

The Fight for Kufa: Task Force 2-37

by Major Todd E. Walsh

As coalition forces entered their second year of the war in Iraq, the 'Iron Dukes' from Task Force 2d Battalion, 37th Armor (TF 2-37), attached to the 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR), headed toward the holy city of Najaf and its smaller sister city, Kufa, to suppress the widespread April Mahdi militia uprisings. Najaf and Kufa had become a base of power and influence for Muqtada al-Sadr and his militia.

Al-Sadr, a radical Shi'a cleric who derives his legitimacy from his martyred father, was intent on driving a wedge between Iraq's interim governing council, coalition forces, and the large Iraqi Shi'ite population. His militia, or Mahdi army, had initiated the uprisings across Iraq during the first week of April 2004 to hinder coalition and Iraqi security efforts and jeopardize regional stability needed for the forthcoming transitional government. Al-Sadr's center of influence lay in the old town of Najaf, near the revered Imam Ali Shrine, and his militia had spread to Kufa in an attempt to control its inhabitants and key bridges to the two cities. Located roughly 150 kilometers south of Baghdad along

the Euphrates River, the cities of Najaf and Kufa are separated by only a few kilometers of suburban sprawl and industrial park, the locale where Task Force 2-37 was positioned to protect coalition provisional authorities and to better strike the enemy.

On 22 April, in a brilliant feint by the 2d ACR, using the 3d ACR in a limited attack on the eastern bank of the Euphrates just east of Kufa, TF 2-37 moved under the cover of darkness, without incident from a distracted enemy, into forward operating bases (FOB) Hotel, Golf, and Baker to relieve exiting Spanish forces. That evening, the task force moved 29 M1A1 Abrams integrated management (AIM) tanks, 62 M966/1026-series guntrucks, 33 M1114 up-armored high-mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs), 2 M1117 armored security vehicles, 6 M109 Paladins, 4 M1064 120mm mortar carriers, 2 towed 120mm mortars, and various combat support vehicles into the Najaf-Kufa city limits. Before the enemy could react to the infiltration of forces between the two cities, the Iron Dukes had forward positioned the task force in a lodgement that would eventually



Armor Defeats al-Sadr's Militia

bring about the defeat of al-Sadr's militia — five bloody weeks later.

Over the next several weeks, the task force, composed of two tank companies, two light-wheeled ground cavalry troops, one up-armored military police company, one motorized combat engineer company, and a Paladin battery, deliberately expanded its zone of influence in Najaf and Kufa. The two tank companies and two light-wheeled ground cavalry troops were all task organized into tank and cavalry teams on arrival, giving the task force commander numerous tactical options for future missions.

Initially, it was tough going, with every patrol or logistics convoy subject to ambush whenever they left an FOB. Quick reaction forces, composed of a tank section or platoon, were released when contact was made, to further develop the situation. It became readily apparent that the enemy favored certain areas in the city to initiate attacks, and after identifying enemy-oriented named areas of interest, the task force took steps to target enemy cells.

Patrols did not continue movement after an ambush; the ambushed patrol or convoy had to get out of the kill zone and establish a base of fire, while maintaining contact with the enemy until a reaction force arrived to hunt down and destroy remnants. Sometimes this would take hours and would develop into a sustained firefight once the ambushers were either reinforced or cornered. The Iron Dukes had the time and tactical patience for a systematic and deliberate approach in dealing with the enemy after every ambush. This finally brought the task force freedom of movement along main supply routes into and out of the city, as the enemy's outlying forces were attrited.

As the task force expanded its battlespace, a number of operations were undertaken to apply continued pressure to al-Sadr's militia and political organizations. These operations were designed as limited attacks to gain intelligence, draw out enemy forces, and attrit as much of the enemy as possible.

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di militia command and control, isolate his remaining forces, and prevent his ability to reinforce and resupply. Attempts were also made to target several key lieutenants in al-Sadr’s organization; some of these attempts were very successful. Elements of the task force captured al-Sadr’s deputy and his chief political advisor in two separate raids, further limiting al-Sadr’s control over his forces and his ability to make direct coordination with followers spread throughout Najaf and Kufa. Intelligence sources reported confusion among al-Sadr’s inner circle of lieutenants, many of which had fled the area or had gone to ground. This set the conditions for the task force to fully isolate Kufa and any Mahdi militia therein from the rest of al-Sadr’s army. Kufa operations were deemed less sensitive than conducting offensive operations in old-town Najaf, near the Imam Ali Shrine.

By the end of May, al-Sadr’s remaining forces were split and isolated in the old town of Najaf and in a loose defensive perimeter around the Kufa Mosque. During the last week in May, rumors of talks between al-Sadr, Ayatollah Sistani, and local tribal leaders were ongoing in an effort to bring about a peaceful solution to the Mahdi militia problem. The constant pressure was working. Intelligence sources also confirmed that much of Najaf and Kufa’s 750,000 inhabitants were fed up with the fighting and wanted an end to hostilities and called for the departure of the Mahdi army. With this backdrop, the task force began planning and executing a series of final attacks into the heart of Kufa to destroy remaining militia and seize weapons caches, keeping constant pressure on al-Sadr’s organization to force a favorable political solution.

At 2200 hours on 30 May, TF 2-37 initiated Operation Smack-down, the first in a series of attacks into Kufa that would take place over the next 96 hours. The initial attack, which included Team Apache, A Company, 1st Battalion, 2d ACR; Team Iron, I Company, 3d Battalion, 2d ACR; and Team Crusader, C Company, 2-37 Armor, was a limited attack or probe to gauge Mahdi militia defensive positions around the Kufa Mosque.

The task force conducted the near-simultaneous and coordinated maneuver of its teams in a force-oriented zone reconnaissance directed toward the Kufa Mosque from the north, west, and south. Limits of advance were established 500 to 800 meters from the mosque, along the enemy’s suspected perimeter defensive positions. Company/teams had to maintain full situational awareness of adjacent-unit progress and location during

the reconnaissance to mitigate the risk of fratricide and prevent enemy infiltration in between and behind friendly units.

Crusader made contact as they entered the western side of Kufa, and Iron made contact as they conducted reconnaissance from the south along a more rural approach. Fighting continued for over an hour with multiple rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) and small arms engagements from alleyways and overgrown palm groves. Shortly before midnight on the eve of Memorial Day and just before elements of the task force were to withdraw from contact, two M1A1 Iron Duke crewmen were killed in action. A tank platoon leader from Team Crusader, and the other, a tank loader in Team Iron, died courageously while engaging the enemy and gaining vital intelligence for the task force. This intelligence would be used to take the fight to the enemy deeper into Kufa in the upcoming operations. The Iron Dukes confirmed 22 enemy fighters killed in action, as well as the composition and disposition of the Mahdi militia’s outlying defenses and observation posts.

At 1800 hours on 1 June, the Iron Dukes initiated the second Kufa force-oriented zone reconnaissance of Operation Smack-down. The purpose of this follow-on operation was to further reduce the offensive capabilities of al-Sadr’s militia within Kufa. Key tasks were to destroy enemy fighting positions that made up the enemy’s perimeter defense around the Kufa Mosque and destroy al-Sadr’s militia within western Kufa. In addition, the task force planned an information operation to mitigate any hostile reaction to the attack. This second attack, conducted in the late afternoon and timed to take advantage of daylight, included Team Aggressor, A Company, 2-37 Armor; Team Iron, I Company, 3d Battalion, 2d ACR; and Team Crusader, C Company, 2-37 Armor. This was another limited action designed to penetrate farther into the Mahdi militia defensive positions around the Kufa Mosque — with limits of advance as close as 350 meters from the mosque compound. This time, however, the task force offset the attacks, but still coordinated the maneuver of its teams to achieve a desired effect on the enemy.

Both Aggressor and Iron attacked from the south, covering the rural farmland and palm grove expanse south of Kufa, with Aggressor in the west and Iron in the east. The intent was to draw the enemy south away from Crusader’s axis of advance through zone five, allowing Crusader the element of surprise and unimpeded movement to Phase Line (PL) Ginger.

Movement for Aggressor and Iron was canalized and slow, and all vehicles, including tanks, had to restrict maneuver to the roads. Aggressor had sporadic contact as they maneuvered to their support-by-fire position, and Iron's advance went unopposed. As the two teams approached their limits of advance, Crusader was launched into the attack. Heavy fighting ensued when Crusader reached PL Ginger, with the enemy resisting from positions around an abandoned police station and cemetery in the vicinity of target reference point (TRP) 003. Crusader tanks received machine gun and RPG fire from the Kufa Mosque outer wall, but continued their attack to limit of advance (LOA) Janie. The enemy also made several desperate attempts to reinforce his cemetery position, but was met with lethal precision tank fires, which quickly eliminated any elements that closed on the position in the crossfire.

The Iron Dukes confirmed another 40 enemy fighters killed in action, as well as the composition and disposition of the Mahdi militia's inner defenses around the Kufa Mosque. Within 36 hours, the task force would launch the culminating attack of Operation Smackdown, while maintaining the initiative and keeping pressure on al-Sadr's organization. If effective, the continued destruction of the enemy would allow coalition-backed mediators to meet any al-Sadr peace gesture from a position of power.

At 0630 hours on 3 June, the Iron Dukes initiated the final Kufa attack of Operation Smackdown. The purpose of this follow-on operation was to completely reduce the offensive capabilities of al-Sadr's militia within Kufa. Key tasks included destroying reinforced enemy fighting positions that made up the enemy's perimeter defense around the Kufa Mosque and destroying militia mortar positions in an occupied schoolyard just 300 meters northwest of the mosque.

For several days, forward operating bases Golf and Baker had been on the receiving end of enemy heavy mortar (120mm), but could not respond with counterfire due to the proximity of non-

combatants to the enemy mortar firing positions. The task of eliminating the enemy's indirect threat in Objective Oakland was given to Iron Troop. Due to restricted urban terrain around the schoolyard and the need for Iron to get quickly onto the objective with surprise, the task force commander decided to have only two teams participate in the attack with the remaining combat power left available in reserve. Unlike the preceding operation, Crusader Troop would attack first along its axis of advance through zone five up to LOA Janie. This would put Crusader in a support-by-fire position (the anvil) to draw the enemy away from Objective Oakland and allow Iron Troop (the hammer) to attack from the north and seize its objective before the enemy has time to react and reposition.

Crusader started its attack shortly after 0630 hours and proceeded 500 meters into western Kufa before it made contact with the enemy. Contact was light and Crusader continued the attack to PL Ginger without losing momentum. At 0645 hours, Iron Troop began its attack from command post (CP) 54 to 60 to 40. Iron Troop led with a tank platoon along this axis of attack followed closely by its organic cavalry. As the lead tanks approached CP 40, six subsurface daisy chain mines were detonated in the road, followed by enfilading small-arms fire from several large buildings to the southeast. Undeterred, Iron's tanks continued the attack toward Objective Oakland to set the outer cordon and provide the scouts needed security outside the schoolyard. As the tanks rolled up to and around the schoolyard complex, Iron's cavalry and mortar section attacked to seize the three large school buildings inside the compound.

Fighting broke out immediately within the school and room-to-room clearing became necessary. With mounted inner cordon scouts fixing and suppressing enemy on the second floor of the largest building, the clearing team closed in on the remaining enemy. Ten Mahdi militiamen died where they fought inside the schoolyard, leaving one 120mm and two 82mm mortars open for



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capture with a large stockpile of rounds. The enemy heavy mortar threat had been eliminated.

As Iron cleared the objective, Crusader reported movement of a platoon of militia toward the schoolyard from the south. Furthermore, the enemy, as reported by Iron's tanks, attempted another envelopment from the north with an additional platoon of dismounts.

As captured equipment was loaded from the schoolyard onto Iron Troop's trucks, the outer cordon of tanks and cavalry begin contact with the enveloping enemy dismount force. The outer cordon had set deliberate positions at key inner city road intersections covering most dismounted avenues of approach into the schoolyard. Crusader disrupted the enemy's ability to effectively reposition forces in mass with precision tank fires, allowing Iron's outer cordon to destroy enemy counterattacking forces as they were piecemealed into the fight. This fight continued for about 45 minutes until enemy action had tapered off to just a couple of small groups of dismounts attempting to work the periphery, but were unwilling to make any concerted attack. Once Iron's clearing team had loaded up their trucks with captured ammo and equipment, the task force commander gave the order to withdraw starting with Iron and then Crusader. The Iron Dukes confirmed another 41 enemy fighters killed in action, as well as the destruction of all Mahdi militia inner defenses outside of the Kufa Mosque.

Within 24 hours, the task force received word that the governor of Najaf had entered into serious deliberations with al-Sadr representatives over the terms of ceasefire and conditions for

standing down the Mahdi army. Different sources speculate that the Mahdi army had been severely attrited in Najaf and Kufa during the preceding weeks with estimated casualties as high as 1,000 enemy fighters killed in action. There is no doubt that the constant pressure applied to the enemy by Task Force 2-37 Armor's force of arms, the discipline of its troopers in battle, and the ultimate sacrifice of those Iron Dukes who fell fighting the enemy, singularly contributed to the defeat of al-Sadr's militia in Najaf and Kufa. This measure of force led directly to the current stability enjoyed by the Najaf and Kufa inhabitants today. This article is dedicated to the lasting memory of Lieutenant Ken Ballard and Specialist Nicholaus Zimmer — Iron Dukes to the end.



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