

20 Years Later: Recalling the US Invasion of Iraq

From the ‘wild west’ of Nasiriyah to the streets of Baghdad, U.S. troops moved swiftly and triumphantly in the first phase of the Iraq War

Mar 21, 2023

The Iraq War began on March 19, 2003, when U.S. planes and warships based in the Persian Gulf hit targets within Iraq with a barrage of Tomahawk missiles. The next day, the ground phase of the war started when the first of some 160,000 U.S. troops entered Iraq.

The invasion was swift and successful. During the first week, Marines encountered heavy resistance near the southern Iraq city of Nasirayah, which the Marines called “the wild west.” By April 9, after a six-day battle, U.S. forces captured Iraq’s capital of Baghdad. By May 1, President George W. Bush declared that the first phase of the war was complete.

The following is a recount of the initial fighting that led to the capture of Baghdad.

FIERCE FIGHTING

Some 100 miles north of Kuwait, Nasiriyah was not a priority when U.S. troops began advancing toward Baghdad. The Army’s 3rd Infantry Division bypassed the city of 500,000 people, leaving it for U.S. Marines to secure. But Marines encountered unexpected resistance, resulting in days of intense fighting and mounting casualties.

The trouble started March 23, after advance elements of the 3rd Division had passed through Nasiriyah and the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade moved in. Marine Task Force Tarawa began taking fire as it entered the city just after dawn. A six-hour battle ensued, ending after Marines called in air support. Nine Marines were killed, and 40 were wounded.

The fighting was fierce and frustrating, as Iraqi militiamen employed some of the first deception tactics of the war. They would indicate a desire to surrender, sometimes even with a white flag, then open fire on U.S. troops. They dressed in civilian clothing; they jumped out of buses and taxis and fired from behind women and children, preventing Marines from

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firing back.

“When we came here, we were told everybody wants to surrender; nobody wants to fight,” said Marine Cpl. Lames Lis. “Now [Iraqi civilians] wave at me, and I wave back through my rifle sight.”

Army Lt. Gen. John Abizaid underscored Lis’s comment: “We will be much more cautious in the way we treat the battlefield as a result of these incidents.”

Nasiriyah was coveted by the U.S. because a pair of bridges helped U.S. forces cross the Euphrates River on their way to Baghdad. The resistance met there was a surprise. According to *The Washington Post*, U.S. strategy was to move as quickly as possible toward Baghdad, leaving potentially difficult situations in the south for later resolution. But the Iraqi strategy of guerrilla attacks to draw troops into urban combat left Americans facing the enemy in the middle and rear of armored columns, in addition to the front.

AMBUSH ALLEY

Although Nasiriyah was considered a strategic success early on (hundreds of tanks, armored vehicles, fuel trucks, Humvees and other vehicles were moved through), the battles remained intense for more than a week.

“Nasiriyah was supposed to be a six-hour firefight,” said Marine Gunnery Sgt. Tracy Hale on March 27. “It’s already been five days. Five days of 24-hours-a-day, nonstop shooting.”

The constant Iraqi fire from all around led Marines to call the southern entrance into the city “Ambush Alley.” Some days were worse than others: March 27 saw 120 Marines under fire, losing 15 Humvees and seven-ton trucks and suffering some 60 wounded. The firefight was so fierce, the Marines were forced to call in artillery on their own position, jumping over a nearby wall for cover.

As characterized by Col. John Coleman, “It’s the Wild West. We control what we want to control, but it’s not a very safe place.” That situation soon changed. Nearly 30 American Marines and soldiers — including members of the 507th Maintenance Company — were killed in fighting in and around Nasiriyah.

From the beginning of the war in Iraq, the battle for the capital city of Baghdad loomed in the distance. As U.S. troops making their way toward the city met limited resistance from Iraqi forces, a fierce confrontation in Baghdad seemed imminent.

The Army’s 3rd Infantry Division and the Marines’ 1st Infantry Division took western and eastern routes, respectively, from Kuwait, converging on the city in early April. While the Republican Guard and Fedayeen did fight back against GIs entering the city, firefights were isolated and Iraqi defenses ineffective.

The long road to Baghdad had come to an end, and the city fell in just a matter of days.

The first American troops to reach Baghdad were members of the 3rd Infantry Division. They set a western course for Baghdad, moving rapidly through the desert to avoid populated areas.

The 30-mile trip took the division 17 days, though its speed pushed troops and equipment to the limit, according to The New York Times, stretching supply lines dangerously thin. Its avoidance of cities also opened it up in the rear to harassment from Iraqi paramilitary groups, such as those that plagued the Marines in Nasiriyah.

But the division completed its historic journey, pushing through the Karbala Gap and occupying Baghdad's international airport.

The push through Karbala was the 3rd Division's first major conflict in its advance into Baghdad, and by March 31, it was assembled outside the city.

The plan was to press on to Baghdad through Karbala Gap, a mile-wide stretch between the Euphrates River and a reservoir. Attack Co., 3rd Bn., 7th Inf. Regt., and two tank companies seized a bridge across the Euphrates near Hindiyah, igniting a seven-hour firefight while the rest of the division poured north through the Karbala Gap.

Elements of the division assaulted the airport on April 3, while others patrolled the outskirts of the city.

The airport fell easily to Army control, and the first American plane, an Air Force C-130, landed there on April 7, opening it to use as an American airfield.

Army troops were poised at Baghdad's door, awaiting orders to invade.

WITH THE 'OLD BREED'

The Marine's 1st Division's trip to Baghdad was perilous, as Iraqi paramilitaries continually nipped at their heels as they passed through cities such as Nasiriyah and Kut. Forces assembled near Baghdad, ready to invade the city when ordered.

The morning of April 7 brought action in many areas of Baghdad. The 7th Marine Regiment encountered isolated firefights as it progressed slowly into the capital from the southeast.

"The enemy is seeking to disrupt our movements by controlling key bridge crossings and the like," said Maj. Dan Healey, commander of B Co., 1st Bn. "So we are rooting them out now."

The strategy, according to commanders, was to demoralize the scattered Iraqi troops and prevent a prolonged guerrilla campaign.

During their advance, Marines came upon a sprawling industrial complex they suspected was being used as the base of resistance. They spread out among the buildings, engaging in a half-hour firefight that left no U.S. casualties. It did, however, lead to the discovery and destruction of 10 Iraqi anti-aircraft guns.

At the same time, the Army's 3rd Bn., 15th Inf. Regt., 2nd Bde., 3rd Inf. Div., ran into heavy fire while holding on to a cloverleaf in the southern part of Baghdad. The convoy of Bradleys, Humvees and support vehicles began receiving fire from the north as it approached the cloverleaf. Soldiers engaged, and any vehicle that approached from the north was destroyed.

THE HEART OF THE CITY

The battle for the heart of Baghdad began and ended on April 8. U.S. tanks left the presidential compound that morning for the city streets, firing at the Information Ministry and Iraqi broadcasting headquarters and receiving heavy rocket, machine-gun and mortar fire in return.

Marines on the southeast edge of the city were planning a bridge crossing into the suburbs when they came under artillery fire. An amphibious assault vehicle was hit, killing two Marines and injuring four.

The men pushed across the bridge on foot (partly blown, it was unable to support tanks), expecting resistance on the other side. But all they found were bunkers, as *Time* magazine reported, "empty save for abandoned gear and piles of Iraqi army boots."

They continued on deeper into the city, covered by American snipers on rooftops, but on edge as their enemy remained curiously elusive.

Marines supported by Apache helicopters seized control of the Al Rashid military base southeast of Baghdad.

The New York Times reported that by the end of the day, U.S. forces controlled "several of [Saddam Hussein's] palaces, at least six ministries, the main Baghdad railway stations, the Al Rashid hotel, the Parliament building, the government's main conference center and the principal government broadcasting headquarters."

By nightfall, Iraqi resistance had died away. By the morning of April 9, it was clear that Hussein's rule was over. U.S. tanks drove down the city streets, encountering only Iraqi civilians, many smiling and cheering. Marine and Army units swept through the city, according to *CBS News*, seizing or destroying buildings that once housed feared Iraqi security forces.

Marines drove into the city center and helped a group of jubilant men pull down a large

statue of Hussein. Though the toppling did not indicate an end fighting (some of the heaviest air strikes of the campaign took place later that evening, and sporadic fighting continued for several days), it did signify the end of the Saddam regime.

That day, the city was officially out of Hussein's control, and on April 14, the Pentagon declared all major combat had ended.

After three weeks of anticipation, U.S. forces entered Baghdad prepared for the fight of their life. But the 32,000 combat sorties and 20,000 bombs used to pummel Iraqi forces throughout the country essentially did the job for them.

The feared street-by-street urban combat was mostly unnecessary, and by April 20, just one month after the war started, U.S. troops began withdrawing from Baghdad.

During the three-week campaign in Iraq, the 3rd Division lost 34 soldiers killed and the 1st Marine Division at least 24 men.

This article is featured in the March 2023 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by the editors of VFW magazine.