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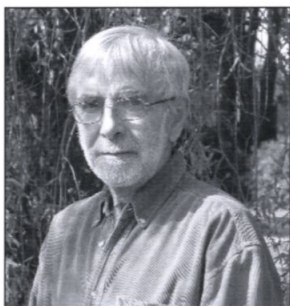
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Special Operations Forces in Iraq



Leigh Neville • Illustrated by Richard Hook

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Dedication

This work is dedicated to my late grandfather, WO2 Edward Farrelly, and to the men and women who have served and continue to serve in OIF. All gave some, some gave all.

Artist's Note

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Author's Note

Please note that all faces and identifying characteristics of special operators have been digitally obscured in all images for security reasons. Additionally, locations referenced have been kept deliberately vague as have some specific operational details which may impact on Coalition tactics, techniques and procedures. Some current unit and task force names and designations, locations and roles have also been omitted or altered for reasons of operational security.

SPECIAL OPERATIONS FORCES IN IRAQ

INTRODUCTION

'A lot of guys obviously hate the place. But in the early mornings when the sun came up, the temperature got just right and the sky looked lovely. I can't tell you about the people. My only interaction with them is in their house at 2am, usually scared shitless.'

US SOF operator, Iraq

Planning for what was eventually to become Operation 'Iraqi Freedom' (OIF) began in December of 2001, even as Coalition Forces continued to battle Taliban and al Qaeda elements in Afghanistan under Operation 'Enduring Freedom' (OEF). Drawing on a pre-existing battle plan, the harried leader of US Central Command (CENTCOM), General Tommy Franks, began to develop options for an invasion of Iraq under the orders of then-Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld.



The plan soon evolved into a concept of operations that required far fewer resources than the original, and one that called for a concurrent start for both the air and ground components, in contrast with the protracted preliminary bombing campaign for Operation 'Desert Storm' (ODS) in 1991. Special operations forces (SOF) were an integral part of the plan, and their role would increase in light of the early successes of SOF in Afghanistan.

CENTCOM's Special Operations Command Central (SOCCENT) joined the planning process formally in March 2002 as conventional forces took over command and control of SOF in Afghanistan. Brigadier-General Gary 'Shooter' Harrell, a leader with an impressive SOF service history, took over command of SOCCENT in June 2002. Harrell had most recently commanded Task Force Bowie in OEF, and had previously served with 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta (1st SFOD-D), after earlier stints with the 10th and 7th Special Forces Groups (SFG).

Harrell and Franks developed a concept of operations that would see Coalition SOF deployed in three major areas. In the western deserts of Iraq, SOF would hunt down mobile Scud TEL launchers, while providing special reconnaissance (SR) and screening tasks in support of conventional forces. In the north, SOF would work with the local Kurdish Peshmerga guerillas to draw Iraqi forces away from reinforcing Baghdad, while capturing strategic sites to allow conventional follow-on forces to deploy (a task which grew in importance with Turkey's refusal to allow conventional forces to deploy from her soil).

In the south, SOF would seize the national oil production facilities, provide SR, and capture key facilities and transport nodes. A fourth covert SOF unit would carry out the hunt for weapons of mass destruction, and high-value leadership targets within the regime of Saddam Hussein.

Once the plan was signed by President George W. Bush, D-Day for Operation 'Iraqi Freedom' was set for 20 March 2003. An air campaign known as 'Shock and Awe' would kick off proceedings, while SOF teams quietly infiltrated into Iraq ahead of conventional forces. In reality, the first conventional operation of the war would occur during the early morning of 19 March, when intelligence indicated that Saddam Hussein and his sons Uday and Qusay were holding a meeting at a location known as Dora Farms outside Baghdad. Four 2,000lb laser-guided bombs struck the Dora Farms complex, dropped from a pair of F-117A Night Hawks, followed immediately by a salvo of Tomahawk TLM cruise missiles fired from ships in the Gulf. Disappointingly, the targets of this 'decapitation strike' were not present.

OIF officially began in the early hours of March 20, after the deadline for Saddam and his sons to leave the country expired. As 'Shock and Awe' got underway, conventional forces crossed the Kuwaiti border: the 3rd Infantry Division (3ID) took the lead for V Corps, across the western desert heading north for Najaf, Karbala and finally Baghdad; the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (1MEF) headed up the rough centre of southern Iraq toward Nasiriyah and al Kut; and the British 1st Armoured Division headed up the east of the country bound for Basra. The planned attack from the north by the 4th Infantry Division (4ID) was stymied by Turkey, and it thus fell to SOF alone to carry out the northern attack.

COMBINED JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS TASK FORCE-WEST

Resurrecting the 'Task Force Dagger' moniker from their operations in Afghanistan, the Combined Joint Special Operations Task Force-West (CJSOTF-West) was again led by Col John Mulholland and built around his 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne). The 5th SFG Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) teams were tasked with two core missions: the first was to counter the SCUD theatre ballistic missile threat by both locating and destroying the SCUD TEL launchers and denying the Iraqi military the use of potential launch sites; the second was to provide both an intelligence-gathering and a screening function in support of the conventional forces, to build up an accurate picture of Iraqi force dispositions in the west of the country.

The ODAs of 5th SFG were deployed under the command and control (C2) of Operational Detachment Bravo (ODB) teams; the latter operated as Advanced Operating Bases (AOBs), which also provided a mobile resupply function with their modified 'War Pig' Light Medium Transport Vehicles. The concept was first developed by 5th SFG in the mid-1990s, based on the use of Unimog forward resupply 'motherships'



All Coalition SOF are trained and equipped for night fighting. The white light and faint line visible above the muzzle of the weapon in this photo taken during a US Army Special Forces night-time raid is the infrared laser from the PEQ-2 target illuminator. (Courtesy US Navy, photo Mass Comm Spec 2nd Class Brett Cole)



to resupply their mobility patrols by UK Special Forces during Operation 'Desert Storm'. The 5th SFG were assigned responsibility for two sectors of western Iraq – the western and southern Joint Special Operations Areas (JSOAs). One element, termed Forward Operating Base (FOB) 51 and commanded by AOB 520 and AOB 530, was composed of the ODAs of 1st Battalion staged out of H-5 airfield in Jordan, and was responsible for the western zone. The group's 2nd and 3rd Bns deployed from Ali al Salim Air Base in Kuwait as FOB 52 and 53 respectively, dedicated to the southern JSOA. Assigned to all teams were Special Tactics airmen from the 23rd Special Tactics Squadron (STS), trained to guide in close air support and manage the airspace above the ODA teams.

A company element from the 19th SFG was attached to Dagger, as were several regular Army and National Guard infantry companies to provide FOB security and act as a Quick Reaction Force (QRF) – a role previously provided in Afghanistan by the Rangers, but these were otherwise tasked in OIF. As the prospect of war grew, the ODAs of A Co, 1st Bn, 19th SFG were tasked with liaison roles supporting conventional forces: ODA 911 and 913 were to support 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (1MEF); 914 was divided into two sub-teams, one being assigned to 3rd Infantry Division (3ID) alongside ODA 916, and the other to UK 1st Armoured Division; while ODA 915 was attached to 101st Airborne Division (101ABN) following 3ID across the western desert. A final 19th Group ODA, 912, was tasked with providing the Personal Security Detail (PSD) for Gen Harrell, commander of the Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command (CFSOCC).

In addition to US SOF, Task Force Dagger included the largest component of Coalition SOF of any of the four special operations task forces deployed to OIF. The United Kingdom Special Forces (UKSF) contributed two squadrons from 22 Special Air Service Regiment (22SAS) – B and D Sqns – and C Sqn from the Special Boat Service (SBS), along with UKSF support personnel; collectively these were designated as Task Force 7 by US planners. The Australian Special

Operations Command (SOCOMD) contributed 1 Sqn from the Special Air Service Regt (SASR), and a company from 4th Bn (Commando), Royal Australian Regt (4RAR) to support the SASR patrols. The Australians also resurrected their codename from Afghanistan, and were termed Task Force 64. The British and Australian Special Forces were assigned the northern and central JSOAs respectively, with a similar mission to the 5th SFG; they also deployed from H-5 in Jordan. The Australians readily agreed to be under US command, but the UKSF required some convincing before they relinquished operational control. An additional issue arose around IFF (Identification Friend or Foe) measures, but the UK eventually leased Blue Force Tracker units from the US; the Australians repeated their practice when working with US SOF in Afghanistan, and had USAF Special Tactics Combat Controllers with this indispensable equipment integrally embedded in each patrol.

The aviators of 3rd Bn, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regt (3/160 SOAR) deployed alongside TF Dagger, as the Joint Special Operations Air Detachment-West (JSOAD-West), with eight MH-47D heavy lift Chinooks, four MH-60L Direct Action Penetrators (DAP) and two MH-60K Black Hawk helicopters. In addition, a flight of Air National Guard (ANG) A-10 Warthogs and a flight of USAF F-16Cs were deployed to H-5 to serve as dedicated SOF close air support (CAS). Task Force 7 also had their own dedicated CAS at H-5 from two flights of RAF GR7 Harriers that had trained with the UKSF elements, and heavy lift in the form of CH-47 Chinooks from 7 Sqn and C-130s from the RAF Special Forces Flight from 47 Squadron.

US Army Special Forces en route to a target aboard a Black Hawk helicopter. (Courtesy US Navy; photo Mass Comm Spec 2nd Class Christopher Perez)



COMBINED JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS TASK FORCE-NORTH

Responsibility for special operations in the north was assigned to Combined Special Operations Task Force-North (CJSOTF-North), known as Task Force Viking. Its core component, the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne), was the obvious choice, having extensive experience between 1991 and 1996 in Kurdistan during Operation 'Provide Comfort', a United Nations-led operation to save the Kurds living in northern Iraq from persecution by Saddam. Working alongside the 10th SFG would be the men of 3rd Bn, 3rd SFG who had recently returned from Afghanistan; 20th SFG (NG) and 2nd Bn 7th SFG had assumed the role of CJSOTF-Afghanistan in September 2002, freeing up 3/3rd SFG to contribute to Viking. The 123rd Special Tactics Sqn, an ANG Air Force Special Operations Command unit, were slated to support the Viking ODAs on the ground. Conventional infantry units attached to Viking were the 173rd Airborne Brigade and several companies from 2nd Bn, 14th Infantry Regt of 10th Mountain Division.

Originally, the war plan called for TF Viking to support 4ID's march south toward Baghdad from Turkey. With Turkey denying staging rights to US forces and the 4ID mission consequently scrubbed, Viking was assigned the task of keeping Iraqi forces in the north from reinforcing Baghdad. The men of Viking began to look for other infiltration routes bypassing Turkish airspace. As the official Army Special Operations History account *All Roads Lead To Baghdad* succinctly explains, after Turkey denied permission 'CJSOTF-North transitioned from being a supporting element to being a supported command. Without a strong infantry presence in the north, it fell to the 10th SFG to organize the Kurdish Peshmerga and keep 13 Iraqi infantry and armoured divisions north of Baghdad busy' – a tall order for the lightly equipped Special Forces.

In late 2002 several covert teams of mixed 10th SFG and OGA ('Other Government Agency') personnel from the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) Special Activities Division (SAD) had been infiltrated into Kurdistan. They were based in the Harir Valley outside the Kurdish capital, Arbil, to develop 'ground truth' intelligence and organize and train the Peshmerga. These teams now paved the way for the eventual insertion of the Viking ODAs, in much the same way as had the CIA 'Jawbreaker' teams in Afghanistan in 2001.

The 10th SFG were not equipped with the Ground Mobility Vehicles (GMVs) of the 5th Group, and civilian vehicles therefore had to be procured. (Actually, 5th SFG had left many of their vehicles in Afghanistan with 3rd SFG, and consequently they had to embark on a hasty and extensive programme of refitting standard HMMWVs to GMV specifications before deployment). Some 230 Non Standard Tactical Vehicles (NTVs) – the majority white Land Rover Defenders, along with some 30 Toyota Tacomas – were purchased and modified to SF requirements. These vehicles had to be driven covertly from warehouses in Turkey, under continual petty interference from the Turkish authorities, until they finally crossed the border into Kurdish territory. However, when the first ground operations of the war began in the pre-dawn hours of 19 March 2003, Task Force Viking was still trying to find a way into northern Iraq.

TASK FORCE 20

Assigned to the western desert along with Dagger was another special operations element known as Task Force 20. TF-20 was based on the concept of Task Force 11/Task Force Sword in Afghanistan, and was structured around similar units primarily drawn from the Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC). TF-20 was commanded by MajGen Dell Dailey, a former commander of the 160th SOAR.

For Iraq, TF-20 was initially composed of C Sqn from 1st Special Forces Operational Detachment-Delta (1st SFOD-D), commonly known by their cover designation Combat Applications Group (CAG) or simply as Delta. Alongside the special operators of Delta were all three battalions of the 75th Ranger Regt; a battalion-strength element from the 82nd Airborne Div, serving both as a heavier infantry punch and a Quick Reaction Force (QRF); and a truck-mounted High Mobility Artillery Rocket System battery to provide mobile indirect fire. (Later in the campaign, another Delta squadron and even a company of Abrams MBTs were added to TF-20.) A squadron from the Naval Special Warfare Development Group (DEVGRU) also operated under TF-20, although their mission set was principally around heliborne direct action (DA) raids. OGA SAD operators worked alongside the TF-20 operators, as did members of Grey Fox, JSOC's intelligence-gathering unit – previously known as the Intelligence Support Activity, amongst numerous other code names. Dedicated aviation was provided by 1st Bn, 160th SOAR with their MH-60K Black Hawks, MH-60L Direct Action Penetrators and MH-6M transport and AH-6M gunship Little Birds.

TF-20 were covertly based at an airbase at Ar'ar in western Saudi Arabia; they were tasked with seizing key targets including airfields deep in Iraq, capturing high value targets, and providing long range special reconnaissance. One of the primary targets in pre-war planning was the seizure of Baghdad International Airport (BIAP), an operation for which two full scale dress rehearsals were carried out but which was never mounted; conventional forces eventually seized BIAP.



Two USAF Special Tactics personnel pass the debris of war. Under magnification, the left-hand airman can be seen to have an ACOG sight on his M4A1 and a Spyderco knife hanging from his chest rig, while his colleague has a sound-suppressed carbine mounting an M68 Aimpoint sight. (Courtesy USAFSOC)



The turret gunner in a US Army Special Forces Ground Mobility Vehicle (GMV) opens fire with his .50cal M2 heavy machine gun – note the empty cases falling. No other World War II-vintage weapon in the world is still in as widespread and satisfactory use as the apparently irreplaceable ‘big fifty’. (Courtesy USSOCOM)

NAVAL SPECIAL OPERATIONS TASK GROUP

More commonly known simply as the Naval Task Group (NTG), this was the fourth and final special operations task force. It was built around a core component of US Navy SEAL Teams 8 and 10; the Polish special operators of GROM (*Grupa Reagowania Operacyjno Mobilnego* or Operational Reserve Group); the British Royal Marines of 40 and 42 Commandos under the command of HQ 3 Commando Brigade, and a small element from M Sqn, SBS; and attached US Psyop and Civil Affairs teams.

The Naval Task Group was principally tasked with the capture of Umm Qasr, Iraq’s only deep-water port; the oil pipeline facilities of the Al Faw Peninsula; and the two off-shore platforms that these pipelines fed. Once these initial targets were secured, the NTG was tasked with supporting conventional forces in the south. Aviation was provided by both Marine Air of 15th MEU and the USAF’s 20th Special Operations Squadron.

FIRST SHOTS

First blood in OIF went to the aviators of the 160th SOAR. A flight of two MH-60L DAPs and four ‘Black Swarm’ flights – each comprising a pair of AH-6 armed Little Birds and an MH-6 equipped with FLIR (Forward Looking Infrared Radar) to identify and laser the targets for the AH-6s. Additionally, each Black Swarm was assigned a pair of A-10s to deliver Maverick ATGMs against any hardened targets the AH-6s couldn’t handle with their .50cal MGs and 2.75in rockets.

At 21:00 local on 19 March, the DAPs and Little Bird flights engaged their first targets – Iraqi visual observation posts along the country’s western and southern borders. The DAPs engaged their targets with Hellfire ATGMs and followed up with bursts from their 30mm cannons. The Black Swarm teams relied on their MH-6 flight leads, who guided in the strikes or called in the orbiting A-10s. In the space of seven hours of darkness, 70-plus sites were destroyed, effectively depriving the Iraqi military of any early warning mechanism.

As the sites were eliminated, air corridors were opened and the first heliborne SOF teams were launched from H-5 in Jordan, including vehicle-mounted patrols from the British and Australian SOF components transported by the MH-47Ds of 3/160th. In the early morning hours, ground teams from Dagger, Task Force 20 and Coalition SOF breached the sand-berms along the borders with Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait and drove into Iraq.

‘Ugly Baby’

For TF Viking, the delay in infiltrating all of its ODAs into theatre was becoming increasingly frustrating. Planners finally developed a punishing route from 10th SFG’s forward staging area in Constanta, Romania, to northern Iraq via two undisclosed countries, and this was code-named Ugly Baby – allegedly from a flippant description of the air route by an SF officer.

22 March saw this epic lift completed, with the majority of 2nd and 3rd Bns landing near Arbil on board six MC-130H Combat Talons. The



This US Army Special Forces operator carries an M4A1 mounted with an EOTech holographic sight, the PEQ-2 IR illuminator and a Surefire tactical flashlight. He wears a Peltor communications headset and issue Oakley A-frame ballistic sunglasses. Just visible on the lower front of his Eagle plate-carrier, in the shadow below his weapon, are numerous pistol magazines for a 9mm sidearm. (Courtesy US Air Force; photo Staff Sgt Shawn Weismiller)

lift was not without its perils; several MC-130s were engaged by Iraqi air defence, and one airframe was sufficiently damaged by AA fire to make an emergency landing at – ironically enough – Incirlik Air Base in Turkey.

The initial lift had deployed a total of 19 ODAs and four ODBs from 10th SFG into northern Iraq. On 23 March, Turkey allowed over-flights, and three final MC-130s flew in to Bashur outside the Kurdish capital of Erbil to reinforce the new arrivals. Eventually TF Viking numbered 51 ODAs and ODBs, alongside some 60,000 Kurdish Peshmerga militia of the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). The SF had to make do with locally procured civilian transport as the first of their NSVs were still several days away. On 26 March the 173rd Abn Bde conducted a successful combat jump from C-17s into Bashur airfield, which was already secured by SF and Peshmerga; the 173rd were assigned the task of securing the Kirkuk oilfields.

Viking deployed initially to the Green Line, a north/south demarcation of the boundary of Kurdish territory. Their initial objectives were threefold: to prevent the reinforcement of Baghdad by tying up the estimated 13 Iraqi Army divisions operating in the north; to advance on the cities of Kirkuk and Mosul; and to carry out a DA operation against an Ansar al Islam terrorist training camp along the border with Iran – this to be known as Operation 'Viking Hammer'. Ansar al Islam was a Sunni terrorist group which counted among its founding members Abu Musab al Zarqawi, a Jordanian international terrorist who would later rise to prominence as the self-appointed head of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). According to surveillance, around 700 Ansar members inhabited the valley, along with a Kurdish splinter faction. They had developed prepared defensive positions, including anti-aircraft machine guns, and maintained a facility where intelligence suspected biological or chemical agents may have been developed or stored.

'Viking Hammer'

The operation was scheduled to launch on 21 March, but the ground component was set back by several days due to the issues around infiltrating the majority of 3rd Bn, 10th SFG into the country. A Tomahawk TLAM cruise missile strike was set for midnight on the 21st as a preparatory barrage, and the strike could not be delayed because of the high tempo of operations elsewhere in theatre. In the early hours, 64 Tomahawks struck the Ansar al Islam camp and surrounding sites, while SF members maintained surveillance to carry out a bomb damage assessment (BDA).

The ground attack was finally launched on 28 March with a six-pronged advance into the valley, each prong being composed of several ODAs from the 3rd Bn and upwards of 1,000 Peshmerga fighters. The main advance set off toward Sargat, the location of the suspected chemical/biological site, but became pinned down by 12.7mm heavy machine gun fire from the surrounding hills. A pair of Navy F/A-18s responded to an urgent CAS request and delivered two 500lb JDAMs against the Ansar machine gun nests; the pilots then obligingly strafed the positions with 20mm cannon before exiting the valley, low on fuel. The advance resumed, only to be halted repeatedly by hidden DShK and

PKM positions. ODA 081 deployed a Mk19 automatic grenade launcher (AGL) from an NSV and suppressed the gun positions, allowing the PUK to assault and wipe out the Ansar defenders. The PUK captured the town of Gulp and attacked their primary target, the village of Sargat, which was heavily defended by fortified fighting positions, DShKs and mortars along with several BM-21 MLRS firing in support. Unable to call in 'fast air' (jet CAS) due to the location of the PUK, the ODAs used a dismounted .50cal M2 to suppress the entrenched Ansar; this allowed the Peshmerga to bring up their own mortars and BM-21s, which eventually forced the Ansar to retreat.

TF Viking advanced to secure the Daramar Gorge, which was surrounded by caves in the rock walls. The Peshmerga were again engaged by small arms and RPG fire, which they and the ODAs enthusiastically returned with .50 and 40mm grenades; however, it soon became obvious that they could advance no further without air support. Covering their withdrawal again with the dismounted .50cal, the ODAs called in fast air, and six 500lb JDAMs shut down any further resistance. During the night of the 28/29th four AC-130 gunships maintained the pressure on the retreating Ansar as they moved toward the Iranian border. On the 29th, TF Viking seized the high ground and pushed through the valley, killing small pockets of diehards. With 'Viking Hammer' successfully completed, 3rd Bn and their Peshmerga returned to the Green Line to assist in the push on Kirkuk and Mosul.

A specialist SSE (Sensitive Site Exploitation) team was brought in to document the finds at Sargat. The team recovered traces of several chemicals including Ricin, along with stocks of NBC suits, atropine injectors (used to counteract the effects of chemical weapon exposure), and Arabic-language manuals on chemical weapons and IED construction. Examination of the bodies at the site showed many of the Ansar al Islam to be foreign fighters from a variety of countries. Estimates of enemy dead numbered over 300; 22 Peshmerga had been killed, with no US losses.

The US Army's 75th Ranger Regiment typically provides Quick Reaction Force support for SF operations, but in April 2003 elements were committed to the initial assault of the Hadithah dam complex on the Euphrates River in western Iraq. This Ranger aims the 84mm M3 Carl Gustav anti-tank rocket launcher, the latest series model of a venerable but powerful support weapon for infantry. (Courtesy US Army Ranger Regt/USSOCOM)



Ayn Sifni

TF Viking regrouped before launching an operation to seize the town of Ayn Sifni, which straddles the main highway into Mosul and was thus of strategic importance. Following the lead from their brother teams in the west, the 10th and 3rd SFG ODAs called in fast air on the Iraqi garrison, resulting in many retreating. By 5 April there appeared to be only two Iraqi platoons left in Ayn Sifni. On the 6th, the attack was launched with three ODAs – 051, 055 and 056. 051 would lead the actual assault with some 300 Peshmerga, while 055 and 056 would act as fire support groups (FSG) along with Peshmerga heavy weapons teams. As 051 advanced toward the village they came under intense fire – the ‘two platoons’ of defenders turned out to be closer to battalion strength, and equipped with 82mm mortars, AAA guns and even an artillery piece. After four hours of air support and fire from the two FSGs, the assault elements finally entered Ayn Sifni. Soon afterwards an Iraqi infantry counter-attack supported by several mortars attempted to retake the town, but was beaten back by 051 and the Kurds. On the same day, south-east of Ayn Sifni, another action was occurring which would go down in Special Forces history – the battle of the Debecka crossroads.

Two Australian soldiers of 4RAR (Commando) patrol through the recently captured Al Assad airbase. They wear Australian DPDU uniforms (see Plate C1) and carry M4A1 carbines, known in Australian service as the M4A5. The left-hand operator's weapon mounts a 40mm M203 grenade-launcher and the ELCAN M145 sight. (Courtesy ADF)



The battle of the Debecka crossroads

The Debecka crossroads cut both the main roads leading to Kirkuk and Mosul, and seizing the road junction would effectively eliminate Iraqi capabilities to reinforce the north. Overlooking this strategic crossroads was the Zurqah Ziraw Dagh ridge, which was occupied by Iraqi forces protecting the crossroads.



Australian Special Air Service Regiment operators conduct a rendezvous somewhere in the western desert of Iraq in their LRPV and RSV Land Rovers. The nearest LRPV mounts both a Mk19 automatic grenade-launcher and an FN-MAG 58 GPMG; a Javelin ATGM is also strapped down on the rear deck. The other wagons are armed with a mix of Mk19s and M2s along with passenger-operated GPMGs. (Courtesy ADF)

The operation commenced with B-52 strikes against the Iraqi defenders on the ridge. In the wake of the bombing, ODA 044 with 150 Peshmerga advanced toward Objective Rock, a T-junction leading to the crossroads and to the town of Debecka itself. Supporting 044 were two 3rd SFG ODAs – 391 and 392 – providing fire support from their GMVs. To their north, two groups of Peshmerga fighters, some 500 strong in all, advanced on the ridgeline. Further north, ODA 043 – again with 150 Kurds, and with ODAs 394 and 395 acting as FSGs – attacked Objective Stone, a commanding hilltop occupied by Iraqi forces.

The central columns of Peshmerga reached their objectives first, and ran into only token resistance, successfully seizing their sector of the ridgeline. ODAs 394 and 395 began suppressing the defenders of Objective Stone after a scheduled airstrike failed to soften up the defences (only four JDAMs were dropped, and only one hit). The two ODAs were engaged by DShK and 120mm mortar fire, and due to the poor results of the air strike 043's Peshmerga refused to move forward. 043 finally managed to procure additional CAS, which covered the withdrawal of the fire-support ODAs back out of mortar range and suppressed Stone's defenders. ODAs 394 and 395 quickly re-supplied from the FOB and raced forward once again, but were not yet in place when 043 and their Peshmerga closed on the objective. Thankfully, the SF and the militia speedily routed the Iraqis and captured the hilltop.

To the south, ODAs 044, 391 and 392 ran into a dirt berm that the Iraqis had built across the road toward Objective Rock, with mines scattered over the roadway. While the Peshmerga attempted to clear the mines, the ODAs went cross-country to bypass the roadblock. As the

teams crested the ridge they contacted Iraqi infantry in prepared positions and bunkers, who soon surrendered under the guns of the GMVs. One of the prisoners, an Iraqi colonel, related that an armoured unit that had been supporting them had withdrawn to the south. The teams returned to breach the dirt berm on the road behind them with demolitions in case a hasty retreat was required, and moved up onto a ridge (known later as Press Hill) overlooking the concealed southern approach. The ODAs then advanced down to the Debecka crossroads; 392 pursued several 60mm mortar teams at the edge of Debecka until they were engaged at long range by a ZSU-57-2, while 391 destroyed with Javelin ATGM and .50cal fire several trucks and 'technicals' (armed pickups) heading from Debecka.

Soon afterwards, the ODAs saw several Iraqi MTLB APCs appear out of the haze, moving toward the crossroads and using smoke generators to lay down a smoke screen behind them. Engaging with the .50s and Mk19s on their GMVs in an attempt to suppress them, the SF raced to ready their Javelins. At that moment, four Iraqi T-55 MBTs pulled out from behind the MTLBs' smoke screen, which had been cannily used to cover their approach.

The T-55s began firing their 100mm main guns directly at the ODAs. Abandoning a plan to engage with Javelins, since the Command Launch Units (CLU) required too long to warm up, the ODAs mounted their GMVs and pulled back to a ridgeline some 900 metres from the crossroads, which they quickly dubbed 'Alamo' – in SOF parlance, a site for a last-ditch defence while awaiting reinforcement. The ODAs quickly requested air, only to be told it would take 30 minutes to arrive. They began killing MTLBs with their Javelins; they soon ran low on rounds, but the onslaught of missiles temporarily halted the Iraqi armoured attack and bought the SF time. The T-55s used the cover of a berm to approach the crossroads, effectively shielding them from a 'lock on' from the Javelins.

Finally, some 35 minutes after the initial TIC (troops in contact) request was made, two Navy F-14s arrived. After the SOF talked in the first bombing run on the T-55s, the unthinkable happened: the first 2,000lb bomb was dropped amongst friendly forces, including the AOB now located back at Objective Rock. The pilot had somehow become confused and targeted the rusted hulk of an old T-55 at Rock rather than the four tanks engaging the ODAs. The bomb killed a dozen Peshmerga, and wounded both the four AOB members and a BBC camera crew accompanying the Peshmerga; veteran BBC correspondent John Simpson was among those injured. A half-team from 391 immediately drove to the scene and began treating casualties.

The rest of the ODAs were forced to pull back from Alamo to Press Hill as Iraqi artillery began to bracket them. One of the ODA members managed to destroy with a Javelin a T-55 that attempted to advance toward them; F/A-18s arrived and soon drove off the remaining armour. With the battle over, the results were tallied: 26 Army SF had managed to blunt an attack by a reinforced company of Iraqi mechanized infantry in APCs, supported by a platoon of tanks and artillery. Ironically, a day after the battle, Task Force 1-63 Armor arrived in Arbil with its company of M1A1 MBTs and Bradley IFVs – a force that would have been ideally suited to assist at Debecka.

The fall of Kirkuk and Mosul

The Peshmerga and the nine ODAs from FOB 103 encircled Kirkuk on 9 April, after fierce fighting to capture ridges overlooking the approaches to the city. The earlier capture of the nearby city of Tuz had broken the will of the Iraqi Army, and primarily only *fedeyeen* (militiamen) remained in Kirkuk. The first ODA units entered the city on 10 April, to a Normandy-like reception from the Kurdish inhabitants. By 18 April the 173rd Abn Bde had taken over responsibility for Kirkuk and the city was firmly in Coalition hands.

A day after the first teams entered Kirkuk, an advance element from FOB 102 numbering no fewer than 30 operators – including the 2nd Bn commander himself – drove unopposed through abandoned Iraqi lines and into Mosul; this advance followed several days of heavy airstrikes on three Iraqi divisions defending the city. On 13 April the 3rd Bn of 3rd SFG, a battalion from the 10th Mountain and the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit (who had infiltrated into Arbil only days earlier) were ordered into Mosul to take over responsibility from the 10th SFG and their loyal Peshmerga.

'Sprint'

In the west, Bravo and Charlie Companies of 1st Bn, 5th SFG crossed the Kuwaiti border with ODA 531 using breaching demolition charges to clear a path through the berms for its War Pigs and GMVs. Charlie's seven ODAs, in some 35 vehicles, took to the south-eastern half of the western desert, heading toward the towns of Nukyab, Habbariya and Mudyasis. ODA 534 headed for the area surrounding Nukyab to search for SCUD launch sites. Bravo set out for the central western town of Ar Rutba and the Iraqi airbase west of it, code-named H-3, with six ODAs and an ODB in the resupply War Pigs. ODAs 523 and 524 searched a suspected SCUD storage facility, while ODAs 521 and 525 were tasked with clearing several abandoned airfields. With no sign of SCUDs, ODA

Men of 4RAR pass a camouflage-netted Iraqi Air Force jet fighter, one of about 50 aircraft captured on Al Assad airbase. (Courtesy ADF)



525 was re-tasked on 21 March with deploying an SR team to conduct surveillance on the town of Ar Rutba itself. A two-man SR was inserted onto a hill overlooking the town, and almost immediately called in a pair of nearby F-16s to destroy a radar facility they identified.

ODA 525 had deployed a second SR covering the two highways leading to Ar Rutba; this team was soon compromised by Bedouins who reported their location to the Ar Rutba garrison. A pickup truck leading four technicals, each mounting a DShK and carrying members of the Saddam Fedeyeen, appeared looking for the SR team. The SF soldiers pulled out in their GMVs, quickly using the FalconView mapping software on their Toshiba Toughbook laptops to establish a hasty ambush. As the fedeyeen drove into range they were engaged by the M2 .50cal and Mk19 40mm AGL mounted on the GMVs, and retreated rapidly. Quickly realizing that the hilltop SR team could be compromised and overrun, the ODA 525 GMVs attempted to exfiltrate them; but before they could, Iraqi vehicles began driving out of Ar Rutba, pulled into prepared defensive positions around the south-west of the city, and then began advancing up the hill. The ODA team leader recognized the danger and broadcast the emergency brevity code 'Sprint' on the Guard Net emergency channel, which is heard by all nearby Coalition aircraft. The brevity code is only used when friendly ground callsigns are in imminent danger of being overrun, and it is not used lightly. An AWACS immediately responded and an urgent request was made for CAS.

While the ODA awaited the arrival of the fast air, the SR team began taking out individuals among the fedeyeen force at the base of the hill with their sound-suppressed Mk12 sniper rifle. The team leader meanwhile managed to contact 521, which was clearing suspect sites east of Ar Rutba, and they raced to reinforce 525. Within minutes, the first F-16Cs swooped in and engaged the enemy vehicles. The response to the brevity code emergency call was heartening. Speaking directly with the AWACS, the ODA's attached ETAC (Enlisted Terminal Attack Controller) stacked arriving fast air as it arrived. He then assigned flights, which were called in to their targets by the SR team, with one man operating the MBITR (Multi Band Inter Team Radio) and the other firing the Mk12. At one point there were as many as four flights stacked – so many that mid-air refuelling was needed. Finally, after four hours of punishing air strikes on the fedeyeen, the eight GMVs of 525 and 521 managed to extract the SR team under the air cover of a B1B bomber, which shadowed them back to ODB 520's location in a dry wadi bed south of Ar Rutba. Conservative BDA pointed to over 100 fedeyeen killed.

The other ODAs had also had their hands full. A fedeyeen convoy attempting to flank 525 ran into the weapons systems of 524's GMVs. In the resulting three-hour contact, four technicals were destroyed and 524 repelled an assault by a company of infantry, with 525 vectoring fast air to 524 as and when required. To the west, ODA 523 had moved to reinforce 524 but ran into a pair of technicals on the highway, which they engaged and destroyed with the GMVs and small arms; 523 ceased fire as a civilian station wagon packed with Iraqi children drove – incredibly – straight through the middle of the action. 522 had identified two fedeyeen technicals proceeding down the highway toward 523 and set a hasty vehicular ambush that caught the Iraqi militia unawares; both technicals were disabled and 15 fedeyeen were killed.

H-3

The intent of the ODAs was to shut down the main supply routes and to secure sites around Ar Rutba and the strategically important H-3 airfield, before slowly tightening the noose around both. H-3 appeared to be defended by around a battalion of Iraqi troops and significant amounts of both mobile and static AA firepower. From 24 March the surrounding ODAs (and elements from Task Force 20, the UK Task Force 7 and Australian Task Force 64, who supported the operation) called in a solid 24 hours of precision airstrikes on H-3, using their SOFLAM laser designators. The bombardment seemed to do the trick: on the 25th, two long columns of military vehicles left H-3 at speed, heading east toward Baghdad during a respite in the bombing. ODA 521 managed to set an ambush and destroyed the lead vehicle in the first convoy, a truck-mounted ZPU-23, with a Javelin shot. With the convoy halted in disarray, 521 made an urgent call for fast air, but as luck would have it a sudden sandstorm swept across the desert, forcing an abandonment of the CAS; under cover of the sandstorm, the convoys scattered and escaped in all directions.

Airfield H-3 now looked unoccupied, and on 27 March, Bravo Co and the Coalition SOF patrols moved in. They found a French Roland SAM, around 80 assorted AA guns including a ZSU-23-4, SA-7 MANPAD SAMs, and an enormous amount of ammunition. H-3 became Bravo's patrol base, with ODAs returning for resupply delivered by C-130s and MH-47s. ODA 581 captured the Iraqi three-star general formerly in command of H-3, trying to escape dressed in civilian clothes in the back of a taxi. He was quickly secured and flown out by a 160th SOAR MH-6 for further interrogation. Additionally, 523 discovered chemical weapons samples in a lab on H-3.

Ar Rutba

Bravo's attention soon turned to Ar Rutba itself. SIGINT efforts by the attached SOT-A (Support Operations Team-Alpha), along with the development of an informer network among both the Bedouin and Ar Rutba residents, indicated that around 800 fedeyeen were in the city. Most of those who still patrolled outside the city were engaged by the ODAs and taken prisoner. The noose was tightened as the ODAs guided in precision CAS against AA positions around the city, and struck fedeyeen sites with Javelin, leading the Iraqis to suspect that a much larger force was encircling the city. On 8 April all nine ODAs secured the main roads into Ar Rutba and commenced a day of near-continuous air strikes by fast air and Apache gunships. A delegation of civilians eventually approached the Americans pleading for the bombardment to stop; the 5th SFG struck a deal with the residents, and next day, at 06:00 local, Bravo Company entered the city.

Not a round was fired as the GMVs drove in under the shadows of a B-52 and a pair of F-16s conducting Show of Force runs over the city. The majority of the militiamen had fled, and those that remained were attempting to blend back in with the population. The ODB quickly coordinated with the civilian leadership, and a new mayor was elected. The Special Forces men allowed Baathists to hold local government positions if they signed documents disavowing their former affiliations. The ODAs lent local traders their satellite phones to allow them to order



SASR troopers guarding an entrance to Al Assad airbase in a Perentie LRPV. Note that an EOTech 551 sight has been mounted to the receiver of the .50cal M2. A subdued Australian flag patch is just visible Velcro'd to the gunner's left shoulder. (Courtesy ADF)

goods from Jordan, and within days the markets were thriving again; 60 per cent of the electricity grid was operational, the water supply was repaired, and living conditions were actually measurably better than under Saddam. It was a remarkably effective 'Hearts and Minds' effort, and should have been the model for the rest of the country. Unfortunately – as the world knows too well – it wasn't.

Bravo continued operations in the region based on Ar Rutba. ODAs 521 and 525 stopped several buses carrying foreign fighters from Syria, who were disarmed and sent back, with a warning that if they returned they would be killed. In early May the teams were relieved in place by the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment (3ACR).

Karbala

Another key operation undertaken by the 5th SFG was the infiltration of ODA 551 on a strategic SR to provide 'eyes on' intelligence on the Karbala Gap. This SR became legendary as one of the longest in the SF's history; it was also of strategic importance, since conventional forces – in this case the 3ID – would have to pass through the gap to reach Baghdad. The gap was some 8km wide, and lay between Lake Razzaza and Karbala itself, an ideal site for Saddam to ambush the Coalition. Intelligence suggested that it would also be the logical choice for a chemical or biological weapons strike by Saddam's forces.

On the night of 19 March, ODA 551 was flown in under a 300-foot ceiling because of the air campaign raging above them. CNN had inadvertently compromised the op the night before, screening a retired US general pointing out the significance of the gap and the need for an

SF team to be inserted there to gather intelligence. 551 infiltrated in three MH-47Ds from 3/160th with a pair of MH-60L DAPs flying shotgun. When they arrived, after driving for most of the night, they conducted an environmental recce and decided to park their vehicles in a seemingly disused quarry while they established covert OPs looking down into the Gap. To their surprise they found the area did not contain the massed Iraqi armour that intelligence had claimed, but only a small Iraqi Army garrison and local fedeyeen.

The team wore their MOPP suits initially, fearful of being 'slimed' if the chemical weapons intelligence proved correct, but took them off after seeing civilians moving about the area. Fedeyeen patrolled regularly and came to within 400m of their position, but never discovered them. On 26 March, Apaches of the 11th Attack Helicopter Regt probed around Karbala in advance of the 3ID, which had been delayed by a sandstorm. One of the Apaches was (famously) shot down by a farmer with a bolt-action rifle on the far side of Karbala – unfortunately, too far away for 551 to assist. Reconnaissance units of 3ID began arriving on 28 March, and 551 was eventually exfiltrated on the 30th. The ODA later discovered from captured Iraqis that the CNN report had been seen and acted upon – the militia had been actively searching for them. A second surprise was the reason Iraqi forces had not entered the quarry – it was apparently a firing range for Iraqi artillery, and was littered with unexploded ordnance ...

Basra and Najaf

In the south, 2nd Bn of the 5th SFG was given two key tasks: Charlie Company would support the Marines and the UK Battle Group around Basra, while Bravo would work targets around Najaf. ODA 554 crossed the border on 21 March with the USMC, tasked with supporting the seizure of the Rumaylah oilfields which would later be secured by UK forces. A half-team from 554 drove to the outskirts of Basra to pick up four Iraqi oil industry technicians who had earlier been recruited by the OGA to assist in safeguarding the oilfields. The half-team successfully contacted the technicians, who were passed to the Marines, and 554 rejoined the other half of their team after several gunfights with fedeyeen.

Their new mission was to infiltrate undercover with an OGA-recruited local sheikh to assist the UK forces in identifying targets around Basra, during which task they encountered a surprising amount of resistance from militia in the city. ODA 554 ran an informer network, with the sheikh's assistance and supported by a hand-held mini-UAV called the AeroVironment Pointer; they eventually assisted the British in rounding up some 170 fedeyeen and Baathist leadership targets in and around Basra.

ODA 544 was infiltrated into Wadi al Khirr airfield by MC-130 and drove the 80km to Najaf. Upon arrival they began setting up temporary VCPs (Vehicle Check Points) to gather local intelligence. (They were not the first ODA into Najaf; 572 had accidentally driven into the city after being given an incorrect grid reference, but quickly withdrew under mortar fire). Once targets were identified, 544 would call in fast air to destroy them. The 3ID had bypassed Najaf on its way to Karbala, and 544 linked up with the follow-on forces, Gen Petraeus's 101st Airborne Division, who entered the city on 30 March.

An Australian SASR operator guarding the Al Assad perimeter as a C-130 lands bringing in a 4RAR relief force; his M4 mounts a KAC M4 QD suppressor. Unusually, he appears to wear a commercially produced chest rig in British desert DPM pattern. Note the distinctively Australian short-brimmed 'Giggle' bush hat. (Courtesy ADF)



The 101ABN secured the city, leaving a brigade to clear up militia and Baath Party remnants; ODA 544 assisted by setting up a local security force to act as de facto police, and worked on developing a local civilian government. They ran into a character whose name would later become synonymous with violence in the south – Moqtada al Sadr, who organized the killing of a moderate cleric supported by the ODA. Meanwhile, ODA 563 worked in support of the USMC around Diwaniyah. Again working with local sheikhs and their militias, and supported by Marine Air, 563 managed to capture a whole city by itself – Qwam al Hamza. The next day 563, their local sheikhs' militiamen and a Marine Force Recon team captured the bridge leading to Diwaniyah. The sheikhs' militias entered the city to pinpoint enemy positions, which were then engaged by Marine Air using 500lb JDAMs to limit collateral damage. The surgical bombing worked, and the Iraqi Army and fedeyeen withdrew from the city toward Baghdad, chased by Marine aviators all the way.

ODA 563 then went into reconstruction mode – setting up a police service, restoring 80 per cent of the city's electricity within a fortnight, reopening schools and hospitals, and even foiling a bank robbery. ODA 563's efforts in Diwaniyah were the fastest return of civil services anywhere in Iraq – again, a template that should have been followed.

Nasiriyah

ODA 553 attempted to infiltrate into Nasiriyah, but west of the city the left front tyre of their MH-53J struck a sand dune, flipping the helicopter. A CSAR team landed and recovered the team members, several of whom were injured, before placing charges to destroy the stricken bird. The CSAR then ferried 553 back to Kuwait, where they reconfigured their loads; they later successfully inserted to conduct an SR on the bridges leading into Nasiriyah. They had several contacts with fedeyeen before linking up with and escorting Army and Marine units into the city. They then went to work setting up an informer network and operating undercover to track local Baathists and fedeyeen, gradually building up a comprehensive intelligence picture. ODAs 565,

546, 543 and 542 were busy training the so-called Free Iraqi Forces, who had been ferried into Kurdistan and flown into the recently captured Tallil airfield outside Nasiriyah. The results were mixed; some units performed well, but others proved a liability.

TASK FORCE 7 & TASK FORCE 64

On 18 March, B and D Sqns of 22SAS infiltrated by both ground and air, heading for H-2 and H-3 airbases along with 1 Sqn, SASR. (G Squadron, 22SAS later deployed in support of the British Battle Group, replacing ODA 554, who had a strained relationship with UK forces.)

The patrols set up covert OPs around the airbases and called in fast air, which cleaned up the minimal Iraqi resistance. The SAS squadrons drove straight onto H-2 virtually unopposed, and Rangers and 45 Cdo RM flew in from Jordan to secure the sites. Handing over to the follow-on forces, the UKSF and SASR elements moved on to their next task – interdiction of the two main highways linking Baghdad with Syria and Jordan. Meanwhile C Sqn, SBS was operating further north near Mosul.

Other SASR patrols were hunting SCUDs. On 22 March a SCUD command and control site was raided by two troop-strength patrols; as the surprised Iraqis withdrew under fire from the SASR LRPVs, one escaping truck was disabled while a second escaped on fire. The facility, which proved to be the principal communications node for all Iraqi forces in the western desert, was destroyed by fast air. A second communications site was raided successfully, although Iraqi Special Forces in technicals – evidently a QRF monitoring the site – arrived soon afterwards and engaged the SASR patrol with DShK and RPG fire. The Australians returned fire, and the battle was at an impasse until the Iraqis attempted to flank the patrol. One of the flanking technicals was successfully destroyed by Javelin ATGM – its first combat use by the Australians – which saw the Iraqis hastily retreat back to the communications facility the SASR had just raided. As an Iraqi mortar team attempted to set up, and a truck full of reinforcements arrived, the attached CCT called in a nearby A-10 which soon ended hostilities.

Around 24 March, six SASR operators in two LRPVs were carrying out a mounted SR near the border with Jordan when they were confronted by an Iraqi force of infantry supported by two armed technicals. The Australians suppressed the infantry with their .50cals and 40mm AGLs, and again destroyed the technicals with Javelin ATGM. An estimated dozen Iraqis were killed in this action. By the end of March, a half-squadron mobility patrol were 80km kilometres from Baghdad and closing.

On 9 April the Australians were moving toward Al Assad airbase, 200km north-west of Baghdad. South of the airfield was a concrete production facility which the SASR soon learned was defended by some 40 troops along with civilian workers. Wanting to avoid any civilian casualties, the SASR commander blocked off all exits and requested an orbiting Navy F-14 to carry out a Show of Force pass by breaking the sound barrier over the Iraqis; this quickly convinced the garrison to surrender. The SASR used similar tactics to capture Al Asad itself; using their SR-25 rifles, they dropped rounds close to Iraqi soldiers and

destroyed defensive positions with precision air strikes from RAAF F/A-18s. Once the Australians had occupied the control tower they engaged in several contacts both with remnants of the garrison force and with looters. By 16 April the SASR were reinforced by their QRF company from 4RAR, and were clearing the base and securing the 50-odd Iraqi jet aircraft and helicopters they had captured there.

In early April around Mosul, a mobility patrol of the SBS ran into one of the anti-SF units Saddam had deployed in the hope of ambushing an SF unit. This time the Iraqis got lucky: the contact developed into a running six-hour contact that ended in a hot extraction by RAF Chinooks. The extraction left a Land Rover DPV, a Polaris ATV and a dirt bike in Iraqi hands; the vehicles plus various pieces of equipment, allegedly including a Stinger SAM, were paraded in front of Arab media. Also left behind were two SBS operators who had become separated from the main body during the contact; the pair fell back on their extensive training, and walked over 160km to cross the Syrian border. They were arrested and held by Syrian authorities until a personal delegation from then-Prime Minister Tony Blair secured their release. The 'blowback' from this action was extensive, with the SBS squadron commander immediately replaced. 'The OC was sacked and replaced by a Blade [22SAS] on the orders of DSF (Director Special Forces),' explained a UKSF source; 'I understand it was [a question of] crap command and a few sprogs [less experienced men] panicking – pure and simple.'

UMM QASR

The Naval Task Group launched their operations on the night of 20 March. Two offshore platforms for loading oil tankers were amongst their initial targets: the Mina al Bakr Oil Terminal (MABOT) would be seized by SEALs from SEAL Teams 8 and 10, while the Khor al Amaya Oil Terminal (KAAOT) was assigned to Poland's special operations unit, the GROM. SEALs from the SDV teams had successfully carried out a covert reconnaissance of both sites several days earlier using the Mk8 mini-submersible. The MABOT platform was hit by a total of 31 SEALs, two Navy EOD in case the rig was wired for demolition, an STS CCT and several interpreters. A similar number of GROM struck the offshore KAAOT platform. Both objectives were quickly seized with zero resistance, although explosives were found by the GROM operators.

The shore-based pumping stations for each platform at Umm Qasr and Al Faw were also seized by a mixed unit of SEALs and British Royal Marines. The operation was tragically delayed by the crash of a USMC CH-46 Sea Knight as it launched from Kuwait carrying seven members of 3 Cdo Bde Reconnaissance Force and a member of 29 Cdo Regt Royal Artillery; all were killed, along with four USMC aviators.

The Umm Qasr site was prepared by an AC-130 strike, and A-10s engaged a nearby SAM installation and a responding Iraqi mechanized unit before the SEALs and Royal Marines landed. They cleared two Iraqi bunkers, killing several Iraqi soldiers, with the SEALs securing the facility itself and the commandos establishing a defensive cordon; the attached CCT called in an A-10 to engage an Iraqi Army vehicle that



approached the site. Royal Marines and SEALs also infiltrated into the Al Faw pumping station, quickly seizing the site after engaging and destroying an Iraqi Army truck-mounted QRF. Members of 40 and 42 Cdos RM were flown in to secure the sites.

Other NTG operations included elements of three SEAL platoons in GMVs and their distinctive 'dune buggy' DPVs seizing the Al Zubayr metering station, while the IMEF attacked through the Rumaylah oilfields north of Al Faw. Captain Robert Harward, a SEAL who had commanded Task Force K-Bar in Afghanistan, commented that there were more SEALs deployed during the invasion than at any one time during the Vietnam War.

Another NTG operation was the seizure of the Mukarayin dam, 92km north-east of Baghdad, to prevent any opportunity for Iraqi forces to flood the capital as Coalition forces entered. Six MH-53Js were earmarked for the infiltration; the lead bird carried the command and control element along with six SEAL snipers; the second carried 20 SEALs and two attached EOD operators; the third carried 35 GROM; the fourth and fifth carried a DPV each with a SEAL element, and the sixth was the dedicated CSAR bird. The lead Pave Low touched down on the roof of a three-storey power generator building and the snipers deployed as overwatch. The GROM and SEAL assault elements fast-roped to the ground, with one Polish operator breaking a leg. The DPVs were dropped off at either end of the dam, one supported by six SEALs and the other with four; with their mounted .50cal M2s and M240Gs, the buggies took up defensive positions covering the access roads to the dam. The combined SEAL and GROM unit held the dam for five days until relieved by the IMEF.

The SEALs and GROM continued their highly successful partnership throughout the rest of the invasion phase, with raids and anti-sniper operations in Baghdad. SEALs and Special Boat Service teams also secured the waterways around Umm Qasr; they were also involved in VBSS missions to seize Iraqi craft carrying seaborne mines, a task in which they were assisted by the 'Bubblics' of RAN Clearance Diving Team 3.

Polish GROM operators secure Umm Qasr, wearing a mixture of Polish woodland pattern BDUs, flight suits and black CT dress (see Plate D2); under magnification the central operator can be seen to carry a breaching shotgun slung over his back. (Courtesy US Navy; photo Photographer's Mate 1st Class Arlo K. Abrahamson)

TASK FORCE 20

On 19 March the men of C Sqn, 1st SFOD-Delta attached to TF-20 became the first US SOF unit to enter Iraq, as they rolled across the border from Ar'ar in western Saudi Arabia in some 15 Pinzgauer 6x6 special operations vehicles (SOV) and several armed NSVs. Accompanying the squadron of operators were Special Tactics CCTs, an intelligence team, several K-9 teams and a pair of American Iraqis serving as interpreters. Delta was tasked with conducting selected high priority SSEs on suspected chemical weapon facilities, before heading for the Haditha dam complex. Along the way, Delta supported the 5th Group ODAs and Coalition SOF at Ar Rutba, and in seizing the H-3 airfield. Meanwhile, on 24 March, Rangers from 3rd Bn conducted a combat drop into H-1 airfield located between Haditha and Ar Rutba, securing the site as a staging area for operations in the west.

For several nights, operators drove through Iraqi lines around Haditha dam on their custom 'stealth' ATVs, marking targets for Coalition fast air; this resulted in the destruction of a large number of armoured vehicles and anti-aircraft systems. Delta's SR of the dam indicated that a much bigger force would be needed to seize it, and a request was made and approved for a second Delta squadron from Fort Bragg to be dispatched along with a battalion of Rangers and a company of M1A1 Abrams MBTs from C Co, 2/70th Armor. The tanks, soon to be termed 'Team Tank', were flown in C-17s from Tallil to H-1 and on to Mission Support Site Grizzly, a desert strip established by Delta located between the dam and Tikrit. The additional Delta squadron – remarkably – flew directly into Grizzly from the US.

The evening of 1 April saw the Delta squadron and 3/75th Rangers conduct a ground assault in Pinzgauers and GMVs against the Haditha dam complex. Supported by a pair of AH-6Ms, they seized the dam's main administrative buildings with little initial opposition. Soon after daybreak a Ranger sniper killed three Iraqis with RPGs on the western side of the dam, and Rangers on the eastern side engaged a truck carrying infantry, which led to an hour-long contact. South of the dam itself, another Ranger platoon was busy securing the power station and electricity transformer, while yet another established blocking positions on the main road into the Haditha complex. The blocking positions came under mortar fire, resulting in the AH-6s flying multiple gun runs to silence the mortars; when another mortar opened fire from a small island it was quickly engaged and silenced by a Ranger Javelin team.

For five days after the seizure of Haditha dam Iraqi forces continued to harass the Rangers. The harassment principally consisted of artillery and mortar fire, but included several infantry assaults. Three Rangers were tragically killed on 3 April by a suicide car-bomber at one of the blocking positions; the car was driven by a distressed pregnant Iraqi woman, who asked the Rangers for water before detonating the car and killing herself, another female in the vehicle and the three Rangers. At one point an Iraqi forward observer took to the waters of the dam in a kayak; this was sunk by .50cal fire and the spotter was captured with sketch maps of the Ranger positions. Another, more pressing problem occurred when an artillery round struck a transformer, shutting down

electricity to the dam. After the transformer was repaired it was discovered that only one of the five turbines at the dam was operating, and that the dam's seals were leaking. A former SF engineer with Civil Affairs flew in by MH-47E, and, assisted by the Iraqi civilian staff, managed to jury-rig fixes that would stop the dam bursting. An Army Engineer unit was later brought in to stabilize the facility. Ironically, it appeared that the Iraqis had not been planning to destroy the dam, flooding the 3ID advancing through Karbala, but that the SOF mission to prevent it almost resulted in that unintended catastrophe.

Delta had handed over to the Rangers on 1 April and headed north to conduct ambushes along the highway north of Tikrit, tying up Iraqi forces in the region and attempting to capture HVTs trying to escape into Syria. In a contact with half a dozen fedeyeen technicals near Tikrit on 2 April, two Delta operators were wounded, one seriously. C Squadron, still in contact, requested an urgent CASEVAC and close air support as Iraqi reinforcements in the form of a company of infantry arrived. Two MH-60Ks and two MH-60L DAPs from 1/160th lifted off immediately and were over the beleaguered operators' positions 90 minutes later. The DAPs began engaging ground targets, allowing the Delta operators to move their casualties to an LZ where the MH-60Ks could land. One of the operators had died from blood loss and was loaded onto the second MH-60 wrapped in a US flag; the MH-60s raced back toward H-1 escorted by a pair of A-10s.

The DAPs stayed on station and destroyed a truck carrying a mortar team and several infantry teams; as they passed by the target, Iraqis began firing small arms up at the retreating DAPs until they were silenced by Delta snipers. Another pair of A-10s soon arrived and were guided onto their targets by the DAPs. One airburst 500lb bomb sprayed fragments within 20 metres of Delta positions, but killed a large number of infantry gathering in a ravine. The DAPs handed over to the A-10s to cover the Delta squadron as they prepared to advance further north.

Joint operations by US Army Special Forces in up-armoured M1114 'Humvees' and Iraqi Police Commandos in GM pickup trucks – the latter have home-made armour shields round the rear beds and mount PKM machine guns over the cabs. (Courtesy US Navy; photo Mass Comm Spec 2nd Class Todd Frantom)





A US Navy SEAL on joint patrol with Iraqi SOF, carrying a Mk18 Mod 0 CQBR (close quarter battle rifle); an EOTech 551 sight is unusually mounted on the forward rail, and note the forward grip with flashlight. The antenna poking over his shoulder shows that he also carries an MBITR radio on the back of his plate-carrier. (Courtesy US Navy, photo PO 2nd Class Johansen Laurel.

Low on fuel, they flew ahead of the ground call signs and spotted several enemy mortar and infantry teams which they quickly engaged with 30mm cannon and minigun before, dangerously low on fuel, the DAPs finally turned back for H-1.

Staging out of Grizzly, Delta mounted operations to interdict avenues of escape for Baath HVTs on Highway 1 (Highways 2 and 4 through the western desert were secured by UK and Australian SAS teams). On 9 April the combined team seized another airfield near Tikrit. During the night attack an M1A1 had driven into a 12m-deep hole, flipping the tank and injuring the loader. The Abrams was later destroyed by two 120mm rounds from one of its brother tanks, since it was judged as non-recoverable. In mid April, Delta moved into Baghdad and Team Tank returned to their parent unit.

SAVING PRIVATE LYNCH

The initial intelligence which led to the rescue of Pfc Jessica Lynch of the 507th Maintenance Co, who had been captured after her convoy became lost and was fatally ambushed in Nasiriyah, was provided by an informer who approached ODA 553 when they were working in that city. The intelligence gathered was passed up the chain through attached SF liaison officers, and made its way to the OGA and Task Force 20. Planning for a rescue operation was begun immediately.

The concept of operations called for a multi-service effort to support the TF-20 elements who would carry out the actual POW recovery. Launching from the recently captured Iraqi airfield at Tallil, the operation included some 290 Rangers from 2/75 and B Co, 1/75; 60 or so special operators from the TF-20 SMUs – Delta and DEVGRU – along with PJs and Combat Controllers from the 24th STS; Marines from Task Force Tarawa then fighting through the city; and aviators from the Army, Marines and Air Force. The plan called for the Tarawa Marines to conduct a deception operation by seizing bridges across the Euphrates to draw attention away from the hospital; an air strike by Marine Air AV-8 Harriers against one of the bridges to further confuse the opposition; and a pair of orbiting AH-1W Cobras tasked to hide the sounds of incoming helicopters. Top cover was provided by an AC-130 Spectre, and a USMC EA-6 Prowler to jam any enemy SAM systems. While these deception operations began, the TF-20 operators would be inserted by four MH-60K Black Hawks and four MH-6 Little Birds supported by another four armed AH-6 gunships and two of the stars of the war's opening night – the MH-60L DAPs. The Rangers would be flown in by Marine CH-46s and CH-53s to establish a cordon around the hospital grounds and block surrounding roads.

At 01:00 local on 1 April 2003 the Marines commenced their deception plan, timed to coincide with the launch of the rescue force. OGA elements cut the city's power as the helicopters approached their objective, ensuring that the pilots could clearly identify their LZs and confusing any nearby opposition. The AH-6s led the way ready to suppress opposition with their miniguns, and immediately behind them flew the MH-6s to drop off their TF-20 sniper teams at strategic locations around the hospital to cover the entry by the assaulters. The DAPs and AH-6s covered the MH-60Ks as they dropped off one Delta assault element on the hospital roof and another by the front door, to make their way to the second floor where Lynch was located. A final MH-60K touched down near the entrance with a team of PJs and SOAR medics on board to transport Lynch to safety.



The shadowy silhouettes of Marines of USMC 1st Reconnaissance Battalion preparing to parachute from the rear ramp of a CH-46 during a night-time HAHO insertion (high altitude, high opening) into Al Anbar in July 2004. (Courtesy Lt Col Rory Talkington)

A night-vision shot from the rear ramp of an MH-53 Pave Low helicopter as an SOF mission is launched from Baghdad International Airport. (Courtesy AFSOC)



The Ranger blocking teams were brought in by an initial flight of three Marine CH-46s, which landed outside the hospital to cover the main roads and cut off any potential reinforcements along with any 'squirters' from the hospital itself. A second wave of CH-46s and CH-53s arrived minutes after the first lift was complete and heading back to Tallil. A ground column of Rangers and TF-20 operators entered the hospital grounds and pulled up outside the entrance in readiness to extract the assault teams. Despite some sporadic fire directed at the Ranger blocking teams, the hospital was devoid of gunmen, although evidence suggested that fedeyeen had been using parts of it as a base. Thirteen minutes after the first TF-20 teams were inserted, a team of PJs and TF-20 medics carried Lynch from the hospital's main entrance on a folding litter and secured her in the waiting MH-60K, which quickly lifted off to rendezvous with a medical flight at Tallil and onward to Kuwait and the United States. The job for TF-20 and the Rangers was not yet over, however; they recovered the remains of eight members of Lynch's unit who had been killed or died from their wounds in the original ambush. The bodies were placed in the TF-20 vehicles and returned to the airfield with the assault teams, AH-6s flying escort above them as the Ranger blocking teams exfiltrated in the Marine helicopters.

Despite the cynical accusations of a PR mission by elements of the media, there was no denying the fact that TF-20 had carried out the first successful US POW rescue mission since World War II.

HUNTING WMD

Intelligence indicating that chemical and biological weapons stocks may have been located at a complex known as the Al Qadisiyah Research Centre led to a TF-20 operation being launched on the evening of 26 March 2003. B Company, 2/75 Rangers supported a SEAL element from the DEVGRU. The target of the operation was one of the regime's

palaces nestled along the shore of the Al Qadisiyah Reservoir, which had been outfitted as a research laboratory amongst both residential and government buildings. The mission package included two AH-6Ms and a pair of MH-60L DAPs providing fire support, along with a pair of MH-6Ms carrying DEVGRU sniper teams. The Rangers would insert from four MH-60Ks into blocking positions around the site, followed minutes later by a pair of MH-47Es that would insert the DEVGRU team beside the target building. A second pair of Chinooks orbited nearby carrying a Ranger QRF and the dedicated CSAR element in the event of a helo being downed.

The operation went smoothly until the first MH-60 landed and was engaged by small arms fire from a nearby building. An AH-6 identified the aggressors from their muzzle flashes and fired a 2.75in rocket into the location, silencing the small arms fire. The second MH-60 was also struck by small arms fire, which was rapidly suppressed by its door-gunner's minigun. It was quickly becoming clear that the site was a hot LZ. The DAPs engaged nearby electricity transformers in an attempt to black out the area, but this resulted in a series of explosions and a fire which lit up the sky, pinpointing the orbiting helicopters. Small arms fire increased as the last two Black Hawks inserted their blocking teams, and a Ranger suffered a gunshot wound to his back that punctured a lung. The helo carrying the wounded Ranger deposited its passengers and immediately departed, with two 160th crew and a SEAL working to stabilize the casualty; at a forward site the Ranger was transferred to a field surgical team aboard an idling HH-130.

The AH-6s and DAPs continued to suppress targets as the MH-47Es closed on the target, with the DEVGRU snipers sitting on the bench seats of the MH-6s engaging numerous gunmen and vehicles. The Chinooks landed under small arms fire, with rounds punching through their thin skin; both managed to safely insert their assaulters, but as they lifted off a 160th SOAR crewmember was shot in the head, the round striking him in the jaw. The crew chief and door-gunners applied



A US Army Special Forces HMMWV in Iraq, equipped with bullbars, an ASK turret for the top gunner, electronic counter-measures against Improvised Explosive Devices, and a SATCOM suite. (Courtesy CJSOFT AP PAO, photo Mass Comm Spec 2nd Class Eli J. Medellin)

immediate first aid in an attempt to staunch blood loss; half way to the airstrip and the waiting HH-130, the wounded aviator stopped breathing, but after five long minutes of CPR respiration was restored. Soon afterwards the Chinook landed and transferred the wounded aviator to the HH-130 which took off with both wounded men on board; they both survived.

At the objective, DEVGRU conducted a hasty SSE while the blocking positions continued to receive and return fire. The AH-6s and the snipers continued to engage enemy gunmen while the DAPs ensured no reinforcements approached the Ranger blocking positions. Extraction was requested, and the QRF and CSAR Chinooks landed to exfiltrate the SEALs while the MH-60s returned to pick up the Rangers. All in all, the teams had been on the ground for 45 minutes but, apart from the two casualties described, escaped unscathed. No evidence of chemical or biological weapons was discovered at the site.

HUNTING HVT

Since the invasion, Task Force 20 has gone through several designation changes – initially, when it was amalgamated with Task Force 5 (formerly Task Force 11/Task Force Sword) in Afghanistan in July 2003, it became Task Force 21, soon afterwards redesignated 121, and later as Task Force 626, Task Force 145 and Task Force 88. The current designations are omitted here; they are also known obliquely as OCF-I ('Other Coalition Forces-Iraq'), a wry reference to the CIA use of the moniker 'OGA'. The Task Force's headquarters and support teams are currently based at a site known as 'The Compound' at Camp Anaconda in Balad, after initially locating to Baghdad International Airport. The teams are deployed in four distinct, geographically based elements: Task Force Central is structured around a Delta squadron with a Ranger company in direct support; Task Force West is built around a DEVGRU squadron, again supported by a Ranger company; Task Force North is composed of another Delta squadron with Ranger support; while the British Task Force Black comprises a 22SAS squadron supported by a company from the Special Forces Support Group.

The US SOF assigned to the Task Force generally serve three-month rotations because of the extremely high tempo and nature of their operations, as explained by a US operator who has served several tours with the TF: 'I don't know what the regular grunts are doing on a daily basis, but definitely doing what we do for twelve months straight would get exhausting. I think we'd get worn out and complacent and start losing lives.'

The Rangers conduct their own raids unilaterally as well as providing support for the SMUs, as detailed by one Ranger: 'Raids are primarily what we do. There are also a couple of squads tasked out to CSAR operations, and of course we also support the big Tier 1 SOF i.e. CAG and DEVGRU. We've also run joint task forces with the SEALs since we have a similar mission overseas [direct action], where we took turns pulling isolation/security and doing the actual hit.'

(continued on page 41)



1: US Army 10th Special Forces Group
2: US Army 5th Special Forces Group
3: US Air Force 24th Special Tactics Sqdn



1: British 22 SAS Regt
 2: US Army Comb at Applications Group (1st SFOD-D)
 3: British Special Forces Support Group

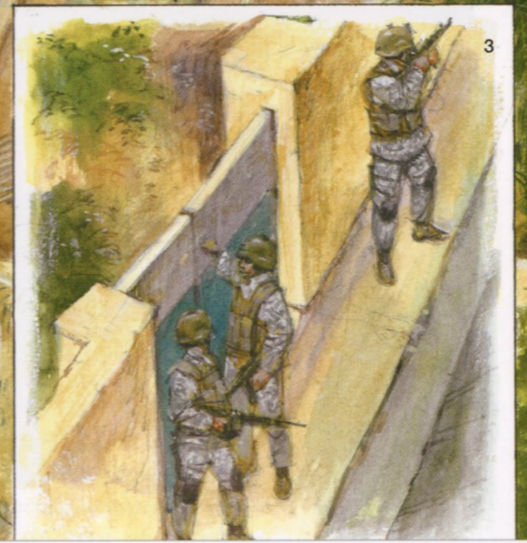
1: 4th Bn (Commando), Royal Australian Regt
 2: US Army 1/75th Ranger Regt
 3: US Navy SEAL Team 4





1: US Army Asymmetric Warfare Group
 2: Polish GROM
 3: British private security contractor





1: M1078 LMTV 'War Pig', US 5th Special Forces Group
2: GMV, US 5th Special Forces Group



Their objective has become the capturing or killing of high value targets. Perhaps the three most famous kills/captures of HVTs in Iraq have been Task Force operations: the killing of Uday and Qusay Hussein, the capture of Saddam Hussein himself, and the killing of Abu Musab al Zarqawi. The Task Force has also been phenomenally successful in targeting Al Qaeda in Iraq and is largely responsible for the destruction of its local organization. It has been reported that the Task Force conducts up to six or seven raids a night, and the results of their 'hits' are the first thing Coalition commander Gen David Petraeus requests every morning.

Their early operations post-invasion concentrated on the hunt for the 55 HVTs featured in the infamous 'HVT deck of cards'; carrying out SSEs at facilities suspected of being used to store or process WMDs; and hunting down both Baathist targets escaping the country, and foreign jihadists attempting to enter it. They also carried out several unusual one-off missions, including the recovery of an Mi-17 Hip helicopter to use for later covert operations. The Task Force chalked up several early successes, including the capture of Palestinian terrorist leader Mohammed Abbas in Baghdad on 19 April 2003, and of the Iraqi deputy Prime Minister, Tariq Aziz, on 25 April.

Notoriously, the hunt for WMDs went less successfully, with only the operation against the Ansar al Islam terrorist group in Sargat in northern Iraq by the 10th SFG recovering any evidence of chemical or biological weapons. TF-20 continued to conduct SSEs throughout April 2003, sometimes only hours ahead of the 'official' Army WMD SSE team – the 75th Exploitation Task Force – but with disappointing results.

Their third broad mission set, the interdiction of fleeing Baathists, notched up some notable successes. On the night of 18 June 2003 near the Syrian border, AC-130 Spectres guided by TF-20 operators struck a convoy of high value Baath Party members escaping to Syria. Intelligence indicated that the convoy might have included Saddam Hussein or his sons; other reports claimed that the convoy consisted only of oil-smugglers. Once the convoy was destroyed by the AC-130s, TF-20 conducted a heliborne assault into a nearby compound which proved to be a Baathist safe-house for ferrying former regime elements across the border. TF-20 also came under fire from Syrian border guards; in the uneven firefight that ensued, several Syrians were killed, 17 were captured and immediately released, and five were wounded and treated by Coalition forces before repatriation.

Uday and Qusay

One of TF-20's next public HVT successes was the killing of Saddam's murderous sons, Uday and Qusay. With a \$15 million reward on each of their heads, it did not take long for a former regime member to sell them out. The information was initially passed by the informer to the 101st Airborne, who consequently passed it to their divisional Special Forces liaison, who contacted Task Force 20. Uday and Qusay were hiding out in the informer's home in the Mosul suburb of Al Falah, along with Qusay's 14-year-old son and a bodyguard. According to several sources, a 12-man team of 22SAS operators working in Mosul for TF-20 conducted an initial CTR (Close Target Reconnaissance), and reported to the TF-20 leadership that they felt confident of covertly

22 July 2003: a mixture of 101st Airborne and Delta personnel watch TOW missiles strike the villa during the last stand of Uday and Qusay Hussein. The Delta operators are those standing near the front in olive drab and black helmets; just visible are their SATCOM units resting on the HMMWVs and – under magnification – IR strobes attached to the rear of their helmets. (Courtesy DOD)



entering the premises at night and killing or capturing the targets. The US Army disagreed, however, and a plan was launched to attempt a daytime capture of the Hussein sons.

On 22 July elements of 101ABN set up a perimeter around the target house, and a Delta entry element made ready as the occupants were called upon via loudspeaker to surrender. The offer was met with silence; the operators rapidly breached the front door and deployed 'flash-bangs' (stun grenades) before entering. They were immediately engaged with small arms fire, one man reportedly receiving a gunshot wound to the hip and several others being lightly wounded by grenade fragments as they withdrew to cover. A second Delta entry attempt was again met with gunfire, and the team discovered that the interior stairs to the second floor where the brothers were holed up were blocked with furniture and other obstacles. Another element of operators fast-roped to the roof of the building from an MH-6 to examine the possibility of an explosive entry point through the roof (and were almost accidentally engaged by orbiting OH-58 Kiowas). Finally the decision was made to soften up the target, and the 101st cordon engaged the building with .50cal and AT-3 rockets. A third Delta entry was attempted, but was again driven back by gunfire. The Airborne were asked to deploy their TOW II-equipped HMMWVs, which proceeded to launch perhaps ten of these missiles into the house while from overhead Kiowas also hosed the premises with .50cal and 2.75in rockets. After the TOW strikes, Delta successfully made entry on their fourth attempt. Qusay and the bodyguard had already died under the barrage; Uday was discovered gravely wounded but still armed and moving in the bathroom, and was shot and killed by a Delta operator. Qusay's teenage son Mustapha was hiding under a bed and opened fire as the operators entered; they had no choice but to return fire.

'Red Dawn'

Although they continued to successfully target former regime members, one of the Task Force's 'Tier One HVTs' eluded capture – Saddam Hussein himself. Intelligence from former members of the Baath Party, supported by signals intelligence, finally pinpointed the fugitive dictator in a farm compound outside Al Dawr south of Tikrit, in the heartland of his clan. On the evening of 14 December 2003, Operation 'Red Dawn' was launched (apparently named after the 1980s action film).

The 1st Bde Combat Team of 4ID provided the cordon, while operators from C Sqn, Delta attached to the then-Task Force 121 searched two locations in the area codenamed Wolverine 1 and 2. An initial sweep found nothing, but as the operators were preparing to exfiltrate one noticed a piece of flooring material, which he kicked to one side, exposing a spider-hole dug in the ground. A Delta operator was preparing to drop a fragmentation grenade into the hole to clear it when Hussein popped up. Hussein was disarmed of his handgun and an AK47 concealed in the hole with him; he was also carrying \$750,000 in



Delta operators carry the body of Uday Hussein from the rubble of the villa where he was cornered. The big sidearm just visible strapped to the thigh of the operator at right is a custom .45ACP 1911 with an extended magazine, apparently with a tactical flashlight mounted under the barrel. (Photographer unknown)

An Iraqi SOF soldier conducts a joint raid and SEE (sensitive site exploitation) with US SOF. Apart from his old-pattern 'chocolate chip' six-colour BDUs he is virtually indistinguishable from his American colleagues. (Courtesy DoD)



US dollars. The capture of the dictator was somewhat anti-climactic after the months Task Force 121 had spent searching for him; Hussein surrendered rather meekly, and was exfiltrated on a 160th SOAR MH-6 and taken into formal US custody.

Hostage rescue

TF 121 also conducted one of only a handful of successful hostage rescues. Four Italian security contractors were seized on 12 April 2004; one was executed while being filmed by his insurgent captors, and another hostage was added when a Polish contractor was snatched at the start of June. Their abductors passed on a statement that the other hostages would be executed unless Italy withdrew its contribution from OIF. On 8 June a dramatic daylight raid was launched by elements of A Sqn, Delta, into an isolated compound near Ramadi code-named Objective Medford. The operation consisted of four MH-60L Black Hawks and four MH-6s carrying assault elements and sniper teams. Touching down at 11:00 local, one MH-60 was slightly damaged when its tail struck the compound's wall. The Delta operators stormed inside the location, capturing several of the kidnappers who surrendered immediately. The four hostages were rapidly located in an adjacent room and cut free with bolt cutters before they were flown out on the Black Hawks.

Zarqawi

The Task Force's most high profile target since Hussein was the Jordanian terrorist Abu Musab al Zarqawi. Zarqawi graduated from Palestinian terrorist organizations through Ansar al Islam, and finally became the nominal leader of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). He was responsible for numerous mass atrocities against Iraqi civilians in an attempt to incite a full-scale civil war between Sunni and Shia, and for beginning the barbaric practice of slowly beheading hostages on camera and releasing videotapes of these murders to jihadist websites. He made the top of the Task Force's hit list early in his brutal career with AQI, but it took the (then) TF-145 almost three years to kill him, despite several very near misses – including an operation in May 2006 where Zarqawi ran a Ranger roadblock to escape the Task Force. In fact, intelligence gathered and exploited (by the Grey Fox/Task Force Orange cell) from a series of raids that April and May eventually led directly to their principal target. These raids resulted in the killing or capture of over 100 AQI members including at least eight HVTs. A special operator described how many of these raids are conducted:

'You have what they call landing on the X, the Y, and then an offset landing. Landing on the X is literally right on top of the target; the Y is within 500 metres or so; and an offset is a hike, say 3 to 6km typically, to mask the presence of helicopters. You'll usually post some sort of overwatch, rear security, and then a squad will clear the actual house.'

'It's not a loud thing. We have ICOM radios as well as MBITRs for

US regular forces (right) supporting Iraqi SOF during a 'high value target' raid in Baghdad. The US soldier has an AN/PSQ-18A Day/Night sight mounted on his M203. The Iraqis wear their newly issued digital-pattern camouflage BDUs with white-on-black 'Punisher' skull sleeve patches, and are armed with camouflage-painted AK47s. (Courtesy USAF, photo MSgt Mike Buytas)



everybody, so we've cleared entire houses and not awakened the occupants. No need for "sounding off" and yelling. We call it "softknock"; but you pan across the doorway and peak through windows before entering the room, to clear as much as possible before you even go in. After that, it's like typical CQB where you clear corners and such. My guys were pretty big on this, but others are bigger on the door breaches and flash-bangs.

'After you clear it, you'll have security out to isolate the target, probably get machine guns on the roof top, and then start SSEing the house, interrogating occupants, etc. After that you'll call the birds, move to exfil with prisoners and evidence, and take off. We do both helo and ground insertions. We almost always have air overwatch – usually a DAP, sometimes AH-6s, and on occasion, if they're expecting something big, a Spectre gunship.'

On 16 April 2006 a DEVGRU assault team supported by the Rangers assaulted an AQI safe house in Yusifiyah south-west of Baghdad, capturing five terrorists and killing five foreign fighters. On 2 May another operation in the same area resulted in ten foreign fighters killed, including three actually wearing suicide-bomb vests. On 2 June, an AQI HVT was killed outside Balad. Each operation netted additional valuable intelligence, but the Task Force's successes did not come without casualties. An operation in Yusifiyah on 14 May saw an AH-6M gunship from B Co, 1/160th SOAR shot down by small arms, tragically killing both pilots while they supported operators from Delta; this battle raged around several AQI safe houses, resulting in 25 AQI killed and four captured.

1st Recon Bn, USMC, suit up for a night-time HAHO combat jump in July 2004. According to the battalion commander, the mission was to conduct 'interdiction of enemy rocket/mortar teams and to conduct ambush operations in Al Anbar Province and along the Euphrates River area sanctuaries'. Some of the M4A1s are mounted with night vision scopes and suppressors. (Courtesy LtCol Rory Talkington)



The urban battlefield: a US Army SF operator covers the advance of an Iraqi Army ambulance and HMMWV. (Courtesy DoD)

On 7 June 2006 this intense series of raids finally culminated at an isolated compound outside Baqubah. US Army MajGen Bill Caldwell said the operation crowned 'a very long, painstaking, deliberate exploitation of intelligence, information-gathering, human sources, electronic and signal intelligence ...'. It is believed that the captured HVTs provided information leading TF-145 to Sheikh Abd al Rahman, Zarqawi's personal 'spiritual adviser'; Rahman was tracked electronically and by covert UAVs, and eventually he led the hunters to Zarqawi. A decision was taken that a ground operation might allow Zarqawi to escape, as he had done several times in the past. The uninhabited rural area around the identified safe house offered a reduced risk of collateral damage, allowed the Task Force to look at the option of a precision air strike. An SR team from B Sqn of Delta was infiltrated covertly into the area to provide real-time surveillance, along with an RQ-1 Predator UAV which transmitted live imagery to the headquarters. Two orbiting F-16C Fighting Falcons flying a routine patrol out of Balad were tasked with the mission, and at 18:15 local the lead F-16 dropped a 500lb laser-guided bomb with a delayed fuse to allow the bomb to penetrate the house before detonation. A quick BDA led to a second bomb, this time a GPS-guided 500lb JDAM, which levelled what remained of the target. Zarqawi, Rahman, a bodyguard and three unknown women had been killed in the strike. Iraqi Army and regular US military arrived while the SR team covertly exfiltrated. Zarqawi was actually still alive when US forces arrived; they attempted to revive him, but he died almost at once.

This success brought no respite for the Coalition SF; soon the hunt began again, with the Task Force searching for Zarqawi's successor, his former second in command Abu Ayyub al Masri.

TASK FORCE BLACK

The UKSF have carried out a huge variety of operations since the invasion, both in concert with the JSOC Task Force and unilaterally in support of British interests, particularly in the south of Iraq where the resident UK Battle Group was deployed. The deployment since early 2003 has generally seen a half-squadron group based in the Basra area

US Army SF and Polish GROM in action alongside the Iraqi SOF. The American operator at right has just fired his old 40mm M79 'blooper' grenade launcher; this Vietnam-era weapon is still preferred by some for its superior accuracy over the more widely seen M203. (Courtesy DoD)



with both SBS and 22SAS rotating through, and a squadron group deployed as Task Force Black in Baghdad in a location known as the Station House. The Task Force Black deployment includes a 22SAS squadron, a company from the SFSG, surveillance teams from the SRR (Special Surveillance Regt), SIGINT and communications specialists from 18 (UKSF) Signals Regt and 264 Squadron. Working alongside them are the Joint Support Group, who run a network of local agents. SBS elements have also worked with Task Force Black; the UKSF rotate their squadrons through on six-monthly tours.

British SF have been involved in several hostage rescues. In March 2006 a team from 22SAS rescued peace activist Norman Kember and two Canadians who had been kidnapped in Baghdad; their abductors fled at the first sign of the SAS raid. UKSF were also involved in the curious situation of having to rescue two of their own from A Sqn, kidnapped in Basra by the Mehdi Army whilst conducting undercover SR.

COMBINED JOINT SPECIAL OPERATIONS TASK FORCE - ARABIAN PENINSULA

The CJSOTF-AP came into being on 2 May 2003, replacing the two CJSOTFs and the Naval Task Group deployed during the invasion phase. (Around 80 per cent of SOF assets were rotated out of theatre at the conclusion of major combat operations, while Task Force 20 remained and progressed to the HVT-hunt under direct JSOC command.) Since 2003, the CJSOTF-AP has been built around the 5th or 10th SFG – often supported by elements from the 1st, 19th and 20th Groups – which deploy for seven-month rotations (3rd and 7th SFG are routinely deployed to Afghanistan). In 2008 there were 5,500 US SOF in theatre, including both those assigned to CJSOTF-AP and the Task Force.

Much of CJSOTF-AP's tasking is focused on the core SF skill set of FID (Foreign Internal Defense), training and advising local Iraqi forces. These units include the ICTF (Iraqi Counter Terrorism Force),

developed as a Tier One SOF akin to Delta; and the ISOF (Iraqi Special Operations Forces), which are closer to Rangers, of which there are now three battalions. The ICTF even has an Operator Training Course based on the Delta model – a 90-day course with training initially carried out in Jordan but based in Iraq since 2006. The unit has conducted several successful hostage rescues and has been involved in virtually every major operation since Fallujah in 2004. The ICTF and ISOF use US weapons and equipment including HMMWVs, M4A1 carbines and advanced night vision equipment.

Army SF are also carrying out DA and SR taskings unilaterally, in concert with the JSOC Task Force and supporting conventional forces. 5th Group operators worked alongside regular Army and Marines in Operation 'Phantom Fury' in 2004, as did Delta sniper teams. The SEALs have been active participants in CJSOTF-AP, assisting with the FID mission along with the more traditional DA and SR roles.

WEAPONS & EQUIPMENT

'The M4A1 is still the primary weapon. We've got a few 10in-barrels circulating around now, mainly to dog teams since they also have to handle a K-9. Command is pretty adamant about keeping the full-length 14.5in barrels, though. I suppose they don't like the loss in muzzle velocity or accuracy. The Mk46 is also used in both its Mod 0 and Mod 1 variations, and the Mk48 is considered weapons squad [-suitable]. The fireteam is pretty flexible. I had a platoon sergeant who made guys with Mk46s also draw out M4s, but sometimes we run nothing but M4s in the squad.'

US Army Ranger, Iraq, 2006–2008

As in OEF in Afghanistan, the principal rifle of special operations units in OIF is the 5.56x45mm Colt M4A1 gas-operated carbine, and later types based on the M4 manufactured by Diemaco (Colt Canada) and Heckler & Koch, including the piston-driven HK416. As well as providing commonality with conventional forces, the M4A1 also offers the versatility of the Special Operations Peculiar Modification (SOPMOD) kit. This is built around the Knight's Armament Company (KAC) Rail Interface System (RIS or Picatinny Rail) which facilitates the mounting of a wide variety of tactical aids to both the foregrip and the upper receiver of the carbine. The list of accessories is long, and continues to grow as aftermarket providers develop new innovations and variants; among the most common are vertical foregrips (some including collapsible bipods), infrared and visible laser target illuminators, and tactical lights for use both in building/vehicle searches and for identifying/dazzling potential insurgents. In terms of sights, the US Army has adopted the M68 Aimpoint, although supplemented by quantities of both the EOTech Holographic Weapons Sight and the Trijicon ACOG (Advanced Combat Optical Gunsight). The M4A1 is often seen with a variety of barrel lengths ranging from the standard 14.5in to the compact 10.3in and a 16in version. The 10.3in barrel has proven popular within Naval Special Warfare, where it has

been adopted as the Mk18 Mod 0; both 'blue water' SEALs and DEVGRU have used the Mk18 extensively in Iraq.

The M4A1 itself is currently in use by all USSOCOM units, elements of JSOC units and many Green Army units. Additionally, the Australian SASR and 4RAR and the Polish GROM have all employed it in Iraq. UKSF use the Canadian version of the M4A1 – the Diemaco C8SFW, known as the L119A1 in UK service. There is very little to visually differentiate between the Colt and Diemaco versions, although UKSF often use the distinctive 40mm H&K AG-C (L17A1) grenade-launcher mounted under the barrel. UKSF Diemacos use a rails system to allow the addition of optical sights and accessories to the weapon; both the Trijicon ACOG and the EOTech are seen, along with various Surefire tactical lights and suppressors. The 10.3in-barrel option is popular for teams deployed in low profile and undercover roles – one was seen on a Diemaco carried by one of the A Sqn 22SAS troopers captured by JAM elements in Basra in September 2005.

A piston-driven version of the M4 produced by Heckler & Koch is known as the HK 416. The 5.56x45mm HK416 was developed in close co-operation with Delta, who conducted live trials of the weapon on operations in Iraq and have been using it as their primary rifle since 2004; it has since been purchased by the DEVGRU and the Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG). Intriguingly, the AWG have been forced to hand back their beloved 416s due to an Army mandate that they must carry regular M4s as part of their role. A source within AWG explained, 'As far as 416s, they've had to turn them in, but kept their Glock 19s. They've been given the M4 with three-round burst. They hate it.' The 416 has also

US Navy SEALs conduct pre-deployment urban close-quarter battle training; note the KAC suppressor on the M4A1. (Courtesy US Navy, photo Chief Mass Comm Spec Shawn P. Eklund)



This Ranger on operations in Baghdad is armed with a 7.62x51mm Mk48 Mod 0 machine gun, fitted with an M68 Aimpoint sight and Surefire light. His helmet mounts the AN/PVS-18 NOD, and note the combination of ECWCS jacket and ACU camouflage trousers. (Courtesy US Army Ranger Regt / USSOCOM)

recently been seen in the hands of 22SAS, along with US OGA personnel. A 7.62x51mm version of the 416, known as the 417, is also appearing in the hands of Tier One US and UK SOF.

A large variety of **sniper** platforms were employed by US SOF during OIF. The issue Army bolt-action remains the 7.62x51mm M24 SWS (Sniper Weapon System), based on the dependable Remington 700 and mounting the Leupold M3A scope. The Army has recently announced the awarding of a contract to KAC for some 4,400 semi-automatic 7.62x51mm M110 SASS (Semi Automatic Sniper System) rifles to replace at least some of their inventory of M24s; the US SOF have been fielding versions of the M110 since May 2000.

The rifle known commercially as the Stoner SR-25 was originally classified the Mk11 Mod 0 when 300 were first purchased by Naval Special Warfare units, and it was soon adopted by Army SOF and the Rangers – a 5.56x45mm version known as the Mk12 Mod 0/1 has also been adopted by Army SOF. The Marines of Force Recon and later MARSOC continue to use the venerable 7.62x51mm M40A3, recently supplemented with some Mk11 Mod 1 rifles.

The Rangers continue to field the Mk11 in both variants alongside the 5.56x45mm Mk12. Additionally, the Mk13 in .300 Winchester Magnum is widely favoured by the Rangers over the older M24 and the Barrett. The SEALs employ a similar variety, with the Mk15 bolt-action .50 also available for special applications. The vehicle-mounted SF ODAs during OIF carried a mix of Mk11s (also known as the Special Purpose Rifle, SPR), M24s and Barretts. In later Phase IV operations, the semi-automatic Mk12 and Mk11 platforms have somewhat superseded the bolt-action

M24 in urban environments, where the ranges are shorter and the fast follow-up shots offered by the semi-automatic are often a benefit.

An Army Ranger with several Iraq and Afghanistan rotations under his belt explained:

'Yes, we have M24s, but nobody is using them. They have the Mk13 if they need a highly accurate bolt-action rifle. The Mk12 doesn't get a lot of use either, but sometimes the spotter will carry that instead, or maybe someone pulling security for the sniper team. And we also have the Barrett, but I've seen a lot of snipers profess that they might possibly choose the .300 Winchester Magnum in a situation where they might have to do a vehicle interdiction. It's apparently just as capable of taking out an engine block, and much lighter to carry.

'There's talk of using the new M110s as a sort of designated-marksmen weapon rather than a sniper rifle, since we already have the Mk11. The Mk11 and Mk12 come with suppressors, and the Mk13 uses the same one as the Mk11. We also have KAC suppressors for the M4s for everybody [although it's] not typically used, as the suppressor just makes the M4 longer, heavier, and if shooting takes place our position is probably already compromised. If we need to kill sentries or some such thing silently, we'd probably just employ snipers.'

The UKSF continue to deploy both the Accuracy International PM (L96A1) in 7.62x51mm, and the AWM L115A1 version in the heavier .338 Lapua. Examples of the .338 L115A1, including suppressed versions, have been used to great effect by 22SAS members in Iraq – including a widely publicized multiple-sniper ambush of an insurgent suicide bomber cell in Baghdad in July 2005. The snipers fired in a near-simultaneous fusillade from covert urban OPs as the target team left their safe-house, killing all three bombers; a fourth sniper/spotter team stood by in case of a weapon stoppage or one of the primary snipers missing his target. The Accuracy International AW50 is also used by UKSF, particularly in the anti-vehicle role, as are examples of the Barrett M82A1. Australian SASR also carried a mix of the PM (SR-98 in Australian service), SR-25s and Barretts.

The venerable 7.62x51mm M14 battle rifle is also still used by Coalition SOF as the Mk14 Mod 0 Enhanced Battle Rifle (EBR). The Mk14 has proven popular as an urban marksman rifle with Navy SEAL teams, with an ACOG- or Aimpoint-equipped Mk14 often employed to provide accurate point fire out to ranges in excess of the capabilities of their Mk18 CQB-R carbines.

Handguns are widely carried in OIF, and not just by SOF; because of the nature of the conflict all Coalition troops are required to be armed at all times, even within the heavily protected Green Zone. It is not unusual to see joggers in PT kit carrying an M9 Beretta, or PX shoppers toting slung M4s. The most common US SOF handgun remains the issue 9x19mm M9 Beretta, still in widespread use with Army SOF, Rangers and Air Force Special Tactics. The M9 has suffered from a checkered history among SOF, with the SEALs adopting the SIG Sauer P226 after several slide failures with early issue M9s, and many Army units disparaging the reliability of the weapon – a fact mainly due to the poor after-market magazines supplied by the Army. The M9 will function properly with quality Beretta magazines, but the taint has stuck, and several SF companies have purchased Glocks with unit funds – primarily the 9x19mm 17 and 19 versions.



The Glock is common in Iraq due to its tolerance of the dusty, sandy environment; the AWG issues the compact Glock 19, as do OGA and Poland's GROM. Additionally, the Glock is the most common handgun among the Iraqi Police and Army and Western civilian security contractors. One surprise recent customer for the Glock platform has been Delta, who have reportedly adopted the Glock 22 in .40cal due to recurring issues with the fine Iraqi sand infiltrating their high-speed custom .45ACP M1911s. The Australian SFTG carried the H&K USP Tactical in 9x19mm; Naval Special Warfare, including DEVGRU and the regular SEAL teams, continue to use their 9x19mm SIG Sauer P226s, as do UKSF including the SFSG (alongside the compact 9mm P228).

Sub-machine guns are very much a rarity among Coalition SOF, the only unit generally using them in combat being the Polish GROM, who carried various H&K MP5 models alongside M4s during the seizure of the off-shore platforms and refinement facilities at Al Faw. Some .45ACP H&K UMPs were seen in the hands of AWG operators, although these were later phased out in favour of the HK416 (and since controversially replaced by the M4, as mentioned above). Several ODAs adopted captured 9x19mm Sterling L34A1 suppressed SMGs as 'car guns', fastening them by bungee cord to the inner frame of their GMVs to allow a fast response to any close-range targets that popped up near the driver or passenger. The only other common use of the SMG has been by security contractors, who have used captured Iraqi MP5A3s, L2A3s and L34A1s, again as vehicle guns, particularly in the early stages of the insurgency before short-barrel M4s became widely available. The MP5K has also seen some use in similar scenarios. The Iraq War has perhaps finally struck the death knell for the SMG, with the widespread adoption of compact 5.56mm carbines offering better anti-vehicle penetration and improved terminal effects.

A rare image of a US Army Ranger designated marksman covering his colleagues with a 7.62x51mm Mk 11 Mod 1 sniper rifle fitted with a PEQ-2 illuminator. He wears a Generation 3 ECWCS jacket, and a MICH helmet with Peltor Com-Tac headset. (Courtesy US Army Ranger Regt / USSOCOM)

Shotguns remain in Coalition SOF use primarily as a Method of Entry (MOE) tool. The most common is the 12-gauge Remington M870 pump action carried by both US and UK SOF. The M870s are modified with a pistol grip, a 'stand-off' muzzle brake (for using frangible rounds on locks and hinges), and often a 'Side Saddle' ammunition carrier offering fast access to five extra shells mounted on the side of the weapon. The M870s are carried either in custom holsters or by the field-expedient method of attaching the weapon by means of bungee cord.

The primary **light machine gun** used by Coalition SOF remains the 5.56x45mm Fabrique Nationale Minimi (the M249 Squad Automatic Weapon, SAW, in US service). The Minimi is generally employed by US, UK and Australian SOF in the Para version (US – M249E4), with its shorter barrel and collapsible stock. Additionally, US SOF are using two modified versions of the Minimi: the Mk46 Mod 0 in 5.56x45mm, and the Mk48 Mod 0 in 7.62x51mm. The Mk46 is an improved version of the Para with the standard M249 stock for increased accuracy and the addition of further Picatinny accessory rails. The Mk48 is somewhat of a mix of the Mk46 and the issue GPMG (M240B), in that it offers the heavier 7.62mm calibre whilst still displaying similar dimensions to the Mk46. It also offers further Picatinny rails and an integral folding bipod. The Mk46 and 48 were originally developed to NSW requirements, but both platforms are in widespread use by the Rangers and Army and Air Force SOF. The M240B and its UK version, the L7A2 GPMG, remain in the armoury particularly as vehicle-mounted weapons, although both see dismounted use for specific direct action operations (such as the seizing of the Haditha dam complex, described above).

An alternative to the usual .50cal M2 or 40mm Mk19 AGL in the top turret ring of GMVs is a minigun; here a 7.62x51mm M134 is being test-fired at an Iraqi range. (Courtesy US Navy; photo Mass Comm Spec 2nd Class Christopher Perez)



For a heavier punch, Coalition SOF have the FGM-148 Javelin ATGM available, the top-attack 'fire and forget' missile which saw such effective use at Debecka. Additionally the M136 is used as a bunker-buster and against light vehicles, and the Rangers continue to deploy with their tried and tested M3 Carl Gustav AT rocket. UKSF use the Javelin, along with the US AT4 and the UK LAW80.

Details of the 40mm Mk47 Mod 0 Stryker automatic grenade-launcher, being test-fired from a GMV turret. Beyond the AGL is an LRAS surveillance system. (Courtesy US Navy; photo Mass Comm Spec 2nd Class Christopher Perez)

Vehicles

The principal vehicle used by US SOF remains the modified HMMWV known as the Ground Mobility Vehicle (GMV). The GMV build was perfected during OEF in Afghanistan and the lessons learnt were incorporated into the GMVs used in Iraq. The GMVs are extensively modified to provide peak performance in extreme environments, and are built to carry the huge amounts of fuel, water, ammunition and specialist equipment required by an ODA. Each is equipped with a vehicle winch, satellite communications compatibility and Blue Force Tracker; up-armoured versions of the GMV are also currently in use. The GMV mounts a heavy weapon in the ring turret, generally a .50cal M2 or 40mm Mk19 AGL, although variants exist mounting the 7.62x51mm M134 minigun; a swing-arm mounting also supports an M240B GPMG for the passenger. SEAL vehicles often mount twin 7.62x51mm Mk48s or the 40mm Mk47 Mod 0 (H&K GMG), which is also seeing use amongst Army SF.

Supporting the ODAs were the War Pigs – LMTV 2.5-ton trucks heavily modified by the mobility experts of 5th Group into armed mobile resupply and command wagons. Crewed by ODB personnel, each War Pig mounted an M240B for the passenger and an M2 or Mk19 in the rear bed. They could also carry enough supplies to keep the ODAs in the field for extended periods without the need for traditional fixed wing or rotary air resupply.

In the early stages of the invasion, Non-Standard Tactical Vehicles (NSVs) were also employed, the most popular including the Land Rover

A GMV of US Navy SEAL Team 4 protects the perimeter at Al Assad for a visiting US civilian delegation. The IR-resistant camouflage netting acts as both a hindrance to enemy snipers targeting the top gunner, and as shade from the sun. This vehicle has been fitted with an anti-IED electronic counter-measures system. (Courtesy DoD, photo Cherie A. Thurlby)



Defenders used by 10th SFG in the north, and the Toyota Tacomas used by 5th SFG and Delta in the west; the OGA also deployed a range of NSVs across the theatre. These NSVs were modified to carry extra fuel and supplies and were equipped with a rear-mounted weapon, generally the M240B or M249 SAW. The Tacomas, for instance, were also equipped with run-flat tyres, Blue Force Tracker and extensive communications suites.

Later in the conflict, MRAP (Mine Resistant Ambush Protected) vehicles have been adopted by SF. USSOCOM have purchased several hundred RG-31, the upgraded RG-31 Mk5 Pathfinders and the RG-33 which are currently seeing extensive operational use. Additional gunner-protection kits including ballistic glass and armour plates have been mounted on GMVs to increase the protection provided to the turret gunner. Other specialist SOF vehicles have also seen use during OIF. Delta used the Pinzgauer SOV, while the SEALs deployed their Chenoweth Desert Patrol Vehicles (DPVs), an up-upgraded dune buggy capable of mounting heavy weapons. The SASR deployed in their famous Perentie six-wheel Long Range Patrol Vehicles (LRPVs), one of their last operational deployments before being retired; and 4RAR brought with them their 4x4 Land Rover Regional Surveillance Vehicles (RSV). UKSF deployed in their equally famous Desert Patrol Vehicles (DPVs), highly modified Land Rover 110 platforms. The DPVs were equipped with .50cal M2s, 40mm Mk19s (later H&K GMGs) and L7A2 GPMGs. All Coalition SOF extensively used all-terrain vehicles (ATVs or 'quad bikes') and Kawasaki dirt bikes for route reconnaissance.

The aviators of 160th Special Operations Aviation Regt fly several different rotary wing aircraft in support of Coalition SOF. Heavy lift is accomplished with the MH-47E, a special operations version of the venerable Chinook equipped with FLIR, a refueling probe and M134 miniguns. The MH-47s are used principally to insert a large number of operators, often by fast-roping them in. The Nightstalkers also fly the

MH-60K and MH-60L Black Hawk for medium lift or for sniper or command-and-control platforms. These MH-60s are modified for special operations use with FLIR and optional long range fuel tanks and are capable of mounting a mid-air refuelling probe. A heavily armed version of the MH-60L is known as the Direct Action Penetrator (DAP); this can choose from a suite of bolt-on/bolt-off weapons systems including .50cal machine guns, 7.62mm miniguns, 30mm cannons, 2.75in unguided rockets and Hellfire ATGMs. The final family of airframes used by the 160th are the distinctive Little Birds. Two versions are flown: the MH-6M with externally mounted bench seats to carry assault teams or snipers, and the AH-6M gunship version mounting miniguns, .50s or rockets. Like the DAP, the AH-6 can quickly be configured for specific missions.

The USAF Special Operations Squadrons also support Coalition SOF. The MC-130 Combat Talon has supplied long range transport, and the awesome destructive power of the AC-130 Spectre has saved the lives of many an SOF team; the MH-53L Pave Low helicopter infiltrated many of the ODAs into western Iraq; and the Para Rescue Jumpers and Casevac employ the surgical suite-equipped HC-130 and the rescue HH-60G Pave Hawk.

APPENDIX: PRIVATE SECURITY CONTRACTORS

The Iraq war has raised the profile of contractor personal security details (PSDs) with the general public, with names such as Blackwater and Aegis now appearing in the media regularly. The reality of PSD work in Iraq is both far more mundane and far more dangerous than these highly coloured accounts might suggest.

Most PSDs in Iraq are former military, many from SOF backgrounds, or former law enforcement, generally with SWAT or tactical experience. Some companies attract former members of particular units; Blackwater, founded by a former SEAL, recruits many SEALs and Marines, while Triple Canopy, founded by Army SF and CAG veterans, tends to attract the former SF, Rangers and Delta guys. Other companies such as Armour Group predominantly recruit British Commonwealth operators. The most public role is the close personal protection (CPP) of key Coalition figures (such as Blackwater's protection of Paul Bremner). The other high visibility roles are the convoy protection teams and the static guards at Coalition facilities in the Green Zone. The convoy teams ferry supplies or personnel across Iraq, often in mine-resistant vehicles such as the Mamba or RG-31, along with armoured 4WDs. A PSD contractor who has spent four years in Iraq explained: 'Most of the armoured SUVs – including GMCs, Suburbans, Excursions, and Explorers, with the odd Mercedes G-Wagon thrown in – these were mainly used by CP/PSD teams. The CETs (Convoy Escort Team) used F350/550-type vehicles.'

Weapons vary depending on the particular job, with high profile teams in overt armoured wagons or SUVs carrying GPMGs and SAWs or the locally procured PKM. PSD personal weapons tend toward the popular M4 in a variety of barrel lengths and manufacturers.

'Initially, in 2004, we had locally purchased weapons, mainly the AK47 with folding stock; there were very few M4-type weapons around, mainly because legit companies went through the proper import



USAF Para Rescue Jumpers maintain security at an HLZ. The ARSOC HH-60 Pave Hawk features a mid-air refuelling probe, and has .50cal M2s in the door-gunner hatches. (Courtesy USSOCOM)

regulations. It wasn't until 2005 when I noticed a lot more M4-type weapons. Most of those were 10–11in barrels, for easier use in confined vehicles; during the early days MP5s and MP5Ks were also used, again for practical reasons,' noted the contractor.

The biggest threats to mobile teams are insurgent ambushes and the IED (Improvised Explosive Device), the insurgent weapon of choice against both armoured and soft-skin targets. Here a PSD explains what it's like to encounter an IED, in this case a very near miss by an EFP (Explosively Formed Projectile) – a particularly nasty IED variant designed specifically to penetrate armour:

'It happens in a split second, unlike a small arms attack, where it's sustained. Sometimes you will see the flash, but it's the boom and the over-pressure that you notice, followed instantly with a massive dust cloud that makes it hard to breathe. My first IA [Immediate Action] was to ask for a shout from the guys in the wagon, to make sure they were OK; then it was to the rest of the team to say "We're good", and if possible to give us a target indicator. The EFP was more like a very loud bang – very little dust, but the pressure as it passed by blew our hood open, causing us to drive blind for 500 metres through a built-up area. The REVA [armoured wagon] was covered in a fine coating of an oily sooty substance, and there were minute traces of copper amongst it [from the EFP projectile, normally made from a copper plate]. We got lucky on that one, with just a burst tyre. A week later we got hit by a double 155mm on the Samara bypass that disabled my vehicle ... by severing all hydraulics and fuel lines. In 30 minutes we were hit by three IEDs in less than 2 kilometres distance.'

The future of PSDs in Iraq, working both for the Coalition and commercial companies, seems assured, with contractors actually costing less overall than using regular military personnel. 'It's not been without its problems, mainly because of the inability to be regulated despite such organizations as the IPOA (International Peace Operators Association). All companies are supposed to be registered to operate in Iraq through the MOI (Ministry of Interior), but that all depends on the thickness of envelopes passed under the table. PSD salaries are on the downward trend; very few people are on the mega-money of \$500-plus a day now, and there are many more Iraqi PSD companies that will get a larger slice of the pie.'

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US Navy SEALs train Iraqi SOF in small unit tactics, while a Marine V-2 Osprey 'tilt-rotor' lifts off in the background. (Courtesy DOD)

PLATE COMMENTARIES

A1: US ARMY 10th SPECIAL FORCES GROUP

This SF operator, fighting in the greener terrain of northern Iraq with Task Force Viking, wears woodland-pattern Battle Dress Uniform (BDUs), a tan baseball cap, and a red-and-white checkered *keffiyeh* – a common local affectation. His armour is the older Special Operations Forces Equipment Advanced Requirements (SPEAR) type, with MOLLE compatible pouches added. He is firing a .50cal M107 Barrett sniper rifle mounting a Leupold scope and PEQ-2 IR laser; the weapon next to him is a 7.62x51mm M14 Designated Marksman Rifle (DMR).

A2: US ARMY 5th SPECIAL FORCES GROUP

Another member of an ODA, wearing three-colour Desert Combat Uniform (DCUs) and SPEAR body armour, under an SO Tech chest rig that features MOLLE straps for mounting pouches, and allows magazines to be carried in a frontal pouch. His headgear is the common Modular/Integrated Communications Helmet (MICH) with a DCU cover and attached Night Observation Device (NOD) mount. His weapon is the 5.56x45mm Mk12 Mod 0 Special Purpose Rifle mounting a Leupold scope and a sound suppressor; his sidearm is the 9x19mm M9 Beretta worn in a Safariland drop-holster.

A3: US AIR FORCE 24th SPECIAL TACTICS SQUADRON

This Combat Controller (CCT) attached to JSOC to support their Special Mission Units has a commercially purchased set of desert tiger-stripe BDUs; he displays on his left arm a CCT patch above an NKDA (No Known Drug Allergies) patch. The rare Integrated Ballistic Communications Helmet (IBCH) is painted tan; this example shows a Wilcox NOD mount, and an MS-2000(M) strobe light attached with Velcro – this has both IR and filtered visible light capabilities, and acts as an IFF device both for air and ground. His vest appears to be a Blackhawk Operator in coyote-tan. His 7.62x51mm Mk14 Mod 0 Enhanced Battle Rifle (EBR) mounts an SEI sound suppressor, the M68 Aimpoint 'red dot' sight and a Surefire tactical light.

B1: BRITISH 22 SPECIAL AIR SERVICE REGIMENT

This trooper wears faded US Army ACU trousers and a British 'SAS smock' (identifiable by the non-wired hood) in desert DPM. Like American SMUs, 22SAS often wear a mixture of camouflage patterns, particularly when working with US units; 'Blades' can be seen in ACUs, three-colour DCUs, desert MARPAT, DPMs or any combination of these. The Peltor Com-Tac headset protects hearing and allows use of comms systems, and note the Adidas GSG9 desert boots. Under his Eagle chest rig he appears to wear a Paraclete RAV Concealment Vest, and a Claymore bag slung to his hip acts as a dump pouch for empty magazines. His 9x19mm SIG Sauer P226 is worn in a drop holster, although mounting the holster on the chest is increasingly common. His primary weapon is the 5.56x45mm Diemaco C8SFW carbine mounting a Trijicon ACOG sight. 22SAS have been using the HK416 and 417 in Iraq, but whether these will eventually replace the Diemaco is unknown.

B2: US ARMY COMBAT APPLICATIONS GROUP (1st SFOD-D)

This Delta operator wears commercial Crye Multicam BDU trousers with an equally non-issue ECWCS smock. Note the subdued US flag (2a), blood-type patch (2b) and 'zap' patch (2c); the 'zap' number allows identification of individuals without using names, particularly if they are wounded. His helmet is a cutaway MICH with NOD mount; his vest an HSGI Wasatch in coyote-tan; and his boots Salomon Mid Experts, seen on operators at the killing of Uday and Qusay Hussein. His drop holster carries a custom-built .45ACP 1911 with a light mount, although this has recently been supplemented with the more sand-resistant .40 Glock 22. His 5.56x45mm HK416 with 10.4in barrel mounts an EOTech 553 sight, a PEQ-2 illuminator and a Surefire light. At his feet is an Accuracy International AWSM in .338.

B3: BRITISH SPECIAL FORCES SUPPORT GROUP

This SFSG operator's use of Crye Multicam BDUs rather than desert DPM identifies him as working with Task Force Black. On his upper right arm he has a subdued Union flag patch above a World War II-vintage Combined Operations patch (3a, 3b), which has apparently been appropriated as an unofficial insignia for SFSG; on his left arm is a 'zap' patch. Karrimor Outback boots are popular among UKSF. A Safariland holster for his P226 is mounted directly to the chest of his olive drab Paraclete RAV. His C8SFW carbine mounts an ACOG sight, a Grip Pod foregrip, a Surefire suppressor and a PEQ-2 illuminator; note also the Magpul release tab fitted to the base of the magazine.

C1: 4th BATTALION (COMMANDO), ROYAL AUSTRALIAN REGIMENT

This Digger serving with the ADF Special Forces Task Group wears issue desert AUSCAM uniform; note the 'glint' tape on his upper right arm for IFF. His locally procured khaki-and-black *keffiyeh/shemagh* is useful for keeping dust out of the mouth and ears. His load-bearing vest is another commercial item, probably from SORD Melbourne; note the MBITR radio worn at his hip, and the AUSCAM holster for either a Browning Hi-Power or an H&K USP Tactical. The F-89 Minimi LSW is the Aussie version of the M249; it mounts a 4x ELCAN M415 sight, and a 200-round assault pack covered in AUSCAM material.

C2: US ARMY 1/75th RANGER REGIMENT

This 1st Bn Ranger wears the standard tri-colour DCUs now replaced by the ACU pattern, although still worn by some Special Forces. His MICH has the Wilcox NOD mount, and 'glint' tape applied to the crown. He wears Hatch CQB gloves and Danner Acadia boots. His vest is the CIRAS Land in coyote-tan; note, hanging from it by D-rings, both a pair of heavy duty fast-roping gloves, and a length of bungee cord supporting an entry shotgun – a shortened Remington 870 with a special 'stand-off' muzzle brake for shooting door locks and hinges. His rifle is the 5.56x45mm M4A1 with 40mm M203 grenade-launcher, mounting a PEQ-2, an M68 Aimpoint and a Surefire light; it is hand-painted in a camouflage finish.

C3: US NAVY SEAL TEAM 4

This SEAL's helmet is the MICH with the Norotos tri-point NOD mounting favoured by Navy Special Warfare. On his Army ACU pattern shirt he sports a Velcro patch with a subdued US flag and 'Calico Jack' patch (3a), a popular unofficial 'morale' patch among SEALs. His boots are the Merrell Saw Tooth type equally popular among Rangers, and his vest is the CIRAS Maritime in desert-khaki – note a second flag patch. The Kydex drop-holster carries a P226; his 5.56x45mm Mk18 Mod 0 CQB-R carbine has an M68 Aimpoint on a LaRue mount, a Surefire light and a PEQ-2. By his feet is a 7.62x51mm Mk48 Mod 0 light machine gun, an up-calibred version of the Mk46 that is popular among all USSF.

D1: US ARMY ASYMMETRIC WARFARE GROUP

The AWG was formed in 2004 from the nucleus of the Joint IEDF Task Force which examined insurgent Improvised Explosive Devices; the new AWG's brief was widened to include developing responses to all insurgent tactics which could then be distilled for Regular Army units. The AWG is not part of USSOCOM, and it was explained to the author that it was 'the brainchild of Gen McCrystal [head of JSOC] who saw that SF was very successful and wanted those methodologies outsourced to Big Army'. His DCU shirt has been modified by moving the skirt pockets up to the outer

arms; note the full-colour US flag patches. The Paraclete RACK vest has commercially procured magazine pouches for his non-issue .45ACP H&K UMP45 sub-machine gun; this rarely seen weapon mounts an EOTech 552 sight. (The AWG also purchased HK416 piston-action carbines, but these were controversially withdrawn for political reasons.) His sidearm is the Glock 19, and he also carries a 40mm M79 grenade-launcher, still popular among SOF for its superior accuracy and robustness over the M203.

D2: POLISH GRUPA REAGOWANIA OPERACYJNO MOBILNEHO

This GROM operator clad in all-black counter-terrorist kit wears a flotation-equipped load-bearing vest, indicating that he was part of the GROM effort at Umm Qasr. His helmet is the plastic Protec model often used by boarding teams, worn here with ballistic goggles and a black Nomex flash hood. A Blackhawk holder on his left forearm carries eight red 00 buckshot shells for his Remington entry shotgun, and a Blackhawk SERPA drop holster his Glock 17 pistol. His primary weapon is the H&K MP5A5 sub-machine gun, with an integrally mounted Surefire light on the forearm and twin magazines supported by an H&K clip.

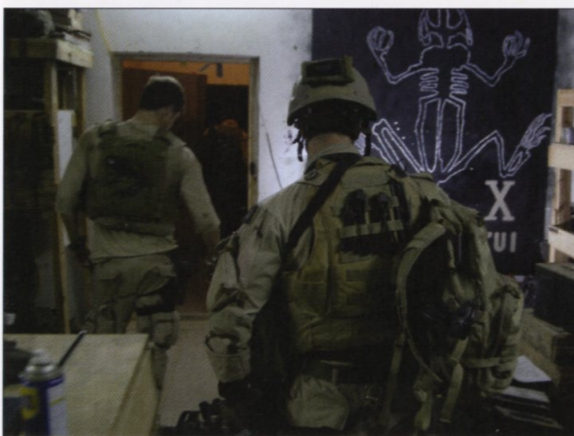
Wearing ACUs, a member of the US Army's Asymmetric Warfare Group (AWG) takes a breather. He carries the HK416 carbine, with an EOTech sight and PEQ-2 infrared illuminator. (Courtesy DOD)





Men of 4 Bn (Commando), Royal Australian Regt, wearing DPDU desert uniforms; note the distinctive cap, with its broad, deep curtain for the cheeks and neck. Various items of load-bearing equipment in standard AUSCAM are often seen used in conjunction with the desert clothing. (Courtesy ADF)

Though taken in a dimly-lit room, this image does show the SEAL Team 10 banner of a skeletal frog. On the original it is possible to make out the frog stencilled in black, slanting up towards the left shoulder, on the rear plate carrier of the operator at left. (Courtesy US Navy, photo Mass Comm Spec 2nd Class Eli J. Medellin)



D3: BRITISH PRIVATE SECURITY CONTRACTOR

He wears desert tiger-stripe BDU trousers, a tan Under Armour T-shirt, Oakley desert assault boots, and Oakley Juliet glasses with the Blaze lenses particularly suited to high-glare desert environments. Note the 'Calico Jack' and large full-colour Union flag patch just visible below the stock of his carbine on his CIRAS Land plate-carrier vest, popular with SOF and contractors alike; a Motorola tactical radio is carried in a lower left pouch. His coyote-tan Safariland 6004 drop holster carries a Glock 19; his primary weapon is a Bushmaster copy of the 5.56mm M4 mounting a Grip Pod foregrip and an EOTech 551 sight; note the clamped twin magazines.

E: THE DEBECKA CROSSROADS, 6 APRIL 2003

This scenario depicts the action described in the body text, when three ODAs from 10th and 3rd Special Forces Groups – ODA 044, and 391 and 392 respectively – held the 'Alamo' position with Kurdish Peshmerga guerrillas (1) against an Iraqi mechanized infantry company supported by a platoon of T-55 tanks, while awaiting 'fast air'. (2) An Iraqi ZSU-57-2 beyond the crossroads brought the ridge line under fire, while infantry in Zil trucks (3) advanced up the road from the south-west, under fire from the Special Forces GMVs (4). Iraqi MTLB armoured personnel carriers (5) then advanced, making smoke, and were engaged by the ODAs with Javelin ATGMs (6, 7). Four T-55 tanks then emerged from behind the APCs and advanced on the ridge. One was destroyed with a Javelin (8); the others were later driven back by close air support from F/A-18 jets.

F: TASK FORCE 20 - HIGH-VALUE TARGET RAID

This generic scenario depicts a raid to capture or eliminate high-value AQI ('al Qaeda in Iraq') personnel reported hiding out in a suburban villa. Most such operations have top cover, here provided by an AH-6M Little Bird from the USAF's 160th SOAR (1). Ranger security teams (2, 3) are deployed along the access roads to intercept 'squirters' leaving the location and any external attempts to interfere; they wear ACUs and are armed with M4A1s, M203s and Mk46 Mod 0s. Their GMV (4) is parked opposite the main gate, covering the approach with a mounted M240B; a Ranger NCO orders curious civilians to keep clear (5). Inside, the Joint Special Operations Task Force assault team, composed of Delta operators, are in position in two four-man 'stacks' each side of the main door (6). The lead man in the left stack is about to blow the door with a frame charge; the men behind him cover the door, upper windows and roof lines, and the team's rear. The operators wear a mix of ACUs, DCUs and commercial Multicam, and cutaway MICH helmets with Peltor headsets; their primary weapon is the Heckler & Koch 416 mounted with a mixture of sights – EOTech 553s and Schmidt & Bender Short Dots, and the lead man on the right also has a Remington 12-gauge to take care of any internal door locks.

An unidentified JSOC or AWG operator (centre) supports regular troops of 101st Airborne Division. Note his weapon, a 5.56x45mm Heckler & Koch 416 mounting a Schmidt & Bender Short Dot sight, PEQ-2 illuminator and tactical flashlight. (Courtesy DOD)



G1: M1078 LMTV 'WAR PIG', US 5th SPECIAL FORCES GROUP

The modified LMTV was developed by 5th Special Forces Group to act as both mobile resupply and command-and-control vehicles, crewed by ODB teams. This example is armed with a 7.62x51mm M240B on a pintle mount for the front passenger, and a .50cal M2 in the rear. Others carry the Mk19 40mm automatic grenade-launcher instead of the M2.

G2: GROUND MOBILITY VEHICLE, US 5th SPECIAL FORCES GROUP

This GMV is typical of the modified 'Hummers' used by 5th SF Group for their operations in western Iraq in spring 2003. Note that it does not feature any of the later up-armouring or an ASK turret. Doors and windows have been removed to allow firing from inside the vehicle and to make rapid 'de-bussing' easier. An aftermarket bullbar has been mounted on the front to tackle obstacles such as roadblocks and general debris, and an individually customized stowage rack has been added to the roof – ODAs had to carry an inordinate amount of varied equipment. Among the stowage here is the carrying case for a Javelin ATGM; AT-3s were also commonly carried strapped down on the roof, allowing the gunner access. The mounted weapons are a Mk19 AGL on the turret ring, and an M240B on a swivel elbow mount by the front door. Typically, personal weapons were kept close at hand, and a captured L34A1 suppressed Sterling SMG might be tied with bungee cord to the central column to allow the driver instant access.

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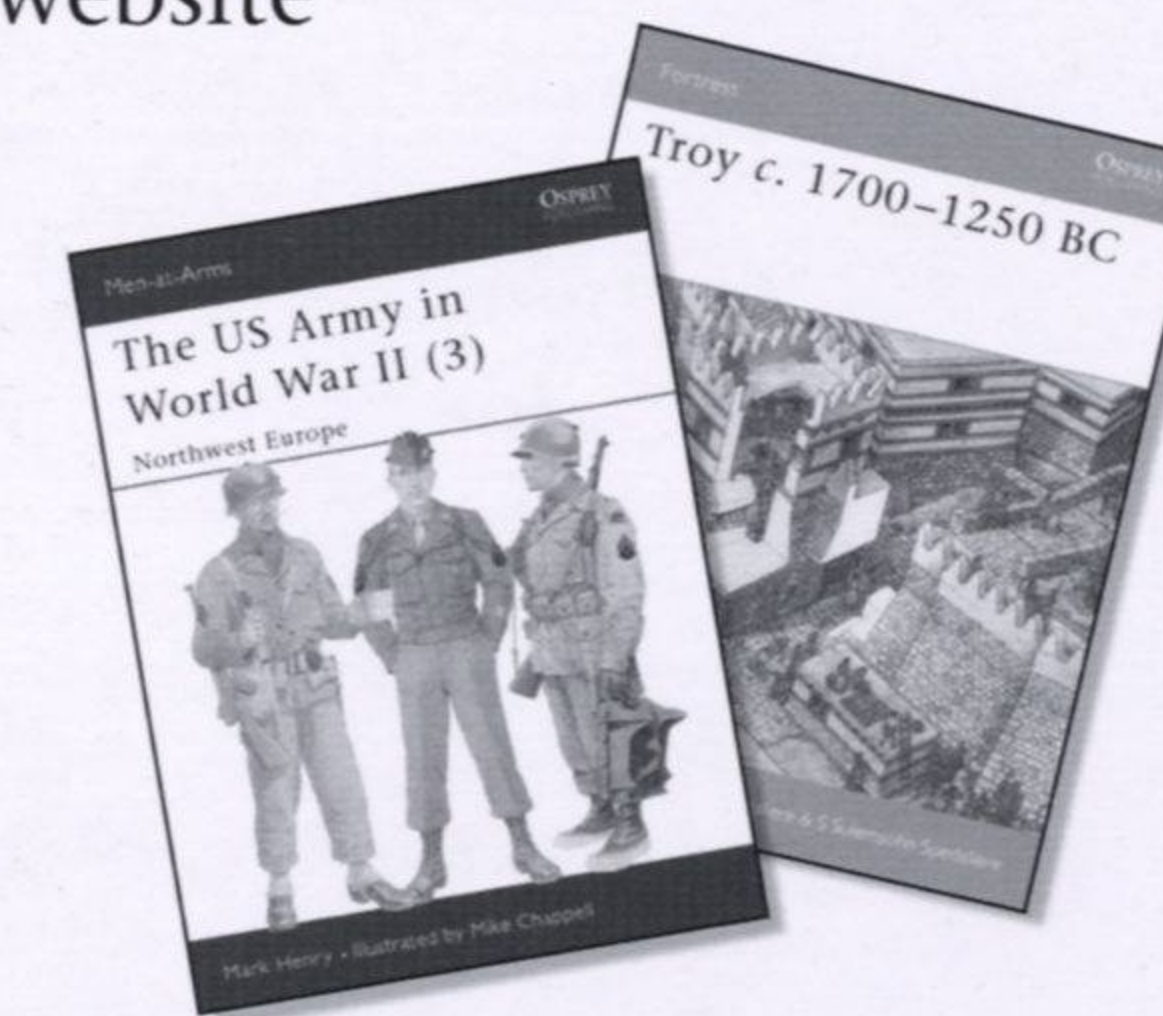
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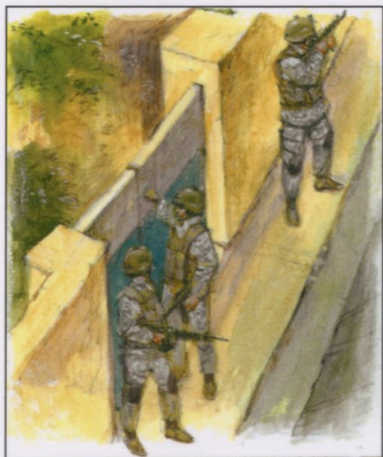
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