

# Battle of An-Nasiriyah: Operation Iraqi Freedom

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ASHWANI GUPTA

## Background

Operation Iraqi Freedom (the second phase of the liberation of Iraq) was launched by the US led Coalition forces on March 20, 2003, with an aim to overthrow the regime of Saddam Hussein and destroy his weapons of mass destruction. The attack plan hinged on destruction of the Iraqi command structure in a short timeframe and decapitation of Iraqi troops by simultaneous air and ground assaults achievable by superior mobility and coordination of Coalition forces. The Coalition forces carried out a series of simultaneous assaults on the cities of Basra, Nasiriyah, Kirkuk and Karbala, with the main assaulting force moving northwards from southern Iraq, capturing Baghdad on April 09, 2003. The Iraqi resistance varied from sporadic engagements to heavy resistance in battles around Nasiriyah and Basra. The short battles provided innumerable lessons in asymmetric warfare for future wars. The Battle of Nasiriyah was one of the most important engagements of Operation Iraqi Freedom. It was a classic example of a superior assaulting force pinned down by a divergent group of poorly trained and equipped regular Army and paramilitary soldiers supplemented by Baath Party volunteers.

## **Nasiriyah**

Nasiriyah is situated on the banks of the river Euphrates, lying 370 km southeast of Baghdad. The fourth most populous city, with a Shia majority, it is a major administrative centre with two vital bridges on the river Euphrates and two bridges on Saddam canal controlling the movement from northern Iraq to the southern part. Two major highways, Highways 7 and 8, pass through the city moving northwards towards Baghdad. The headquarters of Iraqi 3 Corps were located

at Nasiriyah. Consisting of 6 Armoured Division, 51 Mechanised Division and 11 Iraqi Infantry Division, its elements were deployed around Nasiriyah and to its south. 11 Infantry Division was deployed in a 12 km semi-circle around Nasiriyah. The regular troops were supplemented by Baath Party loyalists and members of the Fidayeen (volunteers from various countries). The Coalition hierarchy had not visualised any foreseeable resistance in Nasiriyah as it was appreciated that a predominantly Shia population would welcome the Coalition forces as liberators. Whereas, Nasiriyah's unique location due to a combination of river and canal obstacles and two major highways required for logistics build-up would become a major objective for the Coalition troops.

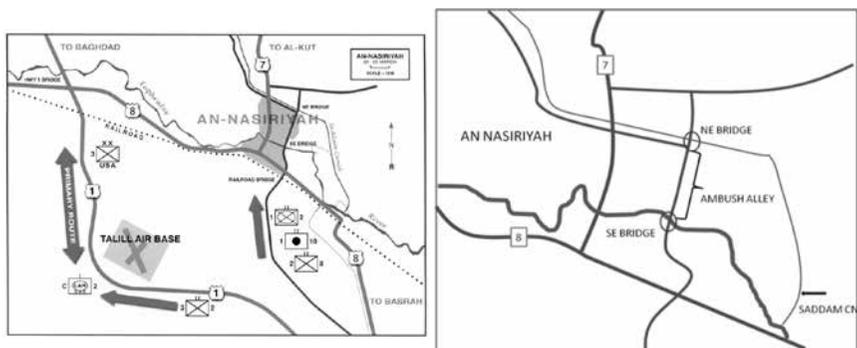
**Battle of Nasiriyah was a classic example of a superior assaulting force pinned down by a divergent group of poorly trained and equipped regular Army and paramilitary soldiers.**

## **Coalition Forces**

The Coalition attack plan consisted of a two-pronged thrust by elements of US 5 Corps and 1st Marine Expeditionary Force from their bases in northern Kuwait, moving almost 600 km through Iraq to eventually attack Baghdad. The main thrust by US 5 Corps was to move up along the west bank of the river Euphrates, bypassing the towns of Nasiriyah, Samawah and Najaf<sup>1</sup> and concentrate to attack Baghdad from the west. 3 Mechanised Infantry Division of 5 Corps was the leading element on the western flank. The 1st Marine Expeditionary Force consisting of 1 Marine Division, US 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade, 3 Marine Aircraft Wing and British 1 Armoured Division were to move eastwards, cross the Euphrates river, advance through the heartland and attack Baghdad from the east. The Coalition forces consisted of troop contingents from the USA, UK, Australia and Poland. The US contribution was 150,000 active duty and reserve soldiers.<sup>2</sup>

The US 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade (also called Task Force Tarawa) was tasked to capture bridges across the Euphrates river and Saddam canal to allow 1 Marine Division to advance along Highway 7 northwards to the town of Al Kuk<sup>3</sup>. It would allow elements of 1st Marine Expeditionary Force to preserve their combat power in their push to Baghdad. Task Force Tarawa was to capture the SE bridge on the Euphrates river and the NE bridge on the Saddam canal (See Fig 1). The task also entailed dominating the 4 km stretch between these bridges, termed as “Ambush Alley” based on the possibility of ambush of any Coalition forces attempting to use it.<sup>4</sup> The Task Force consisted of three Marine battalions, 1st Battalion 2nd Marines (1/2 Bn), 2nd Battalion 8th Marines (2/8 Bn) and 3rd Battalion 2nd Marines (3/2 Bn). It was supplemented by 1st Battalion 10th Marines, its artillery component and two Abraham tank companies of 8th Tank Battalion. In addition, the Task Force also had two light armour companies for reconnaissance and a company of the 2nd Combat Engineer Battalion. With its composition, Task Force Tarawa had more combat punch than a conventional Army brigade. The Task Force was under the command of Brig Gen Richard Natonski. As Task Force Tarawa had to provide a safe corridor for troop movement and ensure the safety of supply lines, the only way to achieve the objective was to capture Nasiriyah.<sup>5</sup>

Fig 1



## The Battle

The first elements of US 3 Infantry Division and 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) entered Iraq from the Kuwaiti side at 0300 hours on March 20, 2003. Elements of 3 Mechanised Infantry Division were able to speedily advance along the western flank towards Baghdad and by March 23, the service support elements, forming the tail, were nearing Nasiriyah. The Coalition forces were

relying on highway movement due to the unpredictable nature of cross-country movement and had been travelling almost non-stop for the last three days. It was at this juncture that a convoy of 507 Maintenance Company of 3 Mechanised Infantry Division, took a wrong turn and instead of moving on the safer Highway 1, started moving along the enemy held Highway 7. By the time the convoy Commander realised his mistake and turned back, the convoy was ambushed and nine soldiers were killed, with six soldiers captured. This emboldened the Iraqi fighters regarding the fighting capabilities of the US soldiers. Thus, when the leading elements of Task Force Tawara entered Nasiriyah, they were surprised by the resistance offered by the Iraqi troops.

Task Force Tawara commenced its advance into Nasiriyah at 0300 hours on March 23. The advance was led by 1/2 Bn with the Combined Anti-Armour Team consisting of eight TOW missile equipped Humvees as the lead element. It was followed by Charlie Company on the western flank and Bravo Company on the eastern flank with two platoons of tanks. The advance was delayed as the Marines were involved in the rescue of elements of the trapped 507 Maintenance Company and were able to rescue 10 soldiers, including the convey Commander. The advance resumed at 1000 hours and Bravo Company along with Alpha Company were able to cross the SE bridge over the Euphrates river and establish a perimeter. Bravo Company, in an attempt to clear the enemy positions, which were firing upon its position advanced ahead and took a wrong turn which resulted in six tanks getting struck in the boggy ground and led to the first casualties of the battle. It also went out of communication with the rest of the battalion. Charlie Company, sensing an opportunity, advanced along the Ambush Alley towards the Saddam canal and suffered a direct RPG hit on its leading vehicles. It managed to cross the Saddam canal and establish a shallow perimeter but was being relentlessly attacked from north, east and west enemy positions by machine-gun, RCL and RPG fire. Unknown to the US troops, the Iraqis had infiltrated 504 Infantry Brigade of 34 Infantry Division to reinforce Nasiriyah. The quantum of enemy troops and their fighting ability now was much higher than anticipated. The Marines battled isolated individuals, groups of irregulars and coordinated attacks by Iraqi troops and were constantly under heavy pressure. Bravo Company was under intense attack from across the Saddam canal and thinking that they were the leading elements, requested for air support to neutralise targets north of Saddam canal. As the communication was poor and the Battalion HQ had no news of Charlie Company's location, the two A-10 aircraft were tasked to destroy any emplacements north of the canal.

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Thus, in the fog of war, the A-10 aircraft attacked the Charlie Company location, leading to the deaths of nine Marines and destruction of five track vehicles. For casualty evacuation, the Marines had to make a run through the Ambush Alley. The Iraqi soldiers and militia attacked from rooftops with mortars and RPG rounds and Charlie Company suffered two direct RPG hits, leading to the deaths of nine soldiers. By the evening, Charlie Company had 18 dead, 14 Marines injured and had lost eight track vehicles. The Marines were able to overcome small groups of soldiers and by afternoon had stabilised the battlefield.

Meanwhile, Alpha Company was relieved by 2/8 Bn by mid-day and it reinforced Charlie Company by 1600 hours. The presence of the two companies dented the Iraqi confidence and no further coordinated attack took place thereafter. By midnight, the position north of the canal was reinforced by the entire battalion and an effective perimeter was in place by March 24. The SE bridge on the river was consolidated by 2/8 Bn and by midnight, the companies had occupied a defensive position on the eastern side of the bridge with 3/2 Bn forming a perimeter on the western side. Sporadic incidents of firing continued but no casualties were suffered. The leading elements of 1 Marine Division crossed Nasiriyah on the night of March 24, through the perimeter established by Task Force Tawara. The consolidation process continued and by March 28, the eastern supply route had been secured and the Battle of Nasiriyah had effectively ended.

## **Military Lessons**

Though the military campaign was an overwhelming success due to the superiority in force levels, the Coalition forces learnt a number of important lessons which would have a profound impact on the conduct of asymmetric warfare in the coming years.

- **Technology Isn't Everything:** The US soldiers realised the hard way that superior technology wasn't a solutions to all problems. The convoy Commander of the ill fated 507 Maintenance Company had state-of-the-art radio sets, Global Positioning System (GPS) and still lost his way within the town leading to the deaths of nine soldiers. The radio sets would not work due to high tension power lines, excessive traffic on the tactical nets rendered passage of information difficult and the A-10 pilots could not recognise own vehicles, leading to unnecessary deaths.

- **Human Intelligence:** Task Force Tawara did not have any actionable intelligence about the enemy positions in Nasiriyah and assumed that being a Shia populated town, it would not offer any resistance and they would be welcomed by the locals as liberators. Due to the unique location of Nasiriyah, it was a geographical choke-point which was used as a resistance point by the Iraqi troops. Fortunately, for the Marines, the Iraqi troops were not effectively organised and their attacks were uncoordinated. A coordinated response would have led to higher numbers of casualties to the Marines.
- **Unconventional Fighting Methodology:** Though elements of the Iraqi 11 Infantry Division were deployed around Nasiriyah, almost 60 percent soldiers had abandoned their prepared defences and, along with Baath Party volunteers, had prepared defensive emplacements inside the town. Iraqi soldiers had employed more than 50 immobile T-50 tanks as pill boxes in buildings, hospitals and schools in and around Nasiriyah. Nine T-50 tanks placed around the SE bridge on the river were destroyed by the anti-armour team of 1/2 Bn on March 23, during the capture of the bridge. Most of the troops were wearing civil clothes and mingling with the civilian population making identification difficult. In many cases, anti-aircraft guns were mounted on a pick-up and the soldiers would move out of the alleys and fire on the Marines. In two cases, they fired into the engine compartment of tanks from the rear, resulting in the loss of two Abraham tanks. A target acquired next to a mosque presented a dilemma to the attacker and efforts had to be made to reduce unnecessary damage and not antagonise the local population.
- **Cultural Training:** US soldiers who did not have any cultural training, concentrated on avoiding actions that might offend the Iraqi population<sup>6</sup>. Knowledge about the tribal system, religion, how Iraqis negotiate, the cultural customs, and the local leadership structure would have enabled better understanding and generated goodwill. According to a Marine Corps Officer, “ We lost at least a month, just trying to understand how the Iraqi system operated. By losing that month, we lost a lot of local goodwill that we had to struggle to get back”. This aspect is equally essential for our units deployed in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and the Northeast, though no viable structured training is conducted for the soldiers and officers.

## Conclusion

The battle of Nasiriyah was an unequal contest between a professional, well equipped Army and a varied mix of regular soldiers, volunteers and foreign fighters. The heavy resistance by the Iraqis was not expected and the US soldiers paid the price for this assumption. Though the battle was over in three days, the Marines suffered heavy casualties and, at one stage, the Commanders feared that the battle had been lost<sup>7</sup>. The employment of unconventional tactics by the Iraqis led to higher Marine casualties and forced the planners to take a closer look at their own rules of engagement and initiate a series of training reorientation programmes for future engagements.

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Col Ashwani Gupta is a Senior Fellow at CLAWS.

## Notes

1. Stephen C Pelletiere, *Losing Iraq: Insurgency and Politics* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2007), p. 9.
2. <http://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RL31763.pdf>
3. Williamson Murray and Robert Scales Jr, *The Iraq War: A Military History* (USA: Belknap Press, 2003), p. 119.
4. Rod Andrew Jr, *An-Nasiriyah: US Marines in Battle* (USA: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2009), p. 8.
5. Antony Cordesman, *The Iraq War: Strategy, Tactics and Military Lessons* (Washington DC: Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 2003), p. 37.
6. Major Matthew R Hover, *The Occupation of Iraq: A Military Perspective on Lessons Learned*.
7. Ibid.