Contact!
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Contact!

'The principles of strategy and tactics, and the logistics of war are absurdly simple: it is the actualities that make war so complicated and so difficult, and are usually so neglected by historians.'

—Field Marshall Lord Archibald P. Wavell

by LtCol Bryan P. McCoy

With all of the menace of a giant shark in search of prey, our armored column steadily churns eastward on Iraq's Highway 6, paralleling the Tigris River toward the town of Al Kut. Along the ancient banks of the Tigris, we follow in the footsteps of the Akkadians, Sumerians, Hittites, Kassites, Assyrians, and Persians. We trace the path of Alexander the Great and his army of Macedon. It is midmorning of 3 April 2003, and Task Force 3d Battalion, 4th Marines (TF 3/4) is on the attack for the 14th day in row.

Our mission is to destroy the remaining offensive capabilities of the Republican Guard's Baghdad Infantry Division. In short, we are to remove the enemy from the game board, allowing the rest of the 1st Marine Division (1st MarDiv) to turn its back to Al Kut and continue the march to Baghdad. Our TF is comprised of roughly 1,150 sailors and Marines and 165 vehicles—75 are armored, to include 15 formidable M1A1 tanks or "Tigers" as we call them. Bravo Company is our tank unit and has been complemented with an attached infantry platoon from Kilo Company under the command of 2dLt Kaloha Stokes. With the Tiger's inherent protection and firepower, they typically led the TF in these "movement to contact" operations, since the thick skin of the tanks could take a hit better than anything else we own. Movement to contact is military parlance for "go find the enemy and develop the situation." In doing so it is not uncommon for the enemy, hiding in a stationary position on ground of his choosing, to get off the first shot. In this particular scenario, we know that after we make contact with the Baghdad Infantry Division, the enemy will suffer the complete destruction of its remaining armor and artillery, rendering any remaining infantry powerless to affect the 1st MarDiv's drive on Baghdad. What we do not know is the location, composition, and disposition of the enemy. We accomplish this the old-fashioned way—"find 'em, fix 'em, and fight 'em."

Having gained fire superiority, Marines advance behind machinegun, rocket, and grenade fire. Note the smoke and dust from freshly detonated grenades. *(Photo courtesy of Robert Nicklesburg,* TIME *magazine.)*

We have been on the move nearly constantly for 16 days, since 19 March, a full 2 days prior to the 21 March assault into Iraq. Our TF has fought at Al Basra, Hajil, Afak, Al Budair, and Ad Diwaniyah, and endured an epic sandstorm on 24 and 25 March. We are exhausted from the effort of constant movement, punctuated by fighting and killing along the way. For the first 3 days nobody slept. Since then, no man has benefited from more than 3 or 4 hours of sleep in each 24-hour period—usually taken in multiple catnaps. Personally, I had slept perhaps an hour and a half the previous night and maybe a total of 8 hours or so over the past 3 days. Each day of fighting has been the equivalent of completing a major physical endurance event, such as a marathon, with the added bonus of the nervous system's parasympathetic response to extreme exertion, stress, and doses of adrenaline, where the body and mind crash in an attempt to recoup from the effort. Adding to the tally of stress is the uncertainty of the day-to-day situation and the ever-increasing threat of the enemy's use of chemical weapons as we close in on Baghdad.

Today we cross north of the Tigris River and the "red line" where intelligence has estimated that Saddam would be compelled to use chemical weapons to defend his capital city. For over 2 weeks we have been living and sleeping in our hot, bulky, charcoal-lined chemical protective suits that resist every movement. Even urination requires extra effort. Every man is filthy despite our best efforts at hygiene; yet we remain clean-shaven and keep our weapons maintained in spotless condition. After a full day of moving we spent the previous night digging the TF into defensive positions and reporting

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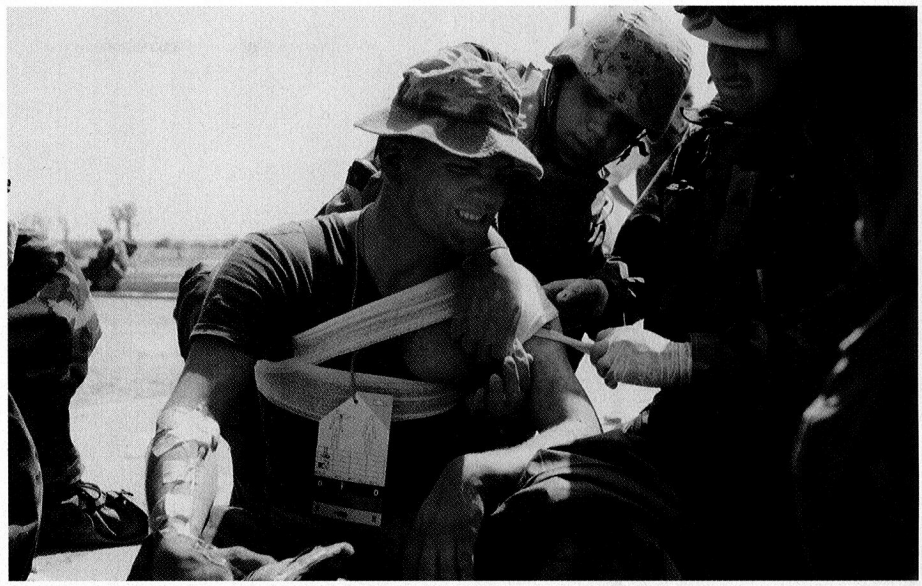
and coordinating our efforts with our higher headquarters, Regimental Combat Team 7, in pitch-black repairing and refueling vehicles, careful to avoid the enemy mines that we found sharing the field with us. Around midnight we received our mission to destroy the Baghdad Infantry Division elements south of the Tigris. By 0200 the order changed to north of the Tigris. With fatigue-numbed minds we amended our plan, racing against the 0600 time of attack.

Crossing the line of departure on time, we cover nearly 40 kilometers by 0900. Encountering only light resistance, we are now on the outskirts of Al Kut. Contact is imminent, yet the lure of sleep is so enticing it is nearly impossible to resist. I think how nice it would be to lay my head against the sharp metal radio mount to my left and close my eyes for just a few minutes. My radio crackles, "Darkside 6, this is Bravo 6 . . . Phase Line Saw . . . time now . . . 15 kph [kilometers per hour] . . . negative contact, out!" Bravo 6 is the Commanding Officer, Bravo Company, Capt Brian Lewis, an exceptionally brave officer and much loved by his men. Lewis is calling me to let me know his location, speed, and enemy situation. The report is really for the TF command post since I am 20 meters behind Lewis' tank in my HMMWV. Lewis' tank is behind the lead tank platoon, the "Red Platoon." I respond, "Roger, out." I knew the situation before he reported it.



Cpl Patrick H. Irish is given first aid for a gunshot wound to the shoulder before being evacuated. His life was saved by the ceramic plate in his flak vest that stopped two other rounds that would have penetrated his chest. *(Photo courtesy of Gillis Bassingnac Gamma.)*

The tactics and techniques for counterambush drills when caught in a kill zone are very clear—return as much fire as possible and get out of the kill zone.

It takes an extra second for my brain to register the enemy Soviet light machinegun (RPK) tracers flying over the hood of my HMMWV. I yell, "Contact right—troops!" to LCpl Samuel Baynes, my M240G (7.62mm medium machinegun) HMMWV turret gunner, directing his return fire into the date palm grove on the right side of the road. "Right turn. Right turn and stop!" I tell the driver, Cpl Omar Monge. The idea is to put the engine block and ballistic glass of the HMMWV between the RPK and us. Instead, Monge turns left and stops. We are positioned broadside to the enemy with nothing but one-eighth inch of fiberglass for protection. It might as well have been one-eighth inch of butter. I give Monge a look he later describes as "the same look a dog gives its owner while the dog gets a bath—the 'why me; what did I ever do to you?' look." The second burst from the RPK hits low into the road embankment a few feet to my right, spraying dirt and chunks of asphalt into our faces. We bail out of the vehicle and immediately put as much fire as possible into the enemy positions. The enemy has let Red Platoon pass and initiates the ambush as soon as Lewis' tank, my HMMWV, and MSgt Allen Johnson's HMMWV have entered the kill zone. The date palm grove harbors a pair of dug-in tanks, 3 armored personnel carriers with machineguns, and expertly constructed and camouflaged bunkers, as well as trenches manned by more than 40 Iraqi combatants, who are a mix of Republican Guard and Saddam Fedayeen—also known as "Saddam's men of sacrifice," who often find their nerve to fight only under the influence of courage building narcotics.

The enemy has initiated contact from as close as 30 meters, peppering the column with small arms fire and rocket propelled grenades (RPGs). I can hear the radio and my own voice loud and clear, my brain all but squelching the deafening reports of weapons and the explosions of RPGs and tank main gun fire. In a semidetached manner I recognize this as the phenomenon of auditory exclusion, or tunnel hearing, in which the brain, responding to stress and hormonally increased heart rate, filters out the unnecessary and processes the essential. I never cease to marvel at this adaptation of the mind, and it is comforting to recognize it for what it is. "Darkside, this is Darkside 6. Contact right, Phase Line Saw. Out!" I am now reduced to being a rifleman. In the middle of the "kill zone," I managed to get off one quick contact report to the Darkside TF—the contact report that would initiate a sequence of actions based on habits formed by long months of training, endless rehearsals, and an implicit understanding of each other that comes from hours upon hours of discussions and a few beers at the bar.

It is called a kill zone for a reason; you do not want to be in one. The

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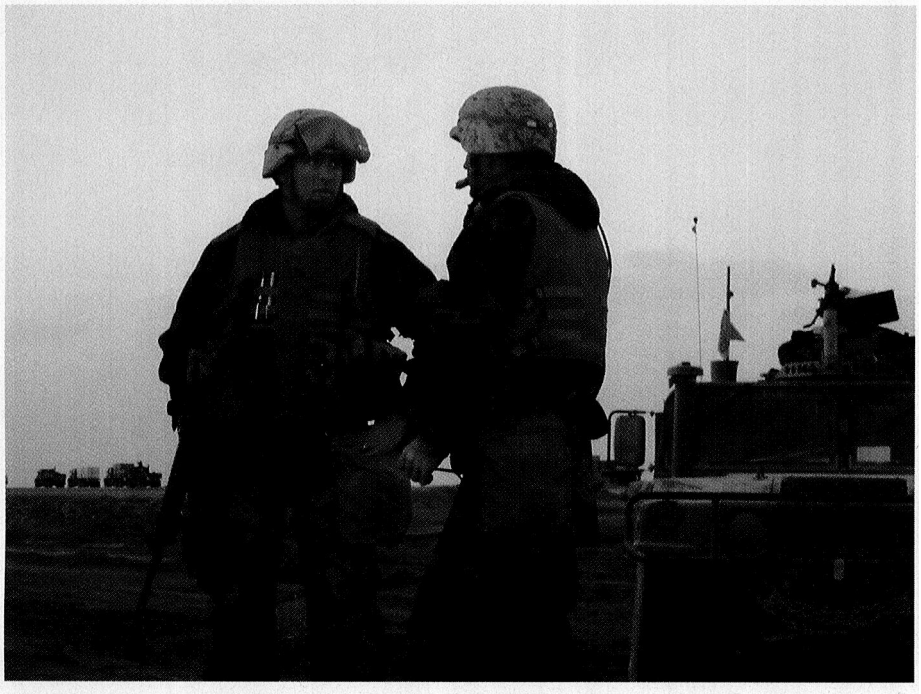

LtCol B.P. McCoy and Capt Kevin Norton in discussion on Highway 1. *(Photo by Capt Bryan Mangan.)*

tactics and techniques for counter-ambush drills when caught in a kill zone are very clear—return as much fire as possible and get out of the kill zone. The terrain along the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers features irrigated fields, crisscrossed with canals and raised levee roads. Such topography is terrible for mechanized forces and makes it nearly impossible for us to clear out of the kill zone. Those of us in it will have to fight it out until the rest of Bravo arrives to even the odds. LCpl Garfield Shealy, my radio operator, kneels next to me wearing the manpack radio, steadily returning fire. I can see the enemy disposition and strength now. He has strong fortifications with good fields of fire and has anchored his left flank on the Tigris River and his right flank on a canal separating the palm grove from the city of Al Kut. I grab the radio handset off Shealy's backpack; I call Kilo 6 and have him attack the seam between the Tigris River and the palm grove to get behind the enemy in order to unhinge his right flank. Only seconds have passed, but I can already feel the effects of adrenaline coursing through my system. There is nothing worse than a shrill radio call. My heart is pounding. I take a deep breath in an attempt to bring my heart rate under control and look at my hands; they are steady enough to hold my rifle in one and the handset in the other. I squeeze the handset and give my directions to Kilo 6 and a brief update to the TF command post. Happily, my voice seems steady and calm and belies the fact that my heart is beating like a drum in my chest. "That is a relief," I think to myself. Calm is just as contagious as panic.

Back in the kill zone, I clearly see the winking muzzle flashes of more than a dozen weapons sweeping the road with fire. I return fire into the closest enemy, an RPK machinegun—probably the one that had initially opened up on my vehicle—that is now fully concentrating its fire on not just Lewis' tank but on Lewis himself. Lewis is popping up and down in his hatch directing the fire of his gunner as the RPK's rounds splatter and spark against his tank all around his cupola, giving the nearly comical impression of a game of "whack a mole." Lewis' tank hammers eight 120mm main gun rounds into the palm grove in rapid succession. Wham! Wham! Wham! I empty two magazines from my M16A2 rifle into the enemy's muzzle flashes. We desperately try to match the enemy's firepower and reduce their accuracy to stay alive long enough until support arrives. I look left to Lewis' tank as the enemy RPK gives a long burst that throws a shower of sparks off of Lewis' cupola hatch and the .50 caliber machinegun he mans as he disappears into the hatch. He does not pop back up. I fear the worst, but his tank remains in action, firing. Vegetation obscures my observation of the RPK's crew. I do not have a clear shot, but I can see the stream of tracers it produces. I fire into the vegetation at what I estimate to be its origin hoping to suppress the crew—to make them duck and cover. Further to my left, MSgt Johnson has the angle on the RPK and empties one magazine wildly at the enemy. Reloading, he scolds himself and recites the rifle range mantra, "front sight post, front sight post—squeeze." His next shots are well-aimed killing shots into the heads of the crew. The gun is silenced. One head of the Hydra is lopped off. Bravo's infantry platoon comes roaring up in three armored assault amphibious vehicles, slamming to a halt at the edge of the kill zone. Their heavy M2 .50 caliber machineguns and Mk19 40mm automatic grenade launchers open up to cover the Marine infantry stampeding down the back ramps of the 26-ton vehicles.

What happens next is pure violence, yet elegant in its harmony. Thirty-five U.S. Marines of 3d Platoon, Kilo Company, rush out of the gloomy confines of their armored mounts and into daylight—into the teeth of the enemy fire. They know nothing of the enemy's strength or disposition. All they know is that this is a "contact right," and this is what we do in contact right. PFC Dusty Ladendorf is a rifleman in that platoon and less than a year out of high school. Later, in an after-action review he makes this comment on the firefight:

> You come out of the back of the track and just do it like you were trained. Execute your battle drill, take cover and fire, cover your buddy's move, and move yourself when he covers you. Find the enemy, close in on him, and kill him. Keep moving and keep killing until it's over.

The platoon rushes straight into the teeth of the fire and gains a foothold in the palm grove, taking advantage of the protection provided by every subtle fold in the ground and clod of dirt.

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An untrained observer would look at the scene and think it no more organized than a riot. What I see is ferocious poetry—every weapons system joins the fight, each supporting the other. Machineguns, rifles, grenade launchers, and rocket launchers systematically suppress and then kill the enemy. We are gaining fire superiority. Now it is for the enemy to question the prospect of survival. It is a scene nearly as old as time itself—a pack of predators methodically corrals and slaughters its prey. It is brutal harmony; no man flinches from the task. The enemy is on the horns of a dilemma. If he gets up to run from his fortifications, he will be cut down by machinegun and rifle fire; if he stays in his hole, he is ripped apart by grenades and rockets. The enemy dies both ways.

Every firefight, even one as concentrated in time and space as the fight at Al Kut, is really the sum of many smaller fights. On a field of less than 6 hectares, seemingly random actions share a dynamic relationship in ways impossible to anticipate, a kaleidoscopic cause and effect of innumerable imponderables accented by chance and possibly fate. Only after the fight is over does a remotely coherent picture of the actualities of the action come into focus.

As the infantry begins to tear the enemy out of their holes, the Red Platoon that had passed through the kill zone engages the dug-in T62s and armored personnel carriers arrayed to support their own infantry. The 120mm rounds of the Tigers are turning the enemy armor into geysers of flame and metal, immolating the crews inside. The combined horror of a vicious infantry onslaught to their front and the nightmare of Tigers tearing into their flanks proves too much for the Iraqis. The rout is on. The Iraqis panic and bolt from the palm grove, seeking the safety of Al Kut. A dozen try swimming the narrow canal that separates the city from the palm grove, but Red Platoon has a Tiger covering their "golden bridge" to sanctuary. The ambushers become the ambushed, cut down by machineguns in the canal. Their escape route is now a kill zone—littered with floating corpses.

Maybe 20 minutes has passed, 20 minutes of a nearly indescribable assault on the senses and emotions—of supreme physical effort. It has been a 20-minute roller coaster ride between extremes. The senses, charged by adrenaline and a pounding heart, rise and fall in levels of acuity and volume. Sound is alternately deafening and then muffled; the vision accentuated by a mental focus. The body is racked by the concussion and overpressure of tank main gun reports and the back blast of rockets, each powerful enough to kill you if you are too close. Even when grenades and mortars do not send fragments into flesh, the jarring shock wave against the body from their explosions is disorienting to the faculties, each blast the equivalent of a slap upside the head, a kick to the chest—or worse. The body seems sluggish to command, yet seems to move as if obedient to habit. As the shooting stops, the senses equalize and return to normal; the body takes stock of the energy it expended in the crisis. You are exhausted.

The enemy is dead, incapacitated, or surrendering. The only sounds now are men calling to one another, the soft roar and crackle of burning tanks and armored personnel carriers, and the pop of small arms ammunition cooking off in the fires, punctuated by the periodic explosion of larger munitions succumbing to metal pyres. The grove is burning in places; an acrid smoke hangs in the air. A concoction of burning armor, seared human flesh mixed with cordite, urine, and sweat, this smell is unique to a modern battlefield. I will never forget it. Enemy dead lay twisted in grotesque contortions. Two Iraqis lay crumpled together in their fighting hole. A handgrenade had killed them; one had tried to pick it up and toss it out, only to have it explode in his grasp.

What factors won that firefight? How had such young men, less than a year out of high school, become such brave and effective fighters, responding automatically and ruthlessly to a very grave situation? They had executed as if it were yet another drill, behaving as if this was routine, even normal. Classic behavioral and operant conditionings[1] were contributors for certain. By itself, simple conditioning does not explain the iron will displayed by these men and their actions afterward. There was no evidence of euphoria. We had stopped killing once the enemy submitted and placed their hands in the air—or were incapacitated by wounds—and gave quarter. There was not a collapse into emotional heaps. The mood was all business.

Al Kut had been a test. Despite mental and physical exhaustion, sleep deprivation and uncertainty, despite the enemy's advantage of surprise and drawing first blood, we had closed with him at pointblank range and ravaged him. How had we, in a matter of minutes, routed a determined, well-prepared, and entrenched enemy who enjoyed the often-decisive element of surprise? Technology was not the answer. Smart bombs and satellite intelligence held no sway in this fight. The superiority of our weapons was not the decisive factor. In a close-in fight like this, advantages in expensive optics and communications equipment are nil. What gave us the edge over our enemy was an exquisite preparation of the mind and body that produced a will to fight, a will to win. We had not panicked; the enemy had. Under tremendous stress, our aim was true and our actions quick and sharp. We had prepared ourselves for the ultimate test of battle, the clash of wills. We had performed simple, ordinary actions under extraordinary conditions. We had triumphed. We had inured ourselves to the sting of battle even before the first shot was fired in anger.

Note

1. Operant conditioning encourages learning to exert a positive influence or control over our environment. It is key in avoiding aversive conditioning and the learned helplessness and fear that go with it.

US MC

>LtCol McCoy was the Battalion Commander, TF 3/4 during the combat action described. This article will be a part of his forthcoming book, The Passion of Command.

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