

U.S. Marines in Battle

An-Najaf

AUGUST 2004





The Fight for An-Najaf in Context

The city of an-Najaf, Iraq, is a provincial and market center located on the western branch of the Euphrates River approximately 100 miles south of Baghdad. Its population (prewar) of 563,000 expands at times with pilgrims to this important center of Islamic scholarship and theology. It is the location of several significant shrines for Shi'a Muslims and boasts one of the largest cemeteries in the world. Its more recent history has been marked by conflict of a political nature as the place of exile for Ayatollah Khomeini and site of the assassination of Ayatollah Mohammad Sadiq. It served as the location of Shi'a resistance to perceived political oppression and was a place of battle once more in 2004.

This is a "battle study" written purposely from the perspective of the Marines, soldiers, and sailors who fought at an-Najaf in August 2004. Some context is needed to fit these events within the evolution of the campaigning in Iraq in 2004. The Americans deployed to al-Anbar and an-Najaf Provinces, faced a variety of threats as Iraq attempted to again govern itself. Threats were from disparate sources, including Sunni fighters in Fallujah and Shi'a fighters in Najaf. Behind each was the possibility of al-Qaeda in Iraq or criminal exploitation of any disruption of Coalition efforts to establish responsible Iraqi Government. This complexity of threats did not lend itself to easy solutions. In March 2004, Lieutenant General James T. Conway's I Marine Expeditionary Force was faced with an outbreak of Sunni insurgency in Fallujah. At the same time, a Shi'a uprising took place across Iraq, including Baghdad, Najaf, an-Nasiriyah, al-Kut, al-Amarah, and Kirkuk. The fighting spread to Karbala, Hillah, and Basrah with attacks on Iraqi and Coalition outposts. This fighting dropped off in June with the establishment of the Iraqi Interim Government of Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, but the menace of further violence remained.

The Multi-National Force-Iraq, under General George W. Casey Jr., USA, felt that before the Iraqis could be responsible for security in each province, the centers of violence had to be dealt with by a "clear-hold-build" approach. Baghdad, Fallujah, and Najaf were thus targeted. When Muqtada al-Sadr fomented another uprising in August, the recently arrived 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit found itself assigned to quell the uprising in Najaf. It would be reinforced for this effort by two U.S. Army and four Iraqi Army battalions. The narrative that follows documents this effort from the small-unit level. The importance of the close relationship between political and military force is emphasized. The intent is to provide a view of combat for the education and training of Marines who might face similar circumstances.

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The Battle of An-Najaf

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Before the Fight

Deployed to Iraq in mid-2004, Lieutenant Colonel John L. Mayer's Battalion Landing Team, 1st Battalion, 4th Marines (BLT 1/4) expected a relatively familiar mission as operational reserve in the Baghdad region. Instead, it walked into the path of a raging storm, resulting in one of the most intense battles the Marine Corps had seen in Operation Iraqi Freedom. In the city of an-Najaf, the battalion engaged a fanatical enemy in a place where "it rained shrapnel," and machine gun, small arms, and rocket-propelled grenade fire reached intensities unknown to already battle-tested Marines.¹ Temperatures soared past 125 degrees Fahrenheit in compressed and confusing city blocks. The special operations capable 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit (11th MEU), of which BLT 1/4 was the ground combat element, operated in a tightly restrictive supporting arms environment reminiscent of Vietnam at its height—and it cost Marine lives.

Even before they departed, the Marines of Colonel Anthony M. Haslam's 11th MEU did not expect an easy deployment. The command element anticipated tense periods of combat as inevitable no matter what the mission. But the violence that followed came more quickly than even the most foresighted expected.² The Marines always stood ready to fight, but confrontation developed so rapidly, and later so explosively, that 11th MEU commanders found the need to expedite and adjust their plans.

The first adjustment came as the expeditionary unit found its mission changed just days out of port from Kuwait. Originally slated as operational reserve for the Baghdad area, theater commanders recognized that the 11th MEU did not possess the necessary manpower required to support the anticipated violence and instability in the capital city following the transfer of authority from the coalition leadership to that of the Iraqi interim government. Instead, the theater commanders assigned the unit a challenging security and stability operation mission. The expeditionary unit was to take

control of the southern Iraqi provinces of an-Najaf and al-Qadisiyah, an area of 16,000 square miles with a violent recent past that still festered. Colonel Haslam and his officers took the sudden change of mission in stride and began planning accordingly. Studying intelligence reports, the 11th MEU staff outlined a comprehensive, aggressive long-range plan.³

As Lieutenant Colonel Mayer's battalion landing team deployed, it faced a situation of growing violence and complexity that had been building since the Coalition's initial invasion of Iraq in 2003. The defeat of Saddam Hussein and the subsequent establishment of a provisional government in early 2004 created an environment of volatile political instability, particularly in the Shiite cities of southern Iraq. Muqtada al-Sadr, a charismatic Shiite Muslim cleric, had emerged as a self-proclaimed populist champion of Iraq's poor and oppressed. As the defender of the downtrodden, al-Sadr demonized the occupying American forces as well as what he considered their puppet Provisional Iraqi Government. His followers included the Mahdi, an armed paramilitary force that served as al-Sadr's private army and whose members vowed to follow his orders to the death. Driven by al-Sadr's inflammatory rhetoric, the militia initiated a widespread insurrection throughout much of Iraq on 4 April 2004 when the newly established Provisional Iraqi Government issued an arrest warrant for al-Sadr for the murder of an Iraqi judge.

Fighting erupted in several major Shiite-dominated cities, including Baghdad, Karbala, al-Kut, an-Nasiriyah, and others, principally south of the capital. Over the next two months, Coalition forces responded to quell the uprising, battering the militia in several engagements, with 1,500 to 2,000 of its members killed in the fighting. The insurrection nearly collapsed, with the remaining militia fighters making a last stand at Najaf. But before the Coalition could completely eliminate the militia, they negotiated a truce effective as of 6 June 2004 that temporarily ended the fighting and left al-Sadr unscathed.

Under the truce terms, al-Sadr and his followers were to uphold a cease-fire, disarm, and relinquish territory held by his forces, but the agreement allowed the militia to retain control of Najaf and al-Kufa, al-Sadr's home territory, and restricted access of Coalition forces into either city. With this reprieve from the Coalition, al-Sadr converted the two

On the Cover: *Marines of Company A, BLT 1/4, strike the militia occupied Iraqi police station in Kufa near an-Najaf during a raid on 20 August 2004.*

Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

A Marine of Company C, BLT 1/4, stares at a poster of Muqtada al-Sadr during a raid on al-Sadr's house on 12 August 2004.

cities into his own personal kingdom.⁴ More importantly, Multi-National Corps Iraq (MNCI) placed the vast Wadi al-Salam Cemetery, the Imam Ali Mosque, and the Kufa Mosque completely off limits to all Coalition forces. This mandate effectively created a safe haven into which the American forces could not enter without permission from the highest U.S. military authority in Iraq.

Optimism surrounding the truce soon dissipated as al-Sadr's militia, using fear and violent oppression, took over Najaf and Kufa and reinforced control.⁵ Reasserting their power came easily for the militia, as many Iraqi soldiers and policeman had been killed or disappeared during the two months of fighting. The new interim Iraqi government installed on 30 June struggled to find a firm footing in establishing security in the militia-dominated areas.⁶

In the Najaf-Kufa area, al-Sadr's militia demonstrated better structure and organization than the local government. They exploited this organization as well as the chaotic political climate to facilitate their oppressive practices. Militia intimidation included assassination, kidnapping, and torture of police and government officials. After committing these heinous acts, the militiamen would then retreat into an exclusion area, where Coalition forces could not pursue them.⁷ The militiamen roamed the streets, set up roadblocks, and

intimidated whomever they pleased. On one occasion, al-Sadr's men kidnapped an Iraqi policeman and tortured him while broadcasting the atrocity over a government radio frequency.⁸ Their abusive actions so disrupted the peoples' lives and the local economy that the militiamen quickly alienated most of Najaf's population. Najaf was largely a tourist destination because of the Imam Ali Mosque and the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery, but militia activities frightened away nearly all the tourists. City residents, particularly businessmen, resented the militiamen and their actions. A local store owner admitted that among the residents of Najaf, "90 percent of the people here hate him [al-Sadr]."⁹

As Lieutenant Colonel Mayer prepared the Battalion Landing Team and elements of his headquarters to move to his new area of operations, the militia weighed heavily on his decisions. Upon debarkation in Kuwait in early July, Mayer oversaw the hardening of the battalion landing team vehicles under contract by the Oshkosh Corporation of Wisconsin.¹⁰ Mayer also considered a more aggressive patrolling policy and the training of the Iraqi National Guard units that would be under his command. Additionally, 11th MEU headquarters guided the development of a resource and troop distribution plan at the various established bases in the area.



U.S. Marine Corps Map

After 10 days of acclimatization in Kuwait and final training, the expeditionary unit deployed in seven vehicle convoys to the an-Najaf/al-Qadisiyah area. The Marines soon observed the area's volatility as they moved to their respective bases of operation. Militia fighters fired on several of the convoys, with a few of these incidents leading to minor engagements that resulted in several enemy casualties and a number of prisoners. First Lieutenant Michael J. Borneo, commander of Combined Antiarmor Team A, recalled how militia fighters

ambushed his team within 10 minutes after it arrived in the Najaf area. Borneo referred to them simply as a few "farmers," and after a short firefight, his team captured four men who participated in the attack. In the same area, he reported numerous men carrying rifles and rocket-propelled grenade launchers "all over" the city. These Iraqis exchanged hostile looks and gestures with the Marines.¹¹ In another incident just south of Najaf, Captain Stephen A. Kintzley's reconnaissance platoon took fire, dismounted, cleared the house where the

shooting came from, and captured three Iraqis. By the time the Marines arrived at their destination, none needed to be told that danger lived on the streets they would soon patrol.

Despite these incidents, the 11th MEU's movement went smoothly from debarkation in Kuwait to its forward operating bases in an-Najaf and al-Qadisiyah Provinces. Its responsibility of securing more than 35,000 square kilometers made for a formidable task, both operationally and logistically. The expeditionary unit planned to operate out of four key forward operating bases (FOB)—Hotel, Duke, Echo, and al-Asad—and several smaller bases around Najaf. Forward Operating Base Hotel, located only three kilometers north of Najaf's government, commercial, and religious centers, served as the landing team's primary operational base.

Colonel Haslam made the decision that containing the militia was to be the 11th MEU's primary operational focus. While the Marines guarded places like police stations and the provincial government headquarters, they had to keep close watch on militia activity,

particularly at the Imam Ali Mosque.¹² In addition to the mosque, the expeditionary unit also closely monitored the nearby home of al-Sadr and his clerical school, which, besides his leadership base in the Imam Ali Mosque, served as a logistical base and militia strongpoint.

Although BLT 1/4 used FOB Hotel as its primary base of operations, the Marine expeditionary unit's commanding officer, Colonel Haslam, chose FOB Duke as his headquarters, approximately 20 kilometers northwest of Najaf. Duke's large size and geographic isolation made it an ideal choice for security, administration, and logistics storage.¹³ The size of the facility also provided adequate room for the expeditionary unit's helicopters—UH-1N Huey, AH-1J Cobra, and CH-46 Sea Knight—for casualty evacuation, resupply, and small-unit troop movements between forward operating bases.

Theater commanders stationed Lieutenant Colonel Mayer's Company A at FOB Echo in the city of ad-Diwaniyah, about 50 kilometers east of FOB Hotel. From here the "Alpha Raiders," as they called themselves, led local security and stability operations in the area. The 11th MEU also used al-Asad, an enormous Hussein-era Iraqi airbase west of Baghdad, to house several of the unit's air assets. It took three to four hours via ground transport to reach Najaf from al-Asad, but it only took 20 minutes by air.

Battalion Landing Team 1/4 selected another site, FOB Baker, for Kufa operations because of its location near the city's central district. Colonel Haslam stationed a platoon of Company B at the Najaf provincial governor's compound to supplement Iraqi security, only a short distance from al-Sadr's headquarters and militia strong points. The 11th MEU's executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Eugene N. Apicella, initially stationed at FOB Echo, would be stationed at the governor's compound to serve as permanent liaison to an-Najaf Provincial Governor Adnan al-Zurufi.

The restrictions of movement imposed by the May truce complicated the already arduous task of contending with al-Sadr's militia. Once Mayer's battalion arrived in the Najaf area, the militia's flagrant acts of oppression and its aggressive attitude immediately caught the Marines' attention. Plans and policies for dealing with the militias, first developed before the expeditionary unit landed in Iraq, now took a more solid shape as the battalion received more situational awareness and intelligence once in the city.¹⁴ The militiamen's practice of coming out of the exclusion areas, committing acts of coercion and intimidation, and then slipping back into their safety



Photo by Cpl Daniel J. Fosco

Col Anthony M. Haslam, commanding officer of 11th MEU, describes the fighting that occurred in the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery to MajGen Richard F. Natonski, commanding general of 1st Marine Division.

zones to avoid arrest or decisive engagement with U.S. forces presented a litany of tactical as well as legal problems for the 11th MEU staff. The local Iraqi political authority's inability to assert any control in the city further frustrated the situation.¹⁵

Before initiating its own plans, however, the expeditionary unit needed the transfer of authority in the Najaf-Kufa area from the U.S. Army's Task Force Dragon, which had engaged in caretaking operations in the cities since the truce. Upon arrival in the vicinity on 21 July, Colonel Haslam's unit began a 10-day transition that resulted in the Marines assuming control of both cities but still technically under the authority of the Polish-led Multi-National Division Central-South.¹⁶ While the transition progressed, Army commanders shared their concerns about al-Sadr's activity in the area. They viewed the situation as tense and rapidly nearing the boiling point. Company C platoon commander First Lieutenant Jeremy T. Sellars agreed. In retrospect, he said, he believed that the Army operations had been only "holding a finger in the dike."¹⁷ A more forthright unnamed officer commented that aggressive patrolling, such as the Marines had in mind, would be "like kicking a hornet nest."¹⁸

As the transition began, the Marines saw first hand the boldness of al-Sadr's militia. The very first Army-led transition patrol, intended only to orient its Marine counterparts, set the operational tone for future dealings with the militia.¹⁹ The Humvee patrol ran into a militia roadblock. There, according to Lieutenant Sellars, a militiaman stood nearby carrying an AK-47. Another al-Sadr fighter wielded a rocket launcher, causing a Humvee's turret gunner to cautiously turn his .50-caliber machine gun in the rocket-bearer's direction.²⁰ The resulting stare-down portended more hostility to come, perhaps even a firefight. The Army lieutenant leading the patrol expressed complete surprise, adding that he had "never seen this before." Reflecting on the same moment, Lieutenant Sellars related that the militiaman with the rifle appeared absolutely astonished at this perceived American transgression and had the angriest look that Sellars had ever seen.²¹

As the small convoy moved on, more fighters appeared carrying rifles and rockets. The 28 May truce forbade the militia from possessing such weapons, but plans for disarming the militiamen had never developed. The routine orientation patrol had inadvertently driven by al-Sadr's house and a women's maternity hospital, locales that the militia considered off limits to Coalition presence. Although these locations were technically not in the exclusion zone, Coalition forces had stayed out of



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read
Marines from BLT 1/4 begin their patrolling of an-Najaf, which led to the confrontation with al-Sadr's militia during the Borneo patrol.

the area to avoid possible incident.²² Why the Army chose to take the transition patrol into this area is unclear, but the decision to drive through the roadblock ignited righteous anger among the militia and began a chain of events that led to confrontation with the Marines shortly afterward and contributed to the hostilities that became the larger battle of Najaf.²³

The Army patrol incident reinforced policy already in the making by Lieutenant Colonel Mayer and his staff. At an 11th MEU command element meeting shortly before completing the transition, the MEU staff committed to a tentative 90-day militia ejection plan. Once the Marines assumed authority over the area of operations, BLT 1/4 began its mission immediately, setting in motion aggressive patrolling, eventually culminating in a decisive engagement.²⁴

Borneo Patrol

The Army commanding officer of Task Force Dragon ceremonially handed over responsibility for the entire an-Najaf and al-Qadisiyah region to Colonel Haslam and the 11th Marine Expeditionary Force on 31 July 2004. Haslam decided to begin patrolling immediately, so on 1 August, the 11th MEU staff formulated a plan, giving careful consideration to the continuing reports of the militia openly carrying weapons. The Coalition allowed Iraqi citizens to own AK-47s, but intelligence revealed that militiamen had stockpiled various caches of illegal arms, including machine guns, rocket-propelled grenades, and mortars. Captain Kintzley's reconnaissance platoon had confirmed these intelligence reports when Kintzley's roving patrols reported many men brandishing the full range of banned weapons.²⁵

Colonel Haslam committed to the concept of avoiding an immediate fight, acceding to the wishes of Adnan al-Zurufi, interim governor of an-Najaf Province. Haslam had warned al-Zurufi of militia provocations, but the governor preferred a peaceful solution. He wanted to co-opt al-Sadr into the political process, so he counseled patience to the Marine commander. Haslam wanted to have ample preparation time before confronting al-Sadr's forces anyway, in large part to have a chance to train the Iraqi National Guard troops and to ensure that his unit was combat-ready. Haslam emphasized, however, the need to demonstrate to al-Sadr that the Marines controlled the city and would "not put up with any nonsense."²⁶

Recognizing both the dangerous potential of aggressive patrolling by Marines and the assertiveness the militia displayed with its weapons buildup, Colonel Haslam sought to construct an appropriate policy of "flexible engagement." This task fell to Lieutenant Colonel Gary S. Johnston, 11th MEU operations officer, a capable officer profoundly aware of the slippery nature of his new undertaking. According to Johnston, "We knew based on our intel that the al-Sadr residences were hot spots regardless if they were in the exclusion zone. The hospital was nearby al-Sadr's chief residence. . . . If you went to check out the hospital . . . you were in his front yard."²⁷ Coalition forces venturing into these areas, Johnston recalled, would require special clearance and, most likely, additional firepower to deal with whatever they might find.²⁸

Patrolling began on the morning of 2 August as scheduled, consisting of Combined Antiarmor Team A from Weapons Company in eight armored Humvees with a total of 36 to 41 men riding four to five in each vehicle.²⁹ The patrol also included a radio battalion element and a small Iraqi National Guard complement. The vehicles carried an array of weaponry, including wire-guided antitank missiles (TOW), 7.62mm machine guns, 40mm automatic grenade launchers, and .50-caliber machine guns. First Lieutenant Michael Borneo led this first patrol in the Najaf area since the Marine Corps took control.

While commanders felt confident in their Marines and their equipment, they did not hold the same certainty that the militia would submit to Coalition control. Small uprisings that previous spring and the militia's recent display of recalcitrance demonstrated a resistance to cooperating with the Marines. In particular, Lieutenant Colonel Johnston, who warily drew up the new exclusion zones plan, had doubts. He recalled that after the 0800 intelligence briefing that preceded Lieutenant Borneo's patrol, he had a "gut feeling that the



Photo by CWO-2 Matthew D. Middleton

Some of the many weapons the explosive ordnance disposal teams collected from the militia in the Old City of an-Najaf during the fighting in August 2004.

patrol was going to be tested." He told fellow officers that his "spider hair was tingling."³⁰

Johnston had given Borneo's platoon its mission: investigate several sites that intelligence identified as "places of interest."³¹ These included police stations, gas stations, power plants, and hospitals around downtown Najaf as well as other sites likely to have militia patrols or roadblocks. He ordered Borneo to take special care to respect exclusion areas but to demonstrate to the militia leadership that anything outside those areas was under Marine authority and "game for us."³² With that guidance, Borneo's patrol departed Forward Operating Base Hotel on the morning of 2 August. The patrol maintained a simple route, with most of the checkpoints and "places of interest" on or near Route Miami, a four-lane principal thoroughfare in Najaf. The list of checkpoints included the hospital, site of the Army-led patrol face-off two weeks earlier. Despite this incident, this checkpoint received no special significance or notice from the patrol, which treated it as just another point on the list.³³

The combined antiarmor patrol left Route Miami, turned east on Route Brady, then north on Route Elway, arriving at the women's hospital.³⁴ Within moments, the fears that made Lieutenant Colonel Johnston's "spider hairs" tingle began to materialize. As Lieutenant Borneo's team approached the hospital, he observed a few Iraqi National Guardsmen posted as sentries. They crouched behind a car and stared across the street at a walled compound consisting of the private al-Sadr family hospital (more like a clinic), al-Sadr's religious school, and his father's house. There, adjacent to the Army-led patrol



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

A Marine under attack by 60mm and 82mm mortars while conducting operations at al-Sadr's house, which sat in an open compound where multiple obstacles, including large trucks and buses, provided excellent cover.

face-off site, stood several militiamen outside the walls carrying AK-47s. Since carrying these rifles did not violate the law, the Borneo patrol could do nothing to these men.

Moments later, however, the Iraqi troops accompanying the patrol pointed out more militiamen inside the al-Sadr compound hauling machine guns, rocket launchers, 82mm mortar tubes, and loading them onto a truck. The Marines could not ignore this movement, which was a clear violation of the weapons restrictions clause of the truce. Lieutenant Borneo ordered a five-man team to investigate, with the intention of arresting the militia leaders and confiscating the illegal weapons.³⁵ As the Marines moved across the street, they heard a shot fired from the compound. The militia sentries, apparently perceiving themselves under attack, opened fire across Route Elway on the approaching Marines.

Although no one actually knew where the shot originated (someone later identified it as an accidental discharge from an Iraqi National Guard soldier), as quickly as it sounded, the Marines' expectations of

avoiding an engagement with al-Sadr's troops evaporated. The shooting changed everything in the Marines' plans. The impending skirmish would become a catalyst for a much larger battle that lay ahead. The battalion landing team's operations officer, Major Coby M. Moran, later called the incident "the shot heard 'round the world," comparing it to the shot at Concord, Massachusetts, that initiated the American Revolution.³⁶

The Weapons Company patrol responded to the militia with a textbook maneuver. Borneo brought the dismounts back and surrounded the side of the al-Sadr clinic located in an open area a few hundred meters square. He effectively cordoned the compound by positioning two Humvees to the north and two to the south. The other four vehicles remained in place for the time being. Once al-Sadr's fighters, an estimated 40-man element, realized that the Marines had surrounded their position, they responded with all their small arms. What had started with rifle fire suddenly escalated to machine guns, rocket launchers, and mortars—both 60mm and 82mm—and at a significant volume. Sensing the seriousness of the situation, Borneo immediately called



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines of Company C, BLT 1/4, prepare for a raid on al-Sadr's compound. The Marines contended with militiamen shooting from multiple locations, using mortars, machine guns, and small arms.

battalion headquarters and requested the quick-reaction force stationed at the governor's compound, about 30 minutes away.³⁷

The al-Sadr compound stood in an open area, but its perimeter wall and other obstacles provided cover and concealment for the enemy. Borneo could see 60mm mortar rounds going over buildings but could not see the firing point. Storage containers, a junkyard, long berms, and vehicles also separated the Marines and the militia fighters, making the battle terrain difficult. The lack of adequate troops to maneuver also increased the difficulty of the fight. Some rocket-propelled grenades nearly hit several Humvees deployed in the section to the south. Borneo counted fifteen 82mm mortar rounds hitting on what appeared to be pre-registered targets.³⁸ About 25 more followed during the length of the engagement.

Al-Sadr's guards fought the Marines primarily from an open lot outside the compound but discharged their mortars from inside the walls. The Marines engaged whatever targets they could find, firing from the cover of various obstacles that also restricted their fields of fire. Borneo's platoon sergeant, Gunnery Sergeant Jeffery M. Godfredson, located to the south of the militia position,

used the large storage containers that dotted the battle area to his advantage. While awaiting permission to fire, he used the container for cover, but once the Marines began returning fire, Godfredson pulled his armed Humvee out of cover to fire, then returned to cover for reloading. While he remained under cover, the other vehicle from his section assumed the firing position until its automatic weapons ran low, then they switched again. About the same time, two more Humvees maneuvered midway between Borneo's and Godfredson's sites to a position that offered the best fields of fire. But the position offered no cover and quickly drew enemy fire.

The battlefield now extended to 360 degrees. At this stage of the firefight, Gunnery Sergeant Godfredson grew frustrated by the several earth berms that crisscrossed the lot and obstructed the fields of fire. Lance Corporal Eric Johnson and the platoon corpsman climbed one of the berms to observe the enemy. Once on top, they immediately noticed a militiaman about 100 meters away preparing to fire a rocket launcher. Johnson and the corpsman held their fire because the platoon still awaited battalion headquarters' permission to return fire. When permission finally came, the corpsman immediately took



Photo by Cpl Matthew S. Richards

Marines of the 11th MEU used their Humvees for cover while fighting al-Sadr's militia during the Borneo patrol.

a shot at the militiaman but missed. At the same time, the rest of the patrol opened fire, causing the volume of fire to pick up enormously. Godfredson's Humvees pulled back and forth delivering ferocious fire on al-Sadr's militia, escalating the once-small skirmish into an increasingly violent engagement.

The dismounted Marines also joined the fight. Sergeant Eric W. Clayton took a team consisting of Lance Corporals Johnson (who had come back down the berm), Richard L. Sweetman, and Cedar Esquivel up the berm and laid suppressing fire on a dug-in militia position. This allowed Gunnery Sergeant Godfredson to maneuver his Humvee section into a better firing position. From there, Corporal Daniel W. Barker aimed his mounted 7.62mm machine gun on the enemy mortar position that Sergeant Clayton and his team had engaged with their M16 rifles. Using Godfredson's alternating fire and cover tactic, when Barker had to reload, Corporal Brent M. Boden drove his vehicle into the position vacated by Godfredson, all the while under heavy machine gun and rocket fire. Boden's vehicle, equipped with an MK19 automatic grenade launcher manned by Lance Corporal Kyle W. Burns, continued suppressing the enemy mortar while avoiding

an increasingly heavy fire from the enemy. Lance Corporal Johnson spotted two militiamen on top of a school bus inside the compound attempting to launch rocket propelled grenades and killed both of them with his rifle.

From the berm, Sergeant Clayton's team observed militia rocket teams crouching behind one of the other dirt berms. Lance Corporal Sweetman fired an AT-4 antitank rocket that either killed the militiamen or scared them away. Meanwhile, Corporal Weaver's rear security element had its own fight on its hands. While his .50-caliber machine gunner, Private First Class Edward Roacho, suppressed sniper fire from a building inside the compound, Corporal Weaver maneuvered to engage the new enemy attackers. Using his M16, he killed a militiaman attempting to flank his vehicle. Then, exposing himself to heavy enemy fire, Weaver ran back and forth between his position and the Iraqi National Guard forces accompanying the patrol, encouraging them to get in the fight. Inspired by Weaver, the Iraqis deployed a strong rear security that freed the Marines to fight forward.³⁹

On the north side of the compound, the fighting increased in its intensity. When Lieutenant Borneo and Corporal Justin M. Madsymowski needed to move past a



Photo by Cpl Matthew S. Richards

The Humvees of BLT 1/4 carried a wide assortment of weapons, including TOW missiles, AT-4 rocket launchers, .50-caliber machine guns, 7.62mm M240G machine guns, and MK19 automatic grenade launchers.

building from which enemy fire emanated, Sergeant William C. Niemeyer II and Corporal Baltazar Aguayo-Sierra poured rifle rounds into the building, suppressing the fire substantially and killing two militia fighters. This maneuver allowed Borneo and Maksymowski to acquire a better shooting position at a soccer field just north of the al-Sadr compound. Meanwhile, Sergeant Mark A. Contrerez and Lance Corporal Jamie M. Herman engaged a fire-team-sized militia element, killing two. Nearby, a group of enemy snipers, who entered a building inside the compound, also drew the attention of Marine riflemen. Lance Corporal Brad A. Kidder neutralized at least two of the positions, among windows and rooftops, with his M16 rifle and M203 40mm grenade launcher, and Lance Corporal Christopher B. Abner killed a sniper at 150 meters with his M16.⁴⁰ Despite the high volume of fire from enemy snipers and machine gunners pouring from the compound, not a single Marine was hit.⁴¹

The Marine crew-served weapons proved equally effective in suppressing the enemy attacks. When antiarmor team members spotted two militia soldiers with a rocket launcher under a fuel tanker 400 meters away. Lance Corporal Brandon W. Shaw fired several 40mm rounds from his MK19 and destroyed the tanker, killing the two rocket men. An AT-4 shot from 200 meters by Lance Corporal Christopher M. Jackalone

destroyed a dirt berm and the two militiamen behind it.⁴²

While observing the enemy from the berm, Johnson came up with an idea of using the MK19 rounds like mortars since the militia's mortars were out of direct line of fire. He hurried down the berm to explain his plan to Gunnery Sergeant Godfredson, who agreed to it. Johnson climbed back up the berm and, as part of Sergeant Clayton's team, directed fire as best he could on the enemy mortar locations. Johnson soon realized that he could not see well enough from this position and decided to move closer. He sprinted across open, exposed ground until he reached the relative cover of a nearby tractor trailer. Climbing to the top of the truck's trailer, he forfeited his cover in exchange for an elevated position that allowed him to see straight into the al-Sadr compound. From this vantage point, Johnson saw the militiamen behind the wall, where four of them manned an 82mm mortar. He killed two of them with his rifle but quickly drew the attention of enemy. He stayed in the perilous spot, ignoring the gunfire and shrapnel. From the trailer roof, he directed MK19 fire, arcing 40mm grenades over buildings. Johnson observed the impacts and called back to his section, which relayed the information by radio. The plan worked flawlessly, and after several well-placed rounds, the Marines eliminated the mortar position. Graced not only with a clever plan and effective fire from

his comrades, Johnson was also the beneficiary of good fortune for his own safety. Despite the heavy enemy fire, he suffered only a small shrapnel wound to his right arm, which required minimal attention.⁴³

As the fight developed, Lieutenant Colonel Johnston monitored the action closely. He controlled the operations that day as Colonel Haslam and Lieutenant Colonel Mayer were several hours away at FOB Echo in ad-Diwaniyah. As the quick reaction force neared the battle site, Johnston had to decide how long to remain engaged with the enemy. He had three primary factors to consider. First, Lieutenant Borneo's patrol was running low on ammunition. The reaction force could carry on the battle for a while, but its deployment could not guarantee a decisive end to the engagement. A second consideration was Governor al-Zurufi's desire to avoid fighting. Johnston understood this, and his own exclusion zone plan demonstrated his commitment to that idea. Third, as the engagement progressed, Johnston received reports that the militia leadership kept sending in reinforcements. These updates led Johnston to a nightmare vision—hundreds of black-clad militiamen descending on the patrol and overwhelming his Marines by sheer numbers.⁴⁴ Johnston knew the call he had to make.

When the reaction force arrived on the scene, First Lieutenants Andrew R. Jones and David C. Lewis quickly appraised conditions, deployed their Marines, and laid down overwhelming fire, which caught the militiamen off guard. The militia fighters increased their rate of fire, but it could not compete with the volume delivered by the reaction force. Ten minutes after the reaction force's arrival, Johnston issued the order he knew he had to give: disengage and withdraw. The patrol promptly began breaking contact. With the help of the reaction force's suppressing fire, along with another A-4 rocket blast that kept the enemy's heads down, Borneo's platoon slipped out smoothly, although not quietly, as their guns blazed. Air support arrived on station about the same time—a UH-1N Huey and AH-1 Cobra gunship—but too late to support the withdrawal, so they returned to FOB Duke. Borneo's platoon finished breaking off and made its way back to FOB Hotel with the quick reaction force not far behind.⁴⁵

The withdrawal came after nearly an hour of intense fighting. The enemy had fired a dozen 60mm and 82mm mortar rounds, about 15 rockets, and great numbers of rifle and machine gun rounds. In response, the patrol had fired more than 600 MK19 grenades, 3 AT-4 rockets, 400 .50-caliber machine gun rounds, 20 grenades from M203s, thousands of 5.56mm rounds from M16s and

light machine guns, as well as 7.62mm rounds from M240G machine guns. The reaction force expended more than 1,300 rounds in its short engagement.⁴⁶ Lieutenant Borneo's unit reported 15 enemy killed and an undetermined number of wounded.⁴⁷ Lance Corporal Johnson's slight wound was the total Marine casualty list. The militia's inadequate fighting skills had kept Marine casualties to a minimum.

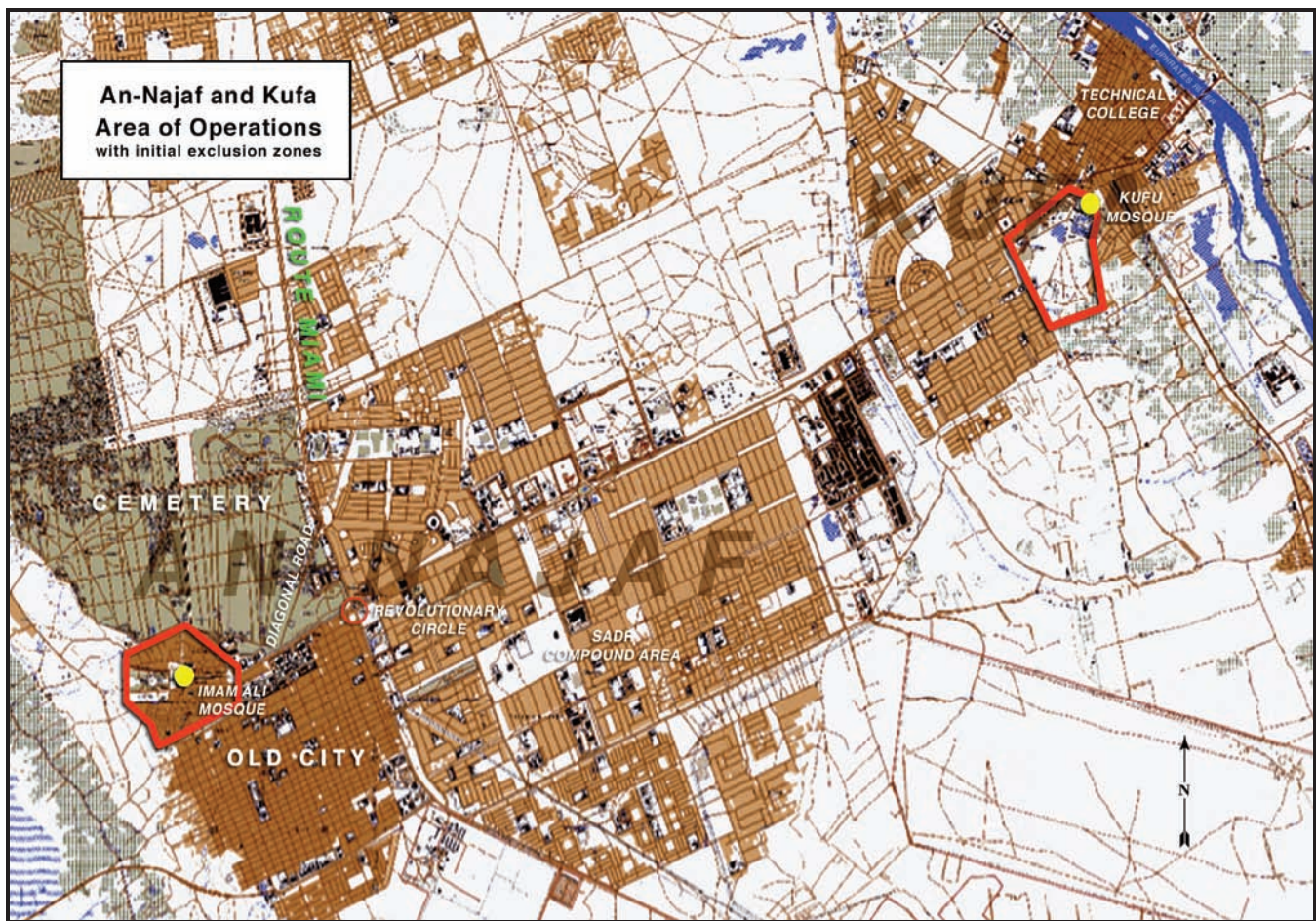
The battalion landing team's first engagement with al-Sadr's militia ended as a tactical draw. Anticipating more such engagements, Lieutenant Colonel Mayer ordered forward his Weapons Company 81mm Mortar Platoon and the light armored reconnaissance unit, whose four Cadillac Gauge LAV-25s provided more formidable firepower as each carried a M38 25mm automatic cannon and an M240G machine gun. Mayer could not predict what the future held, but he wanted his Marines to be ready for anything. As it turned out, this fight was the first of several that would evolve over the next 25 days into a battle for Najaf.

Revolutionary Circle

A short period of calm followed the Borneo patrol. After the ferocious firefight of 2 August, the BLT 1/4 patrols of 3 and 4 August encountered only hostile stares, with each side exchanging what Major Moran described as "dirty looks."⁴⁸ The situation remained tense but quiet as the last patrol on the night of 4 August concluded without incident, returning at 0030 on 5 August, allowing the Marines a few hours of sleep.

The calm in and around Forward Operating Base Hotel quietly deceived the relaxed Marines, as only a few kilometers south of their location, al-Sadr's militia prepared for another battle. Apparently embarrassed by the failure to defeat the Marine patrol a few days earlier, the militia decided to redeem itself by attacking the Iraqi government, the hated American ally. The militia plan called for an assault on Najaf's police station at the city's main intersection of routes Hartford and Miami, Revolutionary Circle. During the lawlessness of the cease-fire, al-Sadr's men had habitually harassed the Iraqi police. On 5 August, the militia attacked the police station with a platoon-sized element using small arms and mortars. They met surprising resistance from the Iraq police, who succeeded in fighting back the enemy's probing attack.

The 11th MEU had a liaison team at the governor's compound near the police station and learned of the attack immediately. The battalion landing team's forward communications and joint coordination center also was



U. S. Marine Corps Map

close to the police station, placed there during the transition with the Army. The attack alarmed the team, but its leaders determined that it did not require action on the Marines' part. In fact, most of the officers were pleased that the policemen handled the attack on their own, demonstrating progress in the Coalition's ultimate mission of making the Iraqi self-sufficient.

These good omens disappeared quickly. At 0300 on 5 August, the militia attacked again with a larger and more determined force. This new assault badly shook Governor al-Zurufi's confidence. Fearing that the militia might overrun the police station, he called on the Marines for assistance. Responding immediately, the 11th MEU commander, Colonel Haslam, deployed a reaction force. It consisted of Lieutenant Borneo's Combined Antiarmor Team A, Captain Matthew T. Morrissey's reinforced Company C, and part of the BLT 1/4 command element consisting of the commanding officer, Lieutenant Colonel Mayer; the operations officer, Major Moran; and the battalion air officer, Captain Carl M. Lowe.⁴⁹ When the relief force from FOB Hotel reached the Iraqi police station a short time later, however, it found that the police

once again had repulsed the attack. The relief force remained at the station per the governor's request but soon returned to base when all seemed quiet enough.

Lieutenant Colonel Mayer's decision to return to base disappointed many of the Marines who arrived ready for a fight. Several implored him to stay in case the militia returned. Since the altercation at the al-Sadr compound, when told that there might be 2,000 or more militia fighters with ill intentions in the area, Lance Corporal James T. Jenkins remembered thinking, "let's go." His friend Lance Corporal Calvert C. Wallace recalled being "fired up" when the relief force mounted up.⁵⁰ As the Marines ate breakfast later that morning around 0630, the call came to mount up again. Because of the prior evening's "false alarm," few responded with the same enthusiasm. Several Marines did not top off the water in their canteens, thinking they would return in a few hours.

As the militia mounted the third attack of 5 August on the police station, the Iraqi police were running low on ammunition and rapidly approaching a critical situation. Governor al-Zurufi telephoned Colonel Haslam again, reporting that the militia had massed in large numbers,



Photo by Cpl Dick Kotecki

Marines assigned to the 11th MEU and Iraqi policemen battled militiamen during three attacks on the police station in the city of an-Najaf, Iraq.

perhaps in the hundreds, near the police station and around Revolutionary Circle.⁵¹ Haslam detected the urgency of the governor's plea and mobilized his relief force once again. At about 0730 on 5 August, Lieutenant Colonel Mayer redeployed the original task force reinforced with more firepower. The force consisted of Combined Antiarmor Team A, First Lieutenant John F. MacDonald's light armored reconnaissance platoon, First Lieutenant Lamar D. Breshears' mortar platoon acting as a provisional infantry unit, and two rifle platoons from Company C.⁵²

Colonel Haslam ordered these units to reinforce the Iraqi police station and to secure Revolutionary Circle, which stood at the center of Najaf's downtown district and adjacent to the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery. With the Imam Ali Mosque about 1,500 meters to the west, these historic and religious sites increased the significance of the mission. Lieutenant Colonel Mayer's plan called for Lieutenant Borneo's combined weapons team and Lieutenant Breshears' platoon to secure the north and east side of Revolutionary Circle, Lieutenant MacDonald's light armored platoon to picket west of the traffic circle, and the platoons from Company C to hold the south part

of the circle and secure the endangered Iraqi police station. Mayer believed his force ample enough to execute the mission, although he did not have clear intelligence about the size of al-Sadr's force.

As the task force approached the target area, ominous signs of upcoming trouble appeared along the route. First of all, the behavior of the Iraqi people and traffic on the streets troubled the Marines. As they drove toward the objective, local townspeople waved and gestured good wishes. Once the Marines neared the Old City (the section around the objective area), however, the supportive crowds disappeared.⁵³ The Marines also noticed "busloads" of young men driving past them toward the cemetery and feared they were likely militia reinforcements.⁵⁴ First Lieutenant Russell L. Thomas, the supporting tank platoon commander, recalled seeing "at least 25 vehicles of all sorts carrying at least 200 men." He remembered wanting to attack them on the spot rather than wait until they positioned themselves to attack him. He restrained himself, acknowledging that an unprovoked attack at this point might cause greater problems.

Once inside the Old City, the militia launched their attack. The whole cemetery side of Route Miami erupted in hostile fire, including small arms, machine guns, mortars, and rockets. The Marine convoy encountered such heavy fire that Lieutenant Colonel Mayer called immediately for reinforcements. He contacted FOB Echo in Diwaniyah and ordered First Lieutenant Scott A. Cuomo's Combined Antiarmor Team B, Captain Robert B. Sotire's Company A (Alpha Raiders), and Captain Steven O. Wallace's Weapons Company headquarters to come forward. The deployment of this relief force left FOB Echo nearly empty. Only a small security force of service support troops remained to defend the base as the rest of the battalion landing team sped toward Revolutionary Circle.

The terrain of the Revolutionary Circle area made the relief force's mission that much more difficult. The area consisted of an urban mix of two- to five-story buildings, complicated by open areas around the traffic circle and the police compound. The proximity of the cemetery, the militia stronghold in the northwest quadrant of the traffic circle, and its 1,200-meter border with Route Miami made movement on the road difficult as the enemy could cover the crucial part of the route with deadly fire for nearly a mile.

A five-foot wall on the entire perimeter of the cemetery further defined the already challenging battle space. It provided cover for the Marines from enemy fire, but it also presented an obstacle to negotiate when returning fire or attacking the militia. Hundreds of militiamen swarmed and scurried within the confines of the graveyard, free to engage any of their available weapons

without restriction. In this environment, BLT 1/4 Marines confronted a maelstrom of enemy fire, including a steady and voluminous stream of 60mm and 82mm mortars, and rocket-propelled grenades.

The intensity of the fighting at Revolutionary Circle soon outpaced that around the Iraqi police station as the militia refocused their efforts on the arriving Americans. The initial clustering of units in and around the traffic circle ended quickly as Marines saw that the militia had registered their mortars directly on that spot. Most elements of the relief force took cover in buildings and behind vehicles and the cemetery wall. Despite the havoc, Company C suffered only one wounded during the scramble away from the circle.⁵⁵ Lieutenant Borneo's Combined Antiarmor Team A responded swiftly to the enemy firestorm as well, positioning its vehicles against the cemetery wall. At the same time, Section B of Lieutenant MacDonald's platoon of armored LAV-25s relocated to the north of the traffic circle for a better firing position. Section A's LAV-25s had a rougher time. They stayed inside the traffic circle, slugging away with 25mm automatic cannons at targets of opportunity, which abounded. As intense as the enemy fire was, the buildings around the circle provided adequate cover for the vehicles against most mortar blasts and rifle fire while allowing plenty of room to spread out to avoid dangerous clustering.

The cover and concealment exercised by the Marines minimized casualties, but it did not eliminate danger. Company C's platoons, which had been lucky at the traffic circle, ran into more trouble as they secured the Iraqi police station. In only a matter of minutes, enemy mortar fire inflicted several fragmentation wounds among the Marines.⁵⁶ The battle raged as incoming enemy fire spread from beyond the cemetery. Shooting came from virtually every building the Marines did not immediately occupy in the Old City. Each building provided a potential position for militia sharpshooters. No sooner had Lieutenant Breshears' platoon taken up position in the traffic circle than his troops began taking fire from militia fighters on top of a four-story building. This structure was just south of the circle, north of the Iraqi police station, and across the street from the Revolutionary Circle on the cemetery side. The militia soldiers fired straight down on the Marines as they scrambled to take cover. All reached safety except for Corporal Jesus E. Alveres-Garcia, who received a serious wound from enemy fire. The intensity of the fighting forced Breshears to order the entire 2d Section of the platoon to escort the wounded Marine to the medical aid station at FOB Hotel.⁵⁷



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines in a firefight with al-Sadr's militia at the Revolutionary Circle. The Marines on the ground are firing through "peep holes" in the wall while the Marines in the Humvee are firing a .50-caliber machine gun.



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Though the temperatures reached as high 125 degrees Fahrenheit, fully-loaded Marines would carry their wounded brethren on their backs in order to deliver them to the corpsmen for medical treatment.

Both sides quickly realized the necessity of securing rooftops for observation and firing. As soon as they entered the battle area, Marines dismounted and cleared several buildings around Revolutionary Circle. They occupied the rooftops across from the cemetery, where they could fire directly on the militiamen and into surrounding buildings. Forward air controller Captain Peter N. Gibbons accompanied Company C Marines to the top of a hotel, where he could view the entire battlefield and call for air support as needed.

Getting permission to acquire supporting fire, however, presented a dilemma. The exclusion zones, drawn by Lieutenant Colonel Mayer weeks before, included the cemetery and the Old City on the same side of Route Miami. Since the enemy attacked from within that area, the Marines had to get permission to bring supporting fires anywhere inside, making it a cumbersome and time-consuming process. Every target had to be approved, which sometimes took 20 to 30 minutes. The wait for permission became more of a burden as the fighting moved closer to the Imam Ali Mosque.⁵⁸ Two initial helicopter sorties of UH-1N Huey and AH-1J Cobras on the morning of 5 August destroyed

several key mortar positions and killed several militia fighters. The “birds” then returned to FOB Duke to rearm and await new missions.⁵⁹

Both sides used all the weapons at their disposal during the engagement, but not in direct attacks. The militia apparently understood the futility of attacking the Marines straight on and facing the full impact of their firepower. On the Coalition side, Lieutenant Colonel Mayer fought cautiously, awaiting the obvious advantage of reinforcements before taking the offensive. A largely static battle ensued, with each side firing at the other without advance or withdrawal. The Marines occasionally did engage in fire and maneuver to take out enemy positions or to gain better firing positions. In the LAV-25 platoon, Section A's designated marksman, Lance Corporal Michael P. Ball, climbed to an elevated firing position, where he targeted and killed three militiamen at 400 meters as they moved about the cemetery.⁶⁰

While the 1st Battalion, 4th Marines, struggled for control on the ground, disaster struck in the air above them. About 0930 as the mortar platoon moved toward a warehouse facility a few hundred meters north of Revolutionary Circle, its members watched a rocket hit

one of the expeditionary unit's Hueys (Number 631, call sign Rock Three One) in the tail section. The helicopter went down for a hard landing about 400 meters north of the mortar platoon just next to Route Miami.⁶¹ Reacting quickly, Lieutenant Borneo and his Weapons Team A moved to the site along with a section of LAV-25s. Lieutenant Breshears' platoon hurried to the crash site on foot, and a section of Lieutenant Russell Thomas' M1A1 Abrams tanks rolled in the same direction. The 1st Platoon of Captain Samuel H. Carrasco's Company B, the battalion's designated quick reaction force, arrived on the scene in two P7 amphibious assault vehicles. All the forces at the site immediately executed a full-scale tactical recovery of aircraft and personnel on the downed helicopter. Thoughts of the 1993 Mogadishu "Blackhawk Down" incident haunted the Marines as they hastened to evacuate the damaged Huey.⁶² The situation degenerated into a footrace between the Marines and the militia fighters attempting to get to the crash site first.

Borneo's motorized team and MacDonald's LAV-25s arrived in the first few minutes. They immediately delivered a high volume of fire on large numbers of militiamen trying to reach the downed helicopter. Lieutenant Borneo used his rifle to kill one militiaman trying to fire a rocket at the rescue party. Three of Borneo's Marines took down a group of five attackers rushing toward the spot where the helicopter crew had taken refuge.⁶³

Only one of the helicopter's crew members was seriously wounded, taking a rifle shot to the face. In a twist of good fortune for the Marines, the Huey had



Photo courtesy of 1stLt Eric Taylor

The remains of the Huey helicopter (call sign Rock Three One) that was brought down by a rocket on 5 August during the initial stages of the fight with al-Sadr's militia.

landed next to a medical clinic. The pilot, Captain Stephen H. Mount, needed attention for a facial wound, so his copilot, Captain Andrew Turner, ran into the clinic and came out with an Iraqi physician. Mount had been holding a compress to his wound while trying to chamber a round in his pistol with his teeth. His crew chief, Staff Sergeant Patrick O. Burgess, finally gave him a needed hand in loading.⁶⁴

The Marines arriving at the crash site found the aircraft empty. Some put out the fire in the burning engine while others shouted for the Huey crew. Mount and his men returned the calls from their position in a courtyard adjacent to the medical clinic. Borneo's and MacDonald's teams, with the help of the recently arrived reaction force, soon suppressed militia fire, leaving only sporadic gunfire from militiamen in hiding.⁶⁵

Borneo and his team found Captain Mount already bandaged by the Iraqi physician and decided he could be moved safely. After searching the grounds of the clinic, Borneo identified an unattended ambulance and commandeered it. His Marines placed Mount in the ambulance and drove him to the battalion aid station at FOB Hotel, escorted by a combined antiarmor section of heavily armed Humvees, which carried the other Huey crew members. Staff Sergeant Burgess remained behind to supervise recovery of the helicopter.

With the crew safely evacuated, the remaining members of the rescue party focused on the aircraft. The lessons of Mogadishu drove the Marines to try to keep from leaving anything of real or propaganda value at the crash site.⁶⁶ Arrangements for the helicopter's recovery fell to the landing team's logistics officer, Captain Duane T. Fosberg. The recovery convoy left FOB Hotel at 1100, and upon arrival at the crash site, carried on necessary work under intermittent enemy fire. The process took three to four hours, with contributions from the battalion's engineer platoon, a civilian crane, and an M88 tank recovery vehicle.⁶⁷ Even the crane operator, who ran a civilian machine for the first time, took sporadic small-arms fire as his machine lifted the helicopter parts onto truck beds for transport back to FOB Hotel. The recovery convoy suffered only one fatality when Sergeant Moses D. Rocha was killed by enemy fire while reloading his Humvee mounted machine gun on the way to the crash site.⁶⁸

Meanwhile, the fight at Revolutionary Circle and the Iraqi police station continued. Most Marines along Route Miami had propped themselves against the cemetery wall

* The October 1993 incident in Mogadishu, Somalia, involved a foiled raid by U.S. Army Rangers in which 18 soldiers were killed.



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines of the 11th MEU battle al-Sadr's militia from positions in the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery. The multi-story buildings (in the distance) provided excellent positions for militia snipers.

for protection against the intense fire coming from inside the grounds. Although the battle remained static, the Marines continued to maneuver individually and in small teams among buildings and along rooftops adjacent to enemy positions in search of better fields of fire. Air and artillery support maintained by Captain Randy Gibbons with Company C and Captain Carl M. Lowe with the command element proved crucial for the ground forces in suppressing militia movements and eliminating several of their positions.⁶⁹

The return of the antiarmor team and the light armored reconnaissance unit to the engagement helped turn the fight in favor of the units that had remained engaged at the cemetery. The firepower from their vehicles kept the enemy off balance, allowing the infantrymen to execute what little movement they could. Marines from these units demonstrated exceptional fighting skills. In one instance, Sergeant William C. Niemeyer II took Lance Corporals Christopher Jackalone and Smith to a five-story rooftop to use the indirect fire spotting technique for his vehicle's MK19 automatic grenade launcher to neutralize enemy emplacements. From that position, they also used their

rifles to kill several militia fighters.⁷⁰ Meanwhile, the gunners of the LAV-25s, as their after action report noted, "continued to use their cannon to destroy two mortar positions, a fortified machine gun bunker, and at least four rocket-propelled grenade teams."⁷¹

Combined Antiarmor Team B arrived later in the afternoon under the leadership of Lieutenant Scott Cuomo to support the Marines fighting around the cemetery as part of the reinforcement convoy Lieutenant Colonel Mayer had ordered in the morning. Later in the afternoon, Cuomo's unit and Lieutenant Thomas' tanks patrolled the length of Route Miami, firing at targets of opportunity on both sides of the road. For the Marines of Cuomo's Team B, the trip to Revolutionary Circle proved just as harrowing as the fighting at their destination. The militia fighters tried to ambush them at 1430 as the force entered Najaf on Route Miami, about 1,500 meters south of the battle area.⁷² Militiamen opened fire with rifles and machine guns from three- and four-story buildings on the west side of the road. The two Team B Humvees leading the convoy turned straight into the enemy fire and attacked. The gunners of the vehicles, Corporal Anthony

C. Mazzola and Lance Corporal William O. Stoffers III, saved the convoy by aggressively delivering accurate fire. Their actions allowed the convoy to escape the ambush and continue its reinforcement mission.

Back at the cemetery, the Marines continued to trade fire with al-Sadr's militia in the stifling 115-degree heat.⁷³ After finishing at the helicopter crash site, the mortar platoon returned to Revolutionary Circle to engage enemy firing from the cemetery. Gun squads acquired rooftop positions to fire at targets of opportunity in the cemetery using the same tactics employed earlier by a Combined Antiarmor Team A group. Both units killed and wounded numerous militiamen and destroyed several fighting positions.⁷⁴ Meanwhile, LAV-25 Section B killed several more militiamen with its cannons while section leader Staff Sergeant Jason G. Smith used a spotter and the indirect MK19 fire technique to eliminate another mortar position inside the cemetery.



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines maneuver for better tactical position during the fight at the Revolutionary Circle and the cemetery surrounding the Imam Ali Mosque.

By mid-afternoon, as four of Lieutenant Cuomo's Team B vehicles relieved the LAV-25 and 81mm platoons at Revolutionary Circle, a maelstrom of firing ensued as the enemy launched a ferocious attack. In the hours that followed, the newly arrived combined antiarmor team destroyed several enemy snipers and their firing emplacements using the team's formidable array of weapons, including wire-guided antitank missiles, MK19 automatic grenade launchers, and medium machine guns. The Marines also enjoyed several episodes of good luck. A Marine section leader, Sergeant David R. Stegall, had a rocket-propelled grenade hit the ground less than 10 meters in front of him, but it did not detonate. It

skipped right over his head and bounced down the road past an entire line of Weapons Company positions.⁷⁵

By late afternoon, all reinforcements had arrived and the engagement had taken on a definite shape. The fight had been intense, but by now most of the enemy positions along Route Miami opposite the cemetery had been eliminated. That left one principal problem area—the cemetery itself. The militia had used it all day as a base of operations against the Marines along Route Miami, but Lieutenant Colonel Mayer could not clear it as he wanted to because of its location in the exclusion zone.⁷⁶ The ability to get into the cemetery would determine the fate of the battle and, potentially, the city.

The Cemetery Fight

The intense fight that developed at Revolutionary Circle on 5 August 2004 convinced Lieutenant Colonel Mayer that BLT 1/4 faced a determined foe. The militiamen did not fight effectively, but they fought hard, and their sheer numbers largely offset their lack of tactical prowess. Hundreds of militia fighters crowded rooftops, windows, and doorways, seemingly anywhere a fighter could hide, all trying to kill as many Marines as possible. The growing casualty list demonstrated the intensity of battle. Within hours, Mayer's Marines had killed and wounded dozens, if not hundreds, of al-Sadr's militiamen. But the militia replaced their losses faster than the Marines could eliminate them. The Marines observed militia reinforcements streaming back and forth unrestricted from the cemetery to new fighting positions.

Mayer understood that he had to stop this continual movement. He consulted with Colonel Haslam, who in turn conferred with the I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) commander, Lieutenant General James T. Conway, in order to get approval to attack the cemetery. Conway forwarded the request to the commander of Multi-National Forces Iraq, Army General George W. Casey Jr. Casey's advisors suggested seeking permission from both the Pentagon and the White House. Although a time-consuming and bureaucratic process, Mayer left nothing to chance on such a politically and culturally sensitive decision.⁷⁷

In the plan that Mayer proposed, he sought to create a buffer between the militiamen and the Iraqi police station—and the civilian population caught between them. To forge this buffer, the Marines would attack through the militia's haven, the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery, and eventually assault the headquarters of al-Sadr's fighters in the area of the Imam Ali Mosque. Intelligence reports indicated that the mosque contained several



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines of BLT 1/4 crossing a rubble-strewn field in an-Najaf. The urban environment of the city presented the Marines with challenges in confronting militiamen who could be hiding in rubble just about anywhere.

hundred militiamen as well as their commander, Muqtada al-Sadr.⁷⁸

Mayer proposed a frontal attack: simple, direct, and violent. Assigning the mosque as the ultimate objective, with supplementary and intermediate objectives, BLT 1/4 would assault and clear the militia defending it. The attack would move east to west paralleling Route Hartford to its intersection with Ring Road, a street tracing the perimeter of the mosque and part of the Old City surrounding it. The Hartford/Ring Road intersection was about 1,000 meters from Revolutionary Circle and about 500 meters east of the mosque. The militia was concentrated both inside and around Ring Road and the mosque. But the militia fighters moved constantly, creating numerous militia strong points in several locations inside the cemetery and all along Route Hartford south of the attack route. Additionally, large numbers of militia fighters surrounded the Iraqi police station and the area adjacent to it.⁷⁹

Having clarified the enemy situation by around 1400, and receiving approval from the high command for the attack, Mayer solidified his plan. The assault would take place along a front stretching along Route Miami from

Revolutionary Circle to the lower end of the amusement park on the north side of Route Favre on about a 1,200-meter front. The attack would move in a westerly direction through the cemetery with the goal of clearing the southeast sector of the cemetery along with the northeast quadrant of the Old City inside Ring Road. At a designated point, the lower end of the attack force would pivot toward Ring Road and the cemetery. Mayer's Marines would then clear the remainder of the cemetery and attendant built-up areas. The plan concentrated the forces on the southern end of the attack, where the militia had consolidated most of its fighters.⁸⁰ Mayer also hoped that the assault might result in al-Sadr's capture.

The assault force concentrated around and projected from Revolutionary Circle. It was anchored by two platoons of Captain Matthew T. Morrissey's Company C and reinforced by Company B's quick reaction force platoon, which provided security on the left flank (Route Hartford). Lieutenant Breshears' mortarmen, now designated as a provisional rifle platoon, took up Company C's right (north) flank. Company C's sector stretched 700 meters north from the traffic circle to a point on Route Miami where a principal cemetery road

(dubbed Diagonal Road) intersected. This road ran in a southwesterly direction from that point until it intersected Hartford about 700 meters west of Revolutionary Circle. Diagonal Road would become the most important avenue in the battle that followed.

Captain Sotire's Company A, accompanied by forward air controller Captain Randy J. Staab, came next in the assault line. Company A lined up north on Route Miami from Diagonal Road to Route Favre. Captain Kintzley's reconnaissance platoon guarded Company A's right flank in the amusement park on the north side of Route Favre and constituted the end of the line as the northern-most unit. The command, consisting of Lieutenant Colonel Mayer, his operations officer, Major Coby Moran, and battalion air officer, Captain Lowe, was positioned on Route Miami near the traffic circle. Only 1,500 meters separated the point of departure from the final objective.⁸¹

With the plan set, Mayer's men started lining up units around 1530 for the cemetery assault. The air temperature had soared to a mid-afternoon peak of around 125 degrees. Even so, the assault formation period provided a much-needed break for the Marines as they lined up with their backs against the cemetery wall, comforted by a little shade. Most had been fighting for more than six hours already. Some of the troops felt relaxed enough to take photos.⁸²

Not all of the fighting had stopped, and the antiarmor teams and tank sections continued to patrol Route Miami from the Iraqi police station and Revolutionary Circle northward.⁸³ The noise of battle—rifle fire, machine guns, mortars, rockets, tank guns, and occasional close air support missions—persisted during the assault preparation. The resting Marines marveled at their calm among the fighting, occurring just short distances away. "We'd been taking fire all day," recalled Corporal Calvert C. Wallace of Company C, who noted that after a while, "you don't even mind." Heat and thirst occupied a higher priority at that point for many of the Marines, as some parched troops ran up to 400 meters under fire to bring water back to their positions.⁸⁴

The cemetery assault began at 1800, but the battalion's Marines found themselves with challenges beyond just the hostile militia fighters. In addition to the extreme heat, they had to contend with the terrain of the 15-square-mile cemetery, an extremely congested and disorganized array of brick-and-mortar crypts, mausoleums, and catacombs, ranging from subterranean to 10 feet tall or more, and in all shapes and sizes. The tightly arranged tombstones often prevented individual Marines from maneuvering in between them in their full



Photo by LtCol John R. Way

The closely-spaced catacombs and tombs of the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery provided excellent cover for the defending militia. The cemetery is reputed to be the largest and oldest cemetery in the world.

battle packs. The Marine expeditionary unit executive officer, Lieutenant Colonel Apicella, aptly described the terrain as "a New Orleans cemetery on steroids." Often, troops had to move laterally by several crypts before being able to move forward.⁸⁵

The attack began smoothly despite the adverse conditions. Company C swept two factories, although the tombs around them impeded their advance. The 81mm platoon and Company A made good progress as well, moving several hundred meters and meeting only sporadic resistance. The reconnaissance platoon also encountered very light fire while moving through the amusement park. Even the platoon from Company B, assigned to Company C's left flank and astride the enemy-held buildings across Route Hartford, experienced little action. The infantry crept forward supported by tanks, combined antiarmor units, P7 amphibious assault vehicles, and Lieutenant MacDonald's LAV-25 light armored vehicles.⁸⁶

As Company C continued to move a few hundred yards forward, the unit began taking sporadic fire, which quickly escalated into sniper fire coming from seemingly all directions. Heavy mortars and rockets whizzed by the Marines, transforming the quiet cemetery into a raging battlefield. The supporting weapons vehicles followed behind the infantry and began engaging the enemy targets with their heavy weapons, eliminating some of their positions. The proximity of the militia fighters to the infantry increased the danger of the Marines hitting "friendly's." Meanwhile, the militiamen along the south side of Route Hartford opened fire, pinning down the Marines there. The cemetery fighting quickly became chaotic as small units lost contact with each other as they



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Tightly arranged tombstones, tombs, and catacombs often prevented Marines from maneuvering in between them in full battle gear.

tried to maneuver around the terrain, encumbered by a seeming forest of crypts and tombs.

Individual Marines found themselves adjusting to the rapidly changing tactical conditions. Earlier in the day, Private First Class Heladio Zuniga had mentioned he and his fellow Marines were just “happy . . . to do something.” Then reality struck, as Lance Corporal Nathaniel A. Ziobro recalled: “Whoa, I’m getting shot at.” Lance Corporal Sanick P. DelaCruz remembered suddenly firing madly in the “same direction” as everyone else.⁸⁷ In a short time they adapted and even became inured to the conditions around them as rounds whizzed by their heads. Lance Corporal DelaCruz spoke of becoming accustomed to incoming mortar and small arms fire: “After a while you just get used to it,” and “you’re just standing by a tomb as rounds fly by your head.”⁸⁸ This did not imply that the Marines took the danger lightly. DelaCruz also spoke of his profound concern for his men in the battle ahead, as well as the possibility of them becoming heat casualties, but it does help explain how they adapted to their environment and went about their job.⁸⁹

Company B’s 2d Platoon, while inflicting heavy casualties on the militia fighters on the south side of Route Hartford, took several casualties of their own. Their suppression, but not attack assignment, subjected them to several shrapnel and sniper casualties, more than any other platoon on 5 August.⁹⁰ Lieutenant Russell Thomas’ tank platoon proved indispensable by delivering a steady flow of deadly high explosive rounds into the enemy-held buildings on Route Hartford. At the hot corner of the battle, the command center positioned itself close to the action and monitored the situation closely. Lieutenant Colonel Mayer, his operations officer, Major Moran, and forward air controller, Captain Lowe, oversaw the action

from just a few hundred meters away, near Revolutionary Circle, from a specially equipped C7 amphibious vehicle.⁹¹

The most remarkable action of the cemetery fight on 5 August belonged to Lieutenant Breshears’ mortar platoon. Breshears knew that by launching his attack early to keep up with Company C, he might expose his own north flank as Company A waited to launch. But Company C needed its flank protected more because it had the most hazardous sector of the assault. The mortar platoon made good progress until it reached Diagonal Road, about 200 meters from its starting point. There the platoon began taking small-arms fire that increased in intensity as the platoon moved forward. Then, within the next 150 meters, the platoon encountered a well-prepared 40-man enemy force. A pitched battle quickly developed as Breshears’ platoon found itself in close combat—so close that his Marines exchanged insults with the enemy as they tossed hand grenades at each other. After several minutes of hard fighting, the militiamen scattered, removing a major obstruction to Company C’s advance to the south. Breshears’ Marines later learned that they had engaged the westernmost element of a militia defensive line that originated in Company C’s objective area.⁹²

As nightfall came, the cemetery fighting remained intense. Lieutenant Colonel Mayer called for a halt to the attack as the darkness prevented the Marines from fighting effectively. He ordered the mortar platoon to fall back to Diagonal Road and set up a defensive perimeter. The Marines would continue the assault in the morning. However, the lack of small unit radio contact and the difficult cemetery terrain led to problems disseminating the order. Due to these communications problems and the intensity of the battle, the order to halt the attack did not get to Lieutenant Breshears’ section, which lay between his 2d Section and Company A. Consequently, when his 2d Section and Company A pulled back, Breshears’ 1st Section was left exposed on three sides. The militia quickly discovered the unit’s accidental isolation and launched attacks from all three directions. Breshears called in an artillery mission to relieve the beleaguered element, but the fire control center denied the mission because of the unit’s location in an exclusion zone.⁹³

The missing order and denial of fire support resulted in lethal consequences for those involved on the ground. With no alternative, 1st Section withdrew under heavy fire. One of its squad leaders, Sergeant Yadir Reynoso, died in the rear-guard action. The section leader, Staff Sergeant Ian W. Bonnell, ordered an advance by the section to retrieve Reynoso’s body. Not hearing the order and acting on his initiative, Lance Corporal Justin C. Vaughn made two



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines carrying out wounded during the fighting in Wadi al-Salam Cemetery. Though the initial casualties of 6 August were 2 killed and 20 wounded, al-Sadr's militiamen sustained substantially higher casualty rates, estimated by the Marines in the hundreds.

dashes under fire to retrieve Reynoso's body and gear before the section could organize. Vaughn carried Reynoso 150 meters to the rear before collapsing from exhaustion. From that point, Vaughn's fellow Marines helped him reach the perimeter on Diagonal Road with the deceased Marine.⁹⁴

Many 11th MEU Marines believed that the fire restrictions caused Sergeant Reynoso's death. The incident created lingering bitterness, but it also reinforced resolve. More importantly, it brought about a quick easing of restrictions, a development that led to almost immediate facilitation of fire mission approval and reduction of restricted areas from 1,000 meters around the mosque to 300 meters. The tragedy had a profound effect on some higher-ranking officers as well. Lieutenant Colonel Gary Johnston, the 11th MEU's operations officer, said that after the Reynoso incident, he made sure that if higher headquarters delayed approving a critical fire mission, he approved it himself.⁹⁵

With the exception of this incident, the battle proceeded according to Marine expectations, even with the battalion's

underestimation of the number of militia fighters. The day's casualties amounted to two killed and about 20 wounded, mostly minor shrapnel wounds, with only a handful of those serious. The militia endured much heavier losses in both the morning battle and the struggle for the cemetery. Corporal James T. Jenkins of Company C estimated that his unit alone killed 100 in the cemetery and claimed to have counted more than 50 of them himself.⁹⁶

Marine small arms accounted for many of the enemy casualties, but the majority of the militia killed and wounded resulted from the battalion's heavier weapons: M1A1 tanks, antiarmor teams, LAV-25s, and P7s. In one case, Lance Corporal Michael J. Novak killed 15 to 25 militia fighters with the LAV-25's 25mm cannon. As the cemetery assault began, Novak spotted militia teams 800 meters down Route Hartford crossing the road and moving into the cemetery, attempting to reinforce militia fighters in Company C's objective area. Novak took advantage of their exposed position and recorded kills with accurate, deadly fire until nightfall halted the fighting.⁹⁷

Close air support also contributed to the high enemy casualty count. Led by the air control triumvirate of Captain Gibbons (Company C), Captain Lowe (battalion command post), and Captain Staab (Company A), Marine air support inflicted hundreds of militia casualties. Bringing in both helicopter and fixed-wing aircraft, the air controllers directed scores of air strikes, a remarkable feat considering the area restrictions and delays pending strike approvals that they encountered.



Official U.S. Marine Corps Photo

A U.S. Air Force AC-130 Spectre gunship raining massive fire on entrenched militia with its 25mm Gatling gun, firing 1,800 rounds per minute. The gunship also carried a 40mm grenade machine gun and 105mm howitzer.

That night, the “crown jewel” of air support arrived—the U.S. Air Force Lockheed AC-130 Spectre gunship, which offered astounding firepower from an altitude of 2,000 meters. The plane carried a 25mm Gatling gun, which fired 1,800 rounds per minute; a 40mm grenade machine gun; and 105mm howitzer. Once given coordinates, the plane targeted the enemy using infrared and heat sensors. Marines on the ground could identify a target, call an AC-130 strike, and the pilot could destroy entire buildings filled with hostile fighters by picking out the enemy’s heat signatures. Throughout the night of 5 August, the Marines in the cemetery huddled underneath tombs and crypts trying to catch some rest. The Marines got excited at the sound of the AC-130, which they called the “mad jackass” because of the signature sound it made as it engaged its awesome firepower on a target.⁹⁸

Anticipating and planning the next day’s battle or taking turns on perimeter watch, few of the officers, like their enlisted Marines, got much sleep that night. They maintained overwatch outside the perimeter from P7 amphibious vehicles, the motorized antiarmor teams, and the LAV-25 armored cars while their leaders planned the next day from inside the perimeter. The company

commanders, Captains Morrissey and Sotire, accompanied by air control officer Captain Gibbons, met to plan the coming day’s course of action.⁹⁹

At 0500 the next morning (6 August), the militia fighters began the day with mortar barrages, signaling to the Marines in the cemetery that the fighting had begun. As the morning progressed, the mortar fire intensified. Amid the same blistering heat as the day before, the battle raged with palpable intensity. Under the constant roar of mortars, small arms, machine gun fire, and rockets, the Marines attempted to match the enemy fire shot for shot. But the mortar activity from that morning fixed itself in the memories of the Marines. “It was literally raining shrapnel,” recalled tanker Lieutenant Thomas.¹⁰⁰ As his Abrams section advanced to support the infantry along Diagonal Road, the shrapnel was so thick that he had his tanks “buttoned up,” not allowing vision slits to remain open for ventilation. The dust from the explosions and debris made sight practically impossible. “I was 50 meters from the tank in front of me and I couldn’t see it,” he said.¹⁰¹

That experience notwithstanding, the 6 August engagement in the Wadi al-Salam Cemetery favored the Marine tanks. Their success began the previous day on Route Hartford, where Thomas recalled a horrific scene, one that lingered in his mind and influenced the cemetery battle’s outcome. Stationed on Route Hartford and patrolling from Revolutionary Square westward about 300 meters from the Imam Ali Mosque, Thomas observed how the “badly outnumbered” Marines struggled to engage the militia fighters “shooting out of every window.”¹⁰² The tank platoon (call sign Tiger), assigned to Company C when the cemetery assault began, supported the unit in its mission to clear the cemetery. Thomas focused his effort on the concentrated militia strongholds, several three- to five-story buildings occupied by enemy fighters. These structures, coupled with the never-ending flow of reinforcements, prevented Marines from advancing past the eastern edge of their day’s objective—the built-up area in the southwest corner of the cemetery.¹⁰³

Anticipating the substantial task before Company C on the 6th, Lieutenant Colonel Mayer placed the quick reaction force and mortar platoons on its flanks and ordered the tank platoon in the middle of the Company C line near the intersection of Route Hartford and the Diagonal Road.¹⁰⁴ The buildings in the immediate area were the focus of intense fighting during the whole battle. In the heat and intensity of this combat, the Abrams tanks fired scores of rounds into enemy positions. As the Major Moran put it, “Thomas earned his pay that day.”¹⁰⁵

With the outside temperature often exceeding 120 degrees, the inside of the tanks approached cooking temperature, making heat stroke a constant threat. Thomas' Marines made it through 5 August without incident because they arrived fresh and "pumped" with adrenalin. But with little rest that night and the grueling work in the same heat conditions on 6 August, the threat of heat injuries dramatically increased. Thomas realized that he could not keep his crews in fighting condition at this pace. He convinced Lieutenant Colonel Mayer to approve putting one section of tanks on line at a time. While two tanks engaged in battle, the other section moved to the rear for two to three hours to recuperate, rest, rehydrate, and eat while the tank received needed maintenance. This rotation provided some relief but did not entirely solve the problems. Section B's commander, Gunnery Sergeant Michael S. Philley, became a heat casualty, succumbing to delirium for a time and driving his tank up and down Route Miami in an erratic manner.¹⁰⁶

Lieutenant Thomas conceived another idea to help his troops recover from the debilitating heat. He remembered having read that professional athletes had used intravenous hydration to revitalize during hot endurance events to fend off heat exhaustion. Thomas had his platoon corpsman, Hospitalman Charles Skeggs, administer fluids through multiple intravenous (IV) injections to tank crewmen during their recuperation periods.¹⁰⁷ The crews came back from their rest periods in much better condition, often with IVs still in their arms. With their revitalized crews, Tiger fired on the enemy for the remainder of the day, delivering punishing blasts on militia positions with impressive consistency. Thomas' IV innovation was adopted by several Marines who fought in the battle.

While Company C's sector endured most of the enemy action, strong fighting continued along the entire battalion front. More accurate intelligence on militia strength revealed that the Marines had vastly underestimated the enemy's numbers. Original assessments indicated a few hundred militia fighters in and around the cemetery, but as updates placed the militia force at closer to 1,000 fighters, operations planners reevaluated the entire assault plan and approach.¹⁰⁸ The militia force estimates increased as the day progressed.

The mortar platoon moved forward toward its new objective, which proved more achievable as the planners halved the original battalion objective. While the mortar platoon made a pivot toward Company C in support of the latter's mission, Company A proceeded toward its own objective using "blast and pounce" tactics. On

multiple occasions, Captain Staab brought in close air support to soften a target before the Alpha Raiders made their assault.

Captain Kintzley's reconnaissance platoon also continued to advance. After a successful mission on 5 August, the platoon linked with Company A's north flank to help narrow the company's front after the mortar platoon began its pivot toward Company C on its move toward its objective. After the connection, Kintzley's platoon came under fire on several occasions. Each time, however, enemy resistance quickly dissolved after close air support strikes. Kintzley's platoon reached its objective and set up a defensive position around the intersection of Routes Favre and Nova. While settling into his defensive position, Sergeant John G. Avak noticed what appeared to be a gun tube behind a wall. After he shot a 40mm grenade from his M203 launcher and disabled the weapon, he saw a SPG-9 recoilless rifle, which could have caused severe damage to Marine units. A few more 40mm rounds eliminated the enemy firing team, and the reconnaissance platoon moved forward to capture the gun as a prize, as well as the one militiaman who remained from the firing team.¹⁰⁹

While Company A and the reconnaissance platoon advanced, Company C and Company B's 2d Platoon stalled around the intersection of Hartford and Diagonal Road, enduring steady casualties. It was here that Company C suffered its first death.¹¹⁰ The Marines took shelter under and between tombs and crypts or against the cemetery wall, only coming up to fight and for resupply. On one of these occasions, Lance Corporal Larry Wells took a fatal sniper shot.¹¹¹

The engagement grew so intense that Lieutenant Thomas' tanks could not move west of Diagonal Road. Although stymied, tank platoon Tiger continued to deploy its weapons effectively against enemy positions, blasting the hotels and other four- and five-story buildings as they became targets. One notable incident that afternoon brought a morale boost. While firing at the roof of a six-story hotel, one of Gunnery Sergeant Philley's tank rounds hit an air conditioning unit. The blast sent a huge fireball several stories into the air. The explosion was so large that it scared Thomas, who thought he might get in trouble and recalled thinking that he "was going to be relieved." Instead, there came a rousing cheer from the troops all around, and Lieutenant Colonel Mayer radioed Thomas a hearty "good shot."

Despite the moderate Marine success, the surprisingly strong resistance of the militia forced Lieutenant Colonel Mayer to reevaluate his plan. His Marines had advanced



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

Marines used heavy weapons, such as the 120mm main gun of the M1A1 Abrams tank, TOW missiles, and AT4 rocket launchers to eliminate pockets of militia resistance in large multi-story buildings in an-Najaf. These multi-story buildings and garages around the cemetery gave al-Sadr's militiamen excellent observation and firing positions that many times could only be eliminated by heavy weapons or close air support.

as far as the hotels at the edge of Ring Road, but they could go no farther. By this time, Mayer had reports that there were as many as 2,000 to 4,000 of al-Sadr's militia fighters in the area. The original plan of clearing the cemetery and possibly reaching the Imam Ali Mosque could not succeed against an enemy of that size. Mayer halted the assault and asked for reinforcements. Colonel Haslam agreed, and with the concurrence of I MEF's General Conway and Multi-National Forces Iraq, the Army sent two cavalry battalions to help wrest Najaf and the Imam Ali Mosque area from al-Sadr's control.¹¹²

In the meantime, Company C's attack on its objective continued with the support tanks, gun vehicles, and air. The Marines stood by while tanks and the vehicles of the antiarmor teams and LAV-25s stayed, using their heavy weapons to clear resistance on Routes Hartford and Miami. The militia fighters launched several small-scale attacks against the governor's compound as well, but Captain Samuel H. Carrasco's Company B, 1st and 3d Platoons, handled them easily, killing several enemy fighters while his Marines only suffered a few minor injuries.

Captains Gibbons and Lowe in the Company C objective area continued their close air support coordination in conjunction with the ground attack. Gibbons called in 20 sorties with combined artillery missions, and Lowe logged an equal number of missions.¹¹³ They, along with Captain Staab, coordinated the rotary and fixed-wing aircraft that inflicted the heaviest damage and casualties of the entire battle.¹¹⁴

The climax of the day's air activity came with the decision to drop large general-purpose bombs on a key enemy position. A tip from an Iraqi civilian at the governor's compound informed the Marines that a certain building in the cemetery served as an militia command center and supply point. Fixed-wing aircraft delivered four 1,000-pound bombs on the target, completely destroying the building. The bombing elicited "a lot of cheers and wows" from the troops, according to Captain Sellars.¹¹⁵ An estimated 15 to 20 members of the militia high command perished in the bombing, which seriously disrupted militia command and control of the cemetery defense.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Raid Interlude

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

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

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

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

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



Photo by Maj Glen G. Butler

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

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

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

to use in targeting and destroying the enemy positions.¹²⁴

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

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



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo by Cpl Matthew S. Richards

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo by SSgt Ashley Brokop, USAF

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

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

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

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

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



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

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

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

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

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

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



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

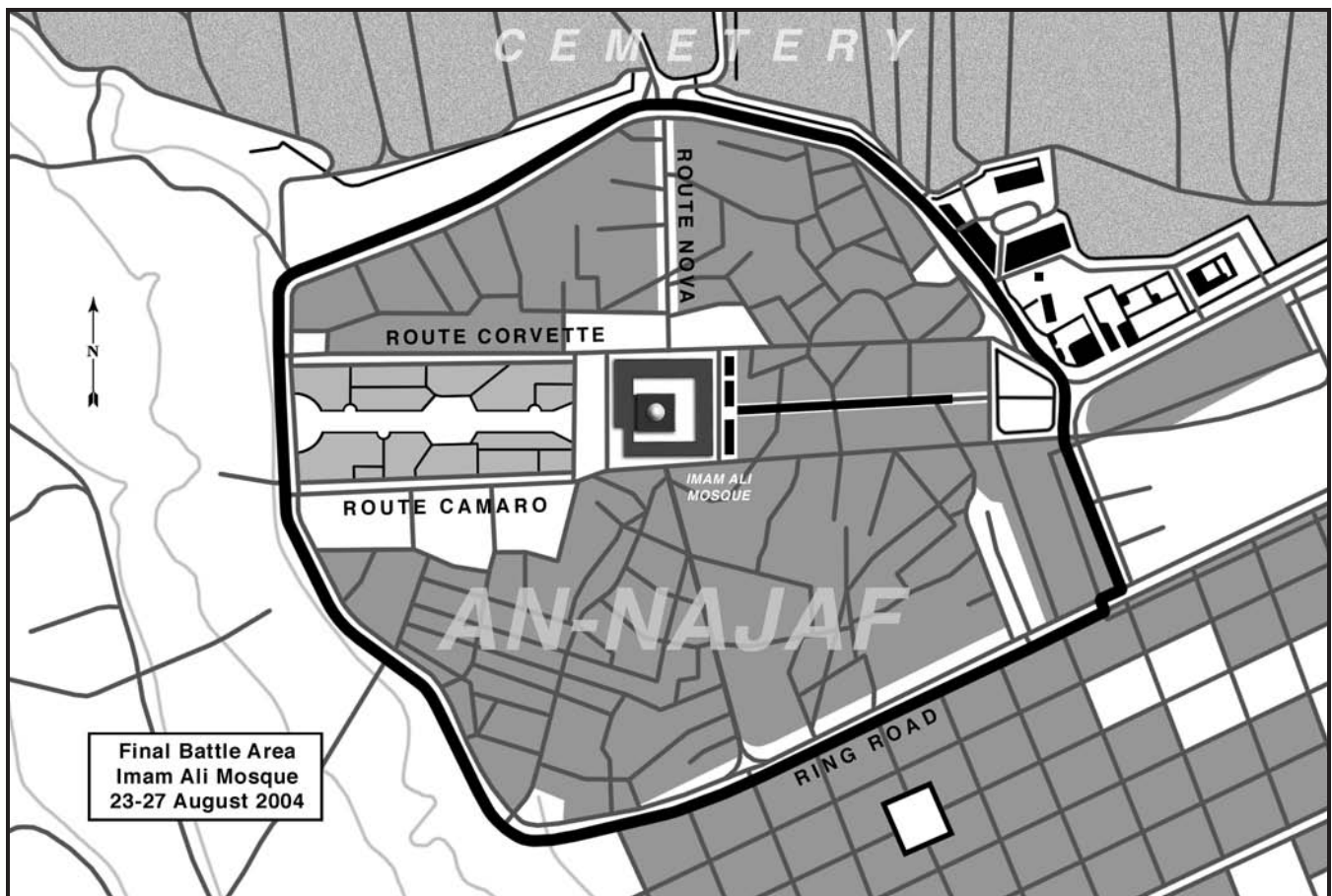


Photo by Cpl Matthew S. Richards
Marines and Iraqi National Guard soldiers set up a checkpoint using a Humvee equipped with TOW guided missile and machine gun.

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

The probing attack consisted of 5th Cavalry tanks and began shortly after 0100. The force encountered 11 improvised explosive devices while en route to the target. The raid focused on the southwest corner of the parking garage, where the attackers quickly met enemy resistance. The engagement started as the cavalry's guns and close air support began taking on targets at about 0130. The intense resistance forced the tanks to expend half their ammo in less than 30 minutes. Major Moran described this engagement as the most violent action he had seen in the Najaf campaign to this time, including the cemetery fight.¹⁶⁰ Close air support joined the fight with the AC-130 and Cobra gunships firing their Gatling guns and Hellfire missiles, respectively. Each made several runs during the next half hour, destroying various targets. Lieutenant Colonel Mayer decided to disengage at about 0200 and had an AC-130 cover the withdrawal. The aircraft stayed on station, making more runs until 0230.¹⁶¹

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



Map by Vincent J. Martinez

The Final Assault

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

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

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

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

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



Photo courtesy of Lucian M. Read

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo by LtCol John R. Way

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo by Cpl Annette Kyriakides

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo by Cpl Annette Kyriakides

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



Photo by Cpl Matthew S. Richards

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

As 26 August dawned, the fighting continued, with the situation worsening for the militia resistance. Fighters continued to desert, and those who remained faced almost certain death. By 1500, the Coalition forces had surrounded the Imam Ali Mosque within 100 meters, and the Iraqi commando units stood poised to make their assault.¹⁹⁷ Militia leaders requested a cease-fire to negotiate surrender, which the Coalition commanders granted. At 1515, General Casey issued Fragmentary Order 582, which directed offensive actions in Najaf to cease.¹⁹⁸ At 0200 the next morning (27 August), the Iraqi government announced that a truce had been reached and that hostilities would officially end at 1000, 27 August 2004.¹⁹⁹

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

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

Aftermath

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

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

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

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

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



Photo by Cpl Daniel J. Fosco

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

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

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

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

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

Notes

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

45. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, pp. 11–14.
46. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 11; Consolidated Combat Action Ribbon List with Summary of Actions—hereafter BLT 1/4 CAR summary.
47. Borneo interview.
48. Moran interview.
49. Haslam interview; Moran interview.
50. Cpl James T. Jenkins and Cpl Calvert C. Wallace interview with LtCol John R. Way, 31 Dec 2004 (MCHD)—hereafter Jenkins and Wallace interview.
51. 11th MEU PA report 6 Aug 2004.
52. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 14.
53. 1stLt Russell L. Thomas interview by Frank Kozlowski, 24–26 Oct 2004 (MCHD)—hereafter Thomas interview; Sellars interview.
54. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 41.
55. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 15.
56. Ibid.
57. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, Weapons Platoon After Action Report—hereafter Mortar AAR.
58. Haslam interview; Borneo interview; Mortar AAR.
59. Moran interview.
60. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 16.
61. Borneo interview; BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 16.
62. Moran interview; Borneo interview; Thomas interview.
63. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 16.
64. Maj Glen G. Butler interview by LtCol John R. Way, 15 Jun 2005 (MCHD)—hereafter Butler interview.
65. BLT 1/4 CAR summary, p. 4.
66. Butler interview; HMM–166 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 24.
67. LtCol John L. Mayer interview by LtCol John R. Way, 20 Oct 2004 (MCHD)—hereafter Mayer interview; BLT 1/4, CAR summary, p. 21.
68. Mayer interview; BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, S–2 Section.
69. Moran interview.
70. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 16.
71. Ibid.
72. BLT 1/4 CAR summary, pp. 8, 20.
73. Sellars interview.
74. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, pp. 16, 17.
75. Ibid., p. 18.
76. Moran interview; Mayer interview.
77. Haslam interview; Mayer interview; Johnston interview.
78. Haslam interview; Johnston interview; Moran interview.
79. Moran interview.
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.; Maj Coby M. Moran phone conversation with author, 30 Jan 2007—hereafter Moran 30 Jan 2007.
82. Jenkins and Wallace interview; BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 12.
83. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 19; Borneo interview.
84. Jenkins and Wallace interview.
85. Apicella interview; Mayer interview; Moran interview; Sellars interview; Jenkins and Wallace interview.
86. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 13.
87. Cpl Matthew S. Richards, 11th MEU Public Affairs Report #2020049284211, 2 Sep 2004—hereafter 11th MEU PA report 2 Sep 2004.
88. Ibid.
89. Ibid.
90. BLT 1/4 CAR summary, p. 4; Moran interview.
91. Moran interview.
92. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 19.
93. Ibid., AAR.
94. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, Vaughn citation.
95. Johnston interview; Haslam interview; Mayer interview; Moran interview.
96. Jenkins and Wallace interview.
97. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 19.
98. Sellars interview.
99. Moran interview.

100. Thomas interview.
101. Ibid.
102. Ibid.
103. Moran interview.
104. Thomas interview.
105. Moran interview.
106. Thomas interview.
107. Ibid.
108. Moran interview; Johnston interview.
109. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 31; Moran interview.
110. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 11; Moran interview.
111. Sellars interview; Jenkins and Wallace interview.
112. Mayer interview; Haslam interview.
113. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 12.
114. Moran interview; Johnston interview; Sellars interview.
115. Ibid.
116. Moran interview; Haslam interview; Johnston interview.
117. Sellars interview.
118. Moran interview; Johnston interview; Haslam interview; Mayer interview.
119. Haslam interview.
120. “The Conflict in Iraq: U.S. holds Back from Attacking Rebels in Najaf,” *New York Times*, 12 Aug 2004, p. 1.
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122. BLT 1/4 CAR summary, pp. 23, 27.
123. Moran interview.
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125. Johnston interview; Moran interview.
126. “Marines Plan Big Assault,” *USA Today*, 12 Aug 2004.
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129. Ibid., pp. 23, 24.
130. Ibid., pp. 23, 24, 30.
131. Sellars interview.
132. BLT 1/4 CAR summary, pp. 15, 16.
133. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 13. Haslam interview.
134. Mayer interview.
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136. BLT 1/4 CAR summary, p. 28.
137. Johnston interview; Mayer interview.
138. Johnston interview.
139. Sellars interview.
140. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, pp. 13, 14. Thomas interview.
141. Sellars interview; Johnston interview.
142. “The Conflict in Iraq: U.S. holds Back from Attacking Rebels in Najaf,” *New York Times*, 12 Aug 2004, p. 1.
143. Johnston interview.
144. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, I MEF, Award Recommendation (Presidential Unit Citation) for 11th MEU—hereafter I MEF recommendation.
145. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 14.
146. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, pp. 12, 25.
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149. Ibid., p. 25.
150. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 41.
151. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 12.
152. Mayer interview; Thomas interview.
153. Mayer interview.
154. Thomas interview.
155. Ibid.
156. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, pp. 10, 22, 36; Moran interview.
157. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, I MEF recommendation.
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159. Kara Newcomer email to author, 22 Aug 2004.

160. Moran interview; Mayer interview.
161. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 16.
162. Sellars interview.
163. Johnston interview.
164. Haslam interview.
165. Johnston interview; Borneo interview; Thomas interview.
166. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 43; Haslam interview; Johnston interview.
167. Johnston interview; Mayer interview; Moran interview; Sellars interview.
168. Moran interview.
169. Ibid.
170. Sellars interview.
171. Johnston interview.
172. Haslam interview.
173. Thomas interview.
174. BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 27.
175. BLT 1/4 CAR summary, p. 16.
176. Ibid.; Sellars interview.
177. BLT 1/4 CAR summary, p. 16.
178. Sellars interview; Jenkins and Wallace interview; BLT 1/4 Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 32.
179. Sellars interview; Jenkins and Wallace interview; Johnston interview.
180. Sellars interview; Jenkins and Wallace interview.
181. 11th MEU Command Chronology, Jul–Dec 2004, p. 18.
182. BLT 1/4 CAR summary, pp. 9, 10.
183. Mayer interview.
184. Johnston interview.
185. Thomas interview.
186. Ibid.
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188. Mayer interview.
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191. Christian Miller and Edmund Sanders, “Iraq Deploys Guardsmen Outside Mosque in Najaf,” *Los Angeles Times*, 25 Aug 2004.
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193. Karl Vick and Nasser Nouri, “U.S. Forces Launch Offensive Near Shrine,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, 24 Aug 2004.
194. Karl Vick and Nasser Nouri, “U.S. Forces Launch Offensive Near Shrine,” *Washington Post Foreign Service*, 24 Aug 2004.
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196. Johnston interview.
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201. Johnston interview.
202. Haslam interview; Johnston interview.
203. Johnston interview.
204. Haslam interview; Mayer interview.
205. Moran interview; Sellars interview.
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210. Butler interview; Haslam interview; Mayer interview; Johnston interview.

Back Cover: *The logotype reproduced on the back cover has as its major element the oldest military insignia in continuous use in the United States. It first appeared, as shown here, on Marine Corps buttons adopted in 1804. With the stars changed to five points, the device has continued on Marine Corps buttons to the present day.*



About the Author and Acknowledgments

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

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

Cpl Annette Kyriakides

