

Operation Iraqi Freedom

Coalition Offensive in Southern Iraq: 20-28 March 2003 (Map 1)

The Isolation of Baghdad: 29 March – 7 April 2003 (Map 2)

The Coalition ground campaign to remove Saddam Hussein from power began on 20 March 2003 under the command and control of the United States 3rd Army, which acted as the Combined Forces Land Component Command (CFLCC). The 3rd Army's principal subordinate elements for the assault into southern Iraq were the United States Army V Corps, which controlled Army elements in the drive west of the Euphrates River, and the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, which controlled United States Marine Corps elements east of the Euphrates as well as the 1st British Armored Division, which operated in the Al Basra area.

On 21-22 March, the United States Army 3rd Infantry Division defeated the Iraqi 11th Infantry Division southwest of An Nasiriyah and seized the Highway 1 Bridge across the Euphrates River. By 23 March, 3rd Infantry Division had passed this bridge off to the 2nd Marine Expeditionary Brigade – Task Force Tarawa – which had followed the 3rd Infantry Division into Iraq. Task Force Tarawa attacked into An Nasiriyah and seized additional bridges. Capture of these bridges was critical to allow 1st Marine Expeditionary Force elements to cross to the east bank of the Euphrates. **(See #1 on Map 1)**

After defeating the Iraqi 51st Mechanized Infantry Division and securing the oilfields near Rumaylah, the United States 1st Marine Division handed off security of the oilfields to the British 1st Armored Division. The British 1st Armored also isolated Al Basra to prevent additional Iraqi forces from entering the city and conducted operations in the vicinity of Umm Qasr. **(See #2 on Map 1)** 1st Marine Division then proceeded northwest across the An Nasiriyah bridges and continued attacking north along Highways 1 and 7.

The 3rd Infantry Division continued attacking northwest. It conducted operations to contain As Samawah (22-28 March) and An Najaf (25-28 March) to prevent Fedayeen irregulars, loyal to the Saddam Hussein regime, from disrupting the American lines of communication. The 3rd Infantry Division further secured Objective RAMs, which would serve as a Logistics Support Area (LSA) in support of the eventual attack on Baghdad. **(See #3 on Map 1)**

On 23-24 March, the United States 11th Attack Helicopter Regiment conducted a deep attack from Logistic Support Area RAMs against Iraqi Republican Guard elements south of Baghdad. The aviators took heavy ground fire from enemy units along their axis of advance. The unexpected intensity of enemy ground fire forced the Regiment to withdraw with one helicopter shot down and thirty one others damaged. **(See #4 on Map 1)** Despite the failure of this mission, Coalition attack helicopter units were able to adjust their tactics and future operations would prove more successful.

By 25 March, Coalition fixed-wing air assets began transitioning the focus of the air campaign from strategic-level targets to Iraqi maneuver elements, particularly Iraq armor that tried to respond to the movement of Coalition ground forces. Additionally, attack helicopters from the 101st Aviation Brigade conducted a successful deep attack against Republican Guard elements south of Baghdad on 28 March. By 29 March, air attacks had degraded Republican Guard elements defending the approaches to Baghdad but both Republican Guard and Fedayeen irregulars continued to resist Coalition operations. Iraqi regular army units proved less of a threat and had in some cases disintegrated due to Coalition attacks and desertion.

In order to free up combat power in the 3rd Infantry Division for the attack on Baghdad, the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 82nd Airborne Division flew into Tallil Air Base (south of An Nasiriyah) and then proceeded by ground to relieve 3rd Infantry Division elements outside of As Samawah by 29 March. **(See #5 on Map 2)** The 82nd Airborne Division elements first isolated and then cleared As Samawah to eliminate the threat to the American lines of communication.

Similarly, on 29 March, the 101st Air Assault Division relieved 3rd Infantry Division elements in the vicinity of An Najaf. The 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Air Assault Division isolated An Najaf from the north while the 1st Brigade Combat Team cleared the city. On 31 March, 2nd Brigade Combat Team conducted a feint toward Al Hillah to deceive Iraqi forces that the Coalition attack on Baghdad would proceed due north on the road network from An Najaf through Al Hillah to Baghdad. This feint also sought to destroy Republican Guard elements operating in the vicinity of Al Hillah. **(See #6 on Map 2)**

With the handoff of As Samawah and An Najaf to elements of the 82nd Airborne Division and 101st Air Assault Division, 3rd Infantry Division consolidated combat power for the attack on Baghdad. On 31 March, the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division attacked the Euphrates River bridges west of Al Hillah to further deceive Iraqi forces as to the true direction of the main Coalition thrust and to fix Republican Guard elements in place. The main attack on Baghdad occurred when the remainder of the 3rd Infantry Division assaulted through the Karbala Gap (in between the city of Karbala and Buhayrat Ar Razazah) and advanced on Baghdad southwest to northeast. **(See #7 on Map 2)**

While V Corps elements operated west of the Euphrates and prepared to strike Baghdad from the southwest, 1st Marine Expeditionary Force Elements, spearheaded by the 1st Marine Division set the conditions for their own attack on the Iraqi capital. The 1st Marine Division initially attacked North on Highway 1 to further deceive Iraqi forces that the main Coalition attack would come from south to north. The 1st Marine Division actually crossed to the north side of the Tigris River near An Numaniyah. The Division's 1st Regimental Combat Team – which had advanced toward Al Kut on Highway 7 – contained Fedayeen irregulars and some weak Iraqi Army units in the city but the remnants of the Republican Guard Division that had previously occupied the city had withdrawn toward Baghdad. **(See #8 on Map 2)**

After crossing the Tigris, the 1st Marine Division advanced on Baghdad from the southeast and defeated the remnants of the Al Nida Republican Guard Division near Al Aziziyah. Lead elements of the Division defeated Fedayeen elements near the junction of the Tigris and Diyala Rivers. By 5 April, the Marines began sealing off Baghdad from the southeast. **(See #9 on Map 2)**

Back to the southwest of Baghdad, the 3rd Infantry Division continued its advance. Republican Guard and Fedayeen elements attempted several poorly coordinated attacks in an attempt to disrupt the Coalition attack. The 3rd Infantry Division elements soundly defeated these attacks. By 4 April, the 3rd Infantry Division began isolating Baghdad from the west. **(See #10 on Map 2)** On 5 April, the Division conducted its first “Thunder Run” into the heart of Baghdad.

While the 3rd Infantry Division and 1st Marine Division moved north, Task Force Tarawa completed clearing enemy forces out of An Nasiriyah and moved to support the 1st Marine Division's lines of communication. On 7 April, Task Force Tarawa attacked toward Al Amarah to defeat remnants of the Iraqi 10th Armored Division. **(See # 11 on Map 2)** Meanwhile, in the southwest, the British 1st Armored Division transitioned from the isolation to the clearance of Al Basra, destroying Fedayeen forces and securing the city. **(See #12 on Map 2)**