

## The capture of Baghdad

**B**aghdad, a 5-million-inhabitant town, was seized in five days (reconnaissance carried out by a battalion on April 5, exploitation of collected information and attack planning on April 6, attack carried out on April 7, defense against counter-attacks on April 8 and 9) by two tank battalions and one mechanized infantry battalion (2<sup>nd</sup> Bde/3<sup>rd</sup> ID), i.e. 975 soldiers with 88 MBTs and Bradleys. This fast victory with very few losses appeared as an easy operation, and by the way was largely covered by the media. According to some journalists, the city would even have been seized almost by chance, by a column, which would have wrongly been heading downtown instead of driving to the airport.

**F**acts were very different. The mission tasked to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade included an important risk. A lack of information on “the enemy in reaction”, or a wrong interpretation, put the brigade into a very tricky situation in the afternoon of April 7, compelling the brigade commander to make a decision between two equally appalling COAs : accepting to be encircled or withdrawing.

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Initially, the American planning intended first to besiege the city, then to attack it with the airborne division. Taking advantage of the Iraqi commander inability to react to the American offensive's high momentum, General Blount, 3<sup>rd</sup> division commander, ordered his 2<sup>nd</sup> Bde to carry

out a raid into Baghdad to test and disrupt defenses, to collect information on the Iraqi disposition and to inflict a maximum of losses before beginning to besiege the town. In fact, the seizure of the regime's decision-making centers resulted into the end of any resistance two days after the raid.



US Army

Colonel Perkins, commanding the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, selected a COA - rather close to the Russian one in Grozny. To launch armored columns into the heart of the city without taking care neither of the flanks nor of the rears as seizing decision-making centers would prevent any coordinated reaction from the Iraqi defense. But the enemy

reaction, though uncoordinated, was more stronger than envisaged. If according to the Intel assessments, the Iraqi army and the republican guard did not really defend the city, fedayees and Islamic volunteers were almost overwhelming the American columns by conducting suicide attacks after having encircled them.

On April 5, a battalion task force with 30-tank and 14-Bradley carried out a raid - of about fifteen kilometers - on highway 8 in the south-western suburbs of Baghdad to link up with the 1<sup>st</sup> Bde which had just seized the airport. Because of the engagements' confusion, some vehicles missed the exit towards the airport, and that event backed up the rumor of the city being

seized, following a route error... The outcome of the raid was reviewed the following day by General Blount and Colonel Perkins : one destroyed MBT, some damaged Bradleys, approximately 1,000 Iraqi combatants killed, no structured defense by the Iraqi army but fanatic fedayee and Islamic volunteer attacking with light weapons. Then general Blount ordered a second raid with the all 2<sup>nd</sup> Bde. Colonel Perkins suggested to keep his battalions in the city in order to exploit at best the psychological

hopelessly tried to move within RPG's and AK-47's firing range. But the American columns were immediately encircled. The Iraqi combatants attacked the American armored vehicles with explosive-stuffed cars, trucks and even buses. The brigade CP was obliged to ensure its own protection, several of its CP vehicles having been destroyed by missiles. BASs were also attacked and the medical personnel and even the chaplain had to defend themselves with their M16s.

the convoy succeeded in driving through and could, under fire, supply the battalions isolated throughout the city.

During the 7<sup>th</sup> to 8<sup>th</sup> night and the two following days, suicide attacks redoubled without really succeeding to disturb the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bde's units. On 9, the regime collapsed and the Iraqi combatants vanished. Only 50 of them had been made prisoners. Thousands of them had died. If they had showed the same know-how - about MOUT (4) - as the Chechen combatants and commanders in Grozny, instead of persisting in suicide attacks, one could think that the 2<sup>nd</sup> Bde would have been placed in the same situation as the Russian armored tanks destroyed in a gigantic ambush in the center of Grozny in 1995 - or as the Rangers encircled in Mogadishu since they had wrongly assessed the enemy's reaction.

The main lesson learned from the capture of Baghdad is obviously the successful combat carried out by mechanized armored units in MOUT. With an identical COA, the American Army thus succeeded in seizing Baghdad, whereas the Russian Army was defeated in a bloody and humiliating way in Grozny in 1995. In a first approach, three explanations can be brought forward :

- the quality of American armored vehicles provided an excellent protection to tank-crews, which enabled them to cause considerable losses without suffering casualties ;
- the "COA" of fanatic but disorganized Iraqi combatants, appeared to be ineffective compared with the Chechen excellent tactics (laying mines or setting obstacles would have changed the course of the battle) ;
- Eventually, the town of Baghdad, with its large avenues, was somehow an easier terrain for tank maneuvering.

*1 Military Operation on Urban Terrain.*



effect of the seizing of symbolic objectives, such as Saddam Hussein's palace, the headquarters of the Baas party, the July 14. bridge and the Rachid hotel. A contrario, the evacuation of these objectives just seized by US troops would have a disastrous media effect. He was authorized to remain in the city if the situation allowed it. On April 7, Colonel Perkins launched his three battalions throughout the city. Each battalion had MBTs, Bradleys, mortars, engineer combat vehicles and BASs (Battalion Aid Stations). Combat service support units were kept outside of the city. All the objectives were quickly reached with low casualties and some destroyed or damaged Bradleys, and that despite suicide counter-attacks carried out by Iraqi combatants, who

After ten hours of uninterrupted combat, the encircled battalions were short of ammunition and gas. Colonel Perkins had to make a difficult decision : to withdraw his battalions as long as they still had the capability to force the encirclement or to send them gas/ammunition supply vehicles without any escort through routes controlled by the enemy. He chose the second option-more risky and possibly most expensive in human lives but which would permit to avoid a siege and to shorten the war.

A six TTF (Tank Truck, Fuel) and eight ammunition-truck convoy endeavored to force its way through. Miraculously, only two TTFs and three ammunition-trucks were hit and exploded instantaneously. The remainder of