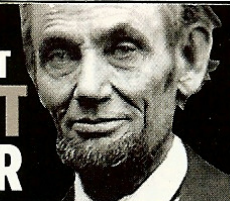




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 MARCH TO
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March to Baghdad

TALLIL AIR BASE, 2003

As an American infantry commander, YOU decide the outcome during the first major battle of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

BY PAT PROCTOR

2003. A task force from the 3d Brigade, 3d Infantry Division, advances north during the invasion of Iraq.

It is March 21, 2003, and you are about to assume the role of U.S. Army Lieutenant Colonel John Charlton, commander of the 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division – aka the Dragon Battalion. The U.S.-led Coalition's invasion of Saddam Hussein's Iraq is only a day old, yet you have just been given the daunting task of attacking the first major objective on the 3d Division's march to Baghdad, the Tallil Air Base complex on the western outskirts of Nasiriyah. The complex is heavily defended, both by elements of the Iraqi regular army's 11th Infantry Division and by the dangerous irregular guerrilla fighters of the Saddam Fedayeen paramilitary organization. Nasiriyah,

Iraq's fourth most populated city, is crawling with fanatical Saddam Fedayeen eager to kill Americans – and more than willing to die in the attempt.

Seizing the closely guarded complex is shaping up to be far from a walkover, yet this first major battle of the Iraq War is a “must win” for the Coalition. You are well aware of the importance of the success of this mission – and that the road to Baghdad passes through Tallil Air Base.

THE ROAD TO BAGHDAD

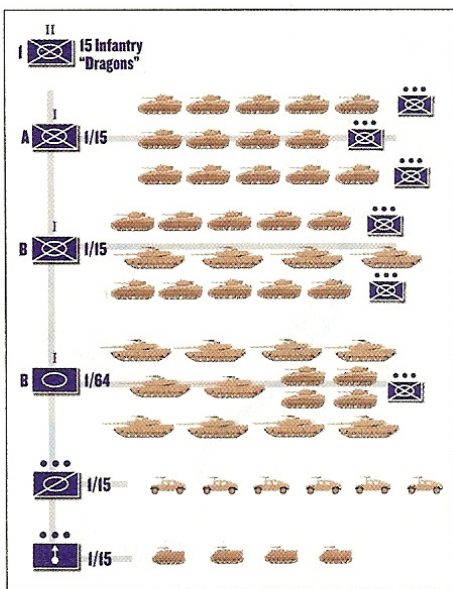
When Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) began at 5:34 a.m. yesterday, March 20, 2003, Saddam Hussein and his generals fully expected a repeat of the 1991 Gulf War's Oper-

ation Desert Storm – the desert blitzkrieg that shattered Saddam's Iraqi Army in 100 hours. Coalition leadership publicly promised “shock and awe,” evoking in the minds of Iraqi generals visions of the devastating air campaign that pounded their troops for weeks before the 1991 ground offensive even began. The Iraqis also expected the Coalition's main push to target the important port city of Basra on the principal Kuwait-Baghdad highway, so they positioned most of their forces north of the Euphrates River. (See Iraq map, p. 65.) As it turned out, they were wrong on both counts.

The Coalition war plan set in operation by the U.S. Army Central Command (CENTCOM) commander, General Tommy Franks,

DAVID LEESON/DALLAS MORNING NEWS/CORBIS

Operation Iraqi Freedom kicked off on March 20, 2003, when Coalition forces stormed out of Kuwait and headed north toward Baghdad. Tallil Air Base, an important Iraqi military installation located west of Nasiriyah, was the offensive's early objective.



differs significantly from the one Saddam and his Iraqi commanders have been anticipating. This time, no lengthy preliminary air campaign preceded the ground attack. Instead, surgical airstrikes against Iraq's command and control infrastructure and troop units are occurring simultaneously with the ground forces' advance. Years (1991-2003) of American and British airstrikes to enforce "no fly zones" in northern and southern Iraq have seriously degraded the country's air defenses and command and control facilities, while Saddam's air force has been virtually nonexistent since the Gulf War. CENTCOM planners reason that the surprise Coalition ground offensive will catch the Iraqi Army off guard, poorly positioned, and ill prepared to resist the attack.

To further confuse the Iraqi defenders, Franks has planned a two-pronged advance directly against Baghdad. The main attack, spearheaded by V Corps' 3d U.S. Infantry Division, will strike south of the Euphrates, while the 1st U.S. Marine Division will advance north of the river. Meanwhile, the 1st British Armored Division will lead forces against Basra, the town the Iraqis mistakenly assume is the Coalition's primary target. Although Franks wants Basra, his main objec-



tive is Baghdad – he is "going for the throat" of Saddam's repressive regime.

FORCES

Despite the battering Iraqi armed forces endured during the 1991 Gulf War, they are still formidable opponents. Saddam's regular ground, air and naval forces total about 540,000 personnel (the majority of them in the Iraqi Army) with a 650,000-man reserve. The army's most effective unit – the best armed, trained and equipped – is Saddam's fiercely loyal elite Republican Guards, about 80,000 of whom are located near Baghdad. Trained in conventional Soviet-era tactics, the regular Iraqi Army fields 13 infantry divisions, 10 armored or mechanized divisions,

and some special operations units. Armed essentially as they were in 1991, Iraqi infantrymen carry AK model assault rifles, Soviet-era machine guns, and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). Iraqi artillery, tanks and mechanized vehicles are also Gulf War holdovers, principally Soviet and Chinese export models (simplified versions meant for foreign markets) that are inferior to their U.S. counterparts in every characteristic.

Saddam Fedayeen, Iraq's paramilitary forces, are potentially more dangerous than the country's regular military forces. Perhaps 50,000 of these irregulars (including foreign volunteers from other Islamic states) operate out of Iraq's cities, where they blend in with the civilian population. Like guerrillas, Sad-

This first major battle of the Iraq War



DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

Lt. Col. John Charlton, commander of the 1st Battalion, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division, was tasked with attacking the Iraqi 11th Infantry Division headquarters and blocking any counterattack from Nasiriyah during the 3d Brigade's assault on Tallil Air Base.

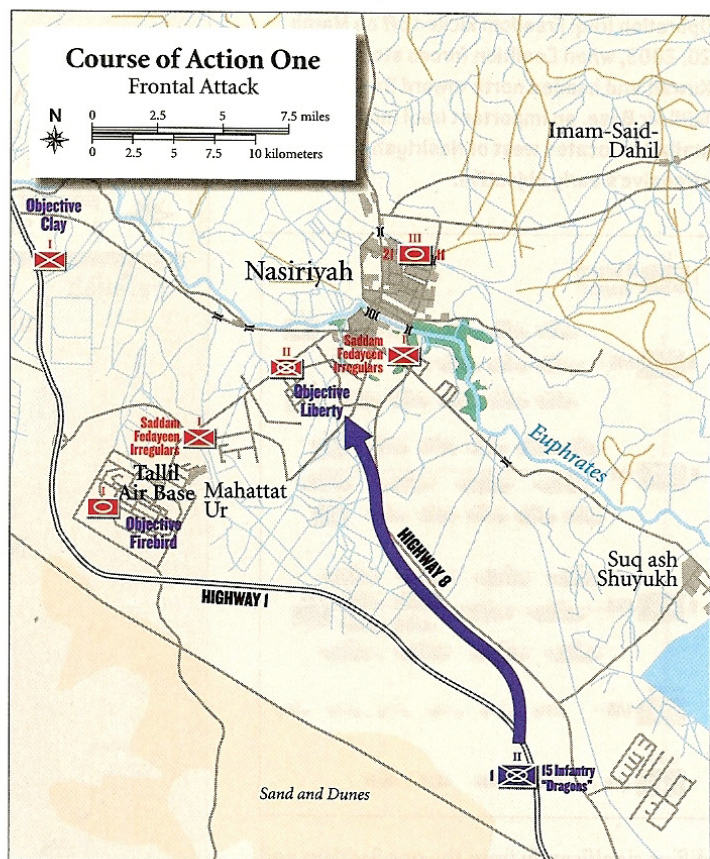
dam Fedayeen strike from ambush, kill as many enemy soldiers as possible, and then disappear to attack again at any opportunity. Highly mobile and elusive, these unconventional fighters carry AK model assault rifles, machine guns, RPGs, grenades, mortars and explosives. Their preferred transportation is the "technical" – swift, agile, jeep-like vehicles mounting machine guns and carrying RPG-wielding fighters. Unpredictable fanatics, Saddam Fedayeen don't "play by the rules" of conventional warfare, thus they are wild cards in the tactical equation.

The American forces spearheading the Coalition's invasion are the most well-led, highly trained, doctrinally sound, superbly armed and equipped, and technologically sophisticated military force in the world. They are vastly superior to any other armed force on the globe in virtually every category, except one: size. While more than 500,000 U.S. troops were deployed during the 1991 Gulf War, the American ground force for OIF is

fewer than 250,000 troops. Potentially, Saddam's army could outnumber U.S. forces by at least 2-to-1. Coalition commanders must overcome this numerical disadvantage by maximizing other key combat power factors: speed, firepower, maneuver, surprise and violent execution.

TARGET: TALLIL

Kicking off the Coalition's ground attack, the 3d Infantry Division breaches the formidable obstacle belt separating Iraq from Kuwait and races across the border, bypassing Basra. Within hours the unit sweeps aside Iraqi border defenders and speeds over 100 kilometers inside Iraq. Soon, however, the division comes face-to-face with the first major obstacle on the road to Baghdad, the critical Tallil Air Base area. Tallil, which controls access to Nasiriyah, an important city along the division's axis of advance, is a perfect location to build a large logistical base. In addition to the airfield, the area contains Highway 1 and



PETHO CARTOGRAPHY

The battalion will capitalize on speed and firepower to attack the objective directly and quickly overpower the Iraqi defenders.

Highway 8, the Coalition's two main supply routes. Tallil also hosts the headquarters of the 11th Iraqi Infantry Division, the first major enemy force the Coalition must defeat on its march. Finally, Tallil Air Base controls access to the Euphrates bridge on Highway 1, which the Marines need to continue their attack north of the river.

The 3d Division's advance makes great progress. Seeking to maintain the attack's momentum, the division's commander, Major General Buford Blount, orders the 3d Brigade to capture Tallil Air Base and secure the area. The 3d Brigade commander quickly develops an attack plan and sends it to his three maneuver battalions: The 2d Battalion, 69th Armor – the Panther Battalion – will bypass the air base and secure Objective Clay, the vital Euphrates bridge; your Dragon Battalion will attack Objective Liberty, the Iraqi 11th Infantry Division headquarters, and prevent any counterattack from Nasiriyah; and the 1st Battalion, 30th Infantry – the Bat-