup>

### **The northern front**

Obviously, the refusal of the Turkish parliament to grant the American 4<sup>th</sup> mechanised Infantry Division permission to invade Iraq from the north, turned the northern front more or less into a backwater. Most of the action took place in the southern and central parts of the country.

Nevertheless, US special forces, together with Kurd rebels, created as much activity as they could to prevent the Iraqis from pulling back their troops in the north and moving them to the south, thereby making it more difficult for the southern attackers. On March 29<sup>th</sup>, these forces were strengthened by a force of 1 000 paratroopers of the 173<sup>rd</sup> Airborne Brigade, stationed in Italy, dropped on an airstrip in northern Iraq. These, later reinforced with more paratroopers, linked up with the special forces and the Kurds. Still later, a few tanks and armoured vehicles were flown in by huge C-17 transport aircraft. Also, the overwhelming US air power in

<sup>129</sup> John Daniszewski: "Baghdad hears the roar from the south and seethes" (*Los Angeles Times*, 3.4.2003).

<sup>130</sup> See Melinda Liu: "A city on the Brink" (*Newsweek*, 14.4.2003).

<sup>131</sup> James Meek: "No sniping, mortars or tracer. And no sign of the dreaded Republican Guard." (*The Guardian*, 3.4.2003). Cf. also Simon Robinson: "Into the fire with Warrior McCoy" (*Time*, 14.4.2003); Jim Landers: "Alone and unafraid" (*Dallas Morning News*, 18.5.2003).

<sup>132</sup> Jim Landers: "Alone and unafraid" (*Dallas Morning news*, 18.5.2003).

the form of huge AC-130 gunships and Navy bombers, proved decisive. With these forces, the Iraqi defence lines were harassed continually, and by March 28<sup>th</sup>, the Iraqis staged a tactical retreat of about 16 km southward towards Kirkuk.<sup>133</sup>

As the Iraqi defences around Baghdad collapsed, so did those in the north. By April 10<sup>th</sup>, the cities of Mosul and Kirkuk had fallen and occupied by the Kurds. These withdrew as soon as the Americans got there to prevent Turkish military intervention.<sup>134</sup> With this, the war in the north was over.

### **The occupation of Baghdad**

The Battle of Baghdad, such as it was, was – just like the war itself – introduced with a thunderclap, an attempt to kill Saddam Hussein and to decapitate the regime. Somehow American intelligence learnt that Saddam would be in a certain underground bunker underneath a restaurant. After the decision was taken to kill him, the coordinates were transmitted rapidly to the air controllers in Saudi Arabia and from there to a B-1B bomber which happened to be in the air near Baghdad. Within 12 minutes of the information reaching US intelligence, the bomber dropped four JDAM bunker busters, which transformed the restaurant and bunker into a gaping hole in the ground.<sup>135</sup> However, Saddam apparently narrowly escaped again – although whereto, remained a mystery.

Obviously, the Americans were in somewhat of a quandary how to occupy Baghdad. After all, hundreds of commentators were whipping up a frenzy of fear about Baghdad becoming a second Stalingrad, with hundreds, even thousands of dead American soldiers being shipped home in body bags. However, the example was provided by the British who, in Basra, were refusing to play the Iraqis' game by trying to conquer the city forcibly. One should remember that the British came before the dilemma much earlier than the Americans, when the Iraqis were still relatively full of fight. By the time the US forces reached Baghdad, the enemy had been much more hammered and their morale much lower.

The British approach was to invest Basra and to regulate the civilian traffic in and out of the city as much as possible. Then they sent in units of Challenger 2 tanks, Scimitar armoured reconnaissance vehicles and/or Warrior infantry fighting vehicles to conduct raids into the city, at first only into the outskirts, but later ever deeper. The purpose was obviously to kill some enemy fighters, but, more importantly, for the psychological effect, to intimidate the Iraqis and show them that

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<sup>133</sup> Luke Harding & Michael Howard: "Eager Kurds link up with US paratroopers" (*The Guardian*, 28.3.2003); Murray & Scales: *The Iraq War*, pp. 185-195.

<sup>134</sup> Mark Oliver: "Kurds lead push into Mosul" (*The Guardian*, 11.4.2003).

<sup>135</sup> Kim Burger et al: "What went right?" (*Jane's Defence Weekly*, 28.4.2003).

resistance was futile, that the Brits could move about almost at will. Attempts by some Iraqi army units to break out were repulsed. On March 30<sup>th</sup>, the suburb of Abu al-Kacib to the south-east of the city, was attacked and occupied by 40 Commando, Royal Marines. The result was that the defences in the end simply imploded. By April 7<sup>th</sup>, Basra was all but completely in British hands.<sup>136</sup> Donald Rumsfeld himself recognised these tactics as being “the pilot project of the US assault on Baghdad”.<sup>137</sup>

Therefore, the Americans at first, therefore, decided to emulate the British way and not storm the capital all at once. They started by launching an armoured raid, just as the British did in Basra, on Saturday, April 5<sup>th</sup>, deep into Baghdad, which became known as the “Thunder Run”. During the event, the 25 Abrams and 12 Bradleys of the 4<sup>th</sup> Battalion, 64<sup>th</sup> Regiment were repeatedly confronted by men on foot, armed with machine guns or rocket launchers, firing from rooftops, windows or building corners, even by tanks, but the Americans let fly with everything they had and massacred whoever came in their way. According to an eyewitness, they destroyed “dozens of tanks, armoured vehicles, towed artillery pieces, fuel tankers and ammunition trucks. They left a long trail of smoking wreckage, some of it exploding long after their tanks had left the roadways about 10 miles south of Baghdad.”<sup>138</sup> Other reports stated that the Americans killed about 1 000 Iraqis and destroyed some 100 vehicles.<sup>139</sup>

They made a powerful point, as *Time* put it: “Our tanks can penetrate your defenses at will, in broad daylight.” This, like nothing else, brought home to the Iraqis that they had lost the war.<sup>140</sup> At the same time, the relentless air attacks had decimated the Iraqi forces to a very great extent. On the same day, Lieutenant-General Michael Moseley, commander of the air forces in the theatre, called the Republican Guard units outside Baghdad “dead”. “We’re not softening them up, we’re killing them,” he said, and added that the Iraqi defence in terms of formations “doesn’t exist any more”. On April 7<sup>th</sup>, CENTCOM intelligence estimated that the

<sup>136</sup> Simon Parker: “British troops launch raid on Basra” (*The Observer*, 30.3.2003); Paul Harris: “Hit-and-run attack on Basra” (*The Observer*, 30.3.2003); Tom Newton Dunn: “Iraqi tank column breaks out of Basra” (*The Guardian*, 31.3.2003); Tim Butcher: “Commandos launch battle for Basra” (*The Guardian*, 31.3.2003); Peter Beaumont & Martin Bentham: “After two weeks kept at bay, British troops cut swath through Saddam loyalists” (*The Guardian*, 7.4.2000); Michael R. Gordon: “Five ways to take a city” (*The New York Times*, 8.4.2003); Terry McCarthy: “Inside Basra” (*Time*, 21.4.2003).

<sup>137</sup> Joseph Fitchett: “British tactics make impression on US” (*International Herald Tribune*, 9.4.2003).

<sup>138</sup> Geoffrey Mohan: “Finding little resistance, unit leaves a trail of ruin” (*Los Angeles Times*, 6.4.2003).

<sup>139</sup> Brian Whitaker: “Pick and mix” (*The Guardian*, 6.4.2003).

<sup>140</sup> Mohanna McGeary: “Target: Saddam” (*Time*, 14.4.2003).

Republican Guard divisions in the vicinity of the capital had lost been reduced to some 30% of their original strength. On the next day, it was estimated that the Republican Guard had only 19 tanks left of their original 850 and 40 artillery pieces of their original 550.<sup>141</sup>

It is clear that these operational decisions worked like a charm. Indicative of this is an interview an American reporter had with a junior officer of the Republican Guard – one of the few of its kind, which makes very interesting reading indeed.<sup>142</sup> Captain Omar Khalidi served with a surface-to-air missile unit, which hid underneath some trees on agricultural land north of Baghdad. They were attacked from the air in the dead of night and while a fierce sandstorm was blowing. Six members of his unit were killed and much of their equipment destroyed.

“This affected the morale of the soldiers, because they were hiding and thought nobody would find them,” he said. “Some soldiers left their positions and ran away. When the big bombs hit their target, some of the vehicles just melted and the effect of the cluster bombs was even greater, because they covered a larger area.”

Khalidi told the reporter that most officers thought spies disclosed their location to the Americans, “because it was impossible to find us through satellite or aircraft. Even if you drove by, you couldn’t find it.” (Obviously, he had never heard of infrared detection equipment.)

Khalidi and his fellow officers also suspected that something untoward was going on between their generals and the Americans when the Republican Guard refused to defend Baghdad. “I think there was something fishy going on, some kind of contact between the Americans and the Iraqi commanders.”

They watched anxiously as the militia in the south resisted bravely, and their spirits were raised when the news came (untrue, as it turned out) that the Iraqis had won a glorious victory in a counterattack on the American force at Saddam Hussein International Airport outside Baghdad, destroying 80 tanks, killing 400 Americans and taking 200 prisoner. But the very next day the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry staged their “Thunder Run” through Baghdad.

Khalidi recounted: “It was just as if that last battle had no effect. It was a very big shock. Everyone was surprised that a military force could pass through all

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<sup>141</sup> Anthony Cordesman: “The status of Iraqi land forces and security/intelligence forces: a guesstimate, revised April 10, 2003” (Center for Strategic and International Studies), at [www.csis.org/burke/mb/iraq\\_statuslandforces.pdf](http://www.csis.org/burke/mb/iraq_statuslandforces.pdf).

<sup>142</sup> William Branigin: “A brief, bitter war for Iraq’s military officers” (*Washington Post*, 27.4.2003).

the Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard forces surrounding the presidential palaces, and everyone became afraid.” Besides, this was accompanied by “unimaginably heavy bombing”, including by low-flying A-10 Thunderbolt II tank-killer aircraft. “In the end, when US troops entered Baghdad, everything was messed up. There were no orders. We didn’t know where the commanders went. So everyone just went home.”

In the same news report, General Ghanem Abdullah Azawi, an engineer in the Iraqi army’s air defence command, made it clear that the army and Republican Guard suffered from a massive loss of morale and confidence even before Baghdad was invaded. “The army didn’t believe in it because it wasn’t a war, it was suicide.” He and his colleagues saw that “this war has no result, only death. Why should we fight to save Saddam? That’s why most of the commanders told their soldiers not to fight, just withdraw.”

No doubt, in later descriptions of the war more eyewitness accounts from the Iraqi side will be quoted. But it is unlikely that they will differ materially from these. And these ones make it clear that the ineptness of the Iraqi high command, possibly partly induced by American bribery, together with the relentless US air campaign and the audacity of the “Thunder Run”, broke the back of the Iraqi resistance.

The original idea, as Major-General Stanley McChrystal, a Pentagon staff officer, said some days before, was not “to drive into Baghdad suddenly and seize it in a coup de main”.<sup>143</sup> Nevertheless, this is exactly what happened. The raid of April 5<sup>th</sup> went extremely well from an American point of view, with the result that Generals McKiernan, Wallace and Conway conferred by televideo and decided that the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry would enter Baghdad from the West and the 1<sup>st</sup> Marines from the East. They would meet in the middle. The crumbling of the Iraqi defences would be exploited ruthlessly.<sup>144</sup>

On April 7<sup>th</sup>, the final attack for the possession of Baghdad was launched. Essentially, it was a repeat of the general campaign plan – a lightning drive deep into the city centre. General Blount started off by having his 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade ram its way to the centre. The two tank battalions raced into the heart of the city to seize key installations, while the mechanised infantry battalion followed up to occupy the intersections and secure the supply route. On the way, heavy fighting took place, threatening to cut the whole force off. Fighters loyal to Saddam – a mixture of *fedayeen*, Special Republican Guards and Syrian volunteers swarmed around the American vehicles and almost overran a US infantry company, whose soldiers kept

<sup>143</sup> Johanna McGeary: “Target: Saddam” (*Time*, 14.4.2003).

<sup>144</sup> Rick Atkinson et al: “Confused start, decisive end” (*Washington Post*, 13.4.2003).

their positions only by the skin of their teeth. In the end, however, dozens of the Iraqis' vehicles were destroyed, and an estimated 350-500 killed.<sup>145</sup>

One of the journalists "embedded" with the infantry later wrote: "The Bradley fought its way to a traffic circle near a presidential palace that morning. We watched through the vision blocks as the big guns on the tanks and Bradleys of Cyclone company ripped into half a dozen suicide drivers speeding across the 14<sup>th</sup> of July bridge. They kept coming – wild-eyed men, some in uniform, some in civilian clothes, some firing AK-47s from passenger windows.

"The gunners inside the tanks and Bradleys kept up a wall of fire, ripping open chunks of roadway with warning shots before pulverising pickup trucks and sedans and human beings in flaming red explosions. Some vehicles exploded more than once as incendiary rounds set off ammunition or explosives stored inside.

"There's brains and guts all over that bridge,' Staff Sgt. Anthony J. Smith said with the spare and brutal commentary typical of so many soldiers I encountered."<sup>146</sup> This day's fighting made one thing clear: All command and control among the Iraqis had collapsed. One tank officer, captain Dan Hubbard, told a reporter, "As the fighting went on, I realized they had no organization. It was like fighting a bunch of different groups that didn't know what each other were doing." It was the turning point. As Major Roger Shuck of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade put it, "This mission is the one that cut the snake in half. Once this happened, everything just started crumbling and falling."<sup>147</sup>

The next day, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Brigade moved in from the north and the 1<sup>st</sup> from the west, while the Marines attacked from the east. Some fierce fighting still followed, the Iraqis appearing in small, scattered groups, without any cohesion. But that day, everything more or less collapsed. Especially in Saddam City, the slum area in the eastern part, mainly populated by Shiite Muslims, the Americans were greeted with glee and applause. "Good, good Bush!" the crowds chanted. "Down, down Saddam!" Baghdad was free from Saddam's dictatorship.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> William Branigin: "3 Key battles turned tide of invasion" (*Washington Post*, 20.4.2003).

<sup>146</sup> David Zucchino: "The war, up close and very personal" (*Los Angeles Times*, 3.5.2003).

<sup>147</sup> William Branigin: "3 Key battles turned tide of invasion" (*Washington Post*, 20.4.2003).

<sup>148</sup> Esther Schrader: "In Baghdad, a solid offense met the shadow of a defense" (*Los Angeles Times*, 10.4.2003); Carol Morello: "Warm welcome for weary Marines" (*Washington Post*, 19.4.2003); John F. Burns: "Last, desperate days of a brutal reign" (*The New York Times*, 20.4.2003).



Specialist observers were ecstatic about the American tactics. John Pike, from GlobalSecurity.com, a Virginian think-tank, said: “I think that with the ‘thunder-run tactic’ – basically taking the city all at once rather than trying to take it one room at a time – they appear to have correctly conceptualised that the assault on Baghdad was essentially a coup d’etat. When you have a coup, you basically grab the airport, grab the main government buildings downtown, grab the TV station, claim that you’re in charge, and dare anyone to dispute you.” The decapitation strategy “of taking our leadership objects as well as command and control and communications was critical to the disorganized defense of not only Baghdad but all of Iraq,” he said.<sup>149</sup>

Strange was the way in which the Iraqi government suddenly vanished off the face of the earth. On the final day, they simply didn’t turn up for work. Only later some of them either gave themselves up or were captured. Saddam Hussein was captured in a hole in the ground some months after the war, while his two sons, Uday and Qusay, were killed in a fierce firefight. Saddam’s faithful minister of information, Mohammad Said Sahhaf – the man who amused half the world by his fervent assurances that the Americans were nowhere near Baghdad; that they were there, but being overrun; that they were inside Baghdad, but committing suicide in their tanks – tried to give himself up, but the Americans regarded him as small fry and refused to take him in. This was perhaps the ultimate insult! According to one report, he quit his post only in the early morning hours of April 10<sup>th</sup>, apparently having believed to the last (just like his Nazi counterpart, Josef Goebbels) that a miracle would save the regime. When, in the evening of April 9<sup>th</sup>, a courier came to the Iraqi broadcasting house with a tape of Saddam exhorting the Iraqis to keep on fighting, his spirits lift a last time. “As I told you,” he said to an aide, “this is Saddam, this is the government, everything is normal.” But a few hours later, the aide told a British newspaper, he “slowly removed his black beret. He folded the epaulettes on his military jacket to hide his rank and then he reached for a red and white kaffiyeh scarf. He wrapped it around his head as he told us to keep on re-broadcasting [the Saddam speech] until 3 am. He said goodbye, and then disappeared out of the back door.” “Comical Ali”, was he was dubbed, finally saw the light.<sup>150</sup>

A few days later, the US Marines resumed their advance northwards, while the 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry and other Marines went on with the task of bringing order to Baghdad, which was fast degenerating into an orgy of looting and lawlessness. On

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<sup>149</sup> Bryan Bender: “Specialists praise ‘armored rush’ as brilliant war strategy” (*The Boston Globe*, 10.4.2003).

<sup>150</sup> Inigo Gilmore: “Revealed: the last moments before Iraq’s propaganda chief succumbed to reality” (*The Telegraph*, 4.5.2003).

April 14<sup>th</sup>, the 3<sup>rd</sup> entered Tikrit, mindful of warnings of a “last stand” of Saddam loyalists. None was encountered. Tikrit fell without a fight. The same day, the main coalition military spokesman, Brigadier-General Vincent Brooks, pronounced “decisive military operations” at an end. At the same time, the Pentagon announced the recall of three aircraft carriers and the cancellation of the orders to the 1<sup>st</sup> Armoured Division and the 1<sup>st</sup> Cavalry Division to ship to Iraq.<sup>151</sup>

The conventional phase of the war was over. The guerrilla phase, with mounting attacks against American troops, especially in the so-called Sunni Triangle between Baghdad, Tikrit and Falluja, was about to begin, with uncertain prospects for the future.

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<sup>151</sup> Alex Spillius: “Fall of Tikrit ends the war” (*The Telegraph*, 15.4.2003).