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Coalition Command and Control in the Networked Era

Thunder Runs into Baghdad: The Impact of Information Age  
Command and Control on Conflict\*

C2 Analysis

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## Abstract

The term “Thunder Run” has been applied to a variety of activities, from the heavily armed convoys sent out in Vietnam to ensure that roads were open and clear of mines to the onslaught of military personnel going on leave after payday in Korea. Used here, however, the term refers to two specific operations during the Iraqi War on April 5 and April 7 of 2003 in which heavily armored columns were sent into Baghdad to first test the strength of the city’s defenses and then occupy key centers of gravity in order to hasten the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime.

The discussion here focuses on the tactical level: what the troops on the ground did and the decisionmaking associated with their efforts. However, modern combat tends to collapse the echelons of command, so the headquarters at the theater level (U.S. Central Command or CENTCOM and the Combined Forces Land Combat Command or CFLCC) as well as high level headquarters within Iraq (V Corps and 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division) played important and often direct roles in both the command function and control function for the forces involved. In addition, typical of U.S. operations during IRAQI FREEDOM, the tactical level involved not only combined arms (armor, infantry, artillery, rotary wing forces, and engineers), but also joint elements, providing both fixed wing aircraft and intelligence support. Hence, the thunder runs were complicated, involving both large numbers of elements as well as a dynamic battlespace.

## Background

The term “Thunder Run” has been applied to a variety of activities, from the heavily armed convoys sent out in Vietnam to ensure that roads were open and clear of mines to the onslaught of military personnel going on leave after payday in Korea. Used here, however, the term refers to two specific operations during the Iraqi War on April 5 and April 7 of 2003 in which heavily armored columns were sent into Baghdad to first test the strength of the city’s defenses and then occupy key centers of gravity in order to hasten the fall of Saddam Hussein’s regime.

The discussion here focuses on the tactical level: what the troops on the ground did and the decisionmaking associated with their efforts. However, modern combat tends to collapse the echelons of command, so the headquarters at the theater level (U.S. Central Command or CENTCOM and the Combined Forces Land Combat Command or CFLCC) as well as senior headquarters within Iraq (V Corps and 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division) played important and often direct roles in both the command function and control function for the forces involved. In addition, typical of U.S. operations during IRAQI FREEDOM, the tactical level involved not only combined arms (armor, infantry, artillery, rotary wing forces, and engineers), but also joint elements, providing both fixed wing aircraft and intelligence support. Hence, the thunder runs were complicated, involving both large numbers of elements as well as a dynamic battlespace.

A note should also be made about historical sources, not only in this article, but whenever secondary research is conducted. This case has been chosen because it was important for understanding the state of the art in employing network-centric approaches, because it was important enough to be carefully documented, and because several histories treating these events had already been published. However, historical sources are always limited by the records they consult, the people they interview, and the perspectives of the commands and individuals involved. As a result, some inconsistent reporting is almost inevitable. We have noted inconsistencies when they appeared in the records that we examined and reported alternative perspectives when they appeared significant.

Two examples should suffice to make the point. Historians have reported that a hastily constructed minefield was put in place during the night of April 6 and threatened the prompt departure of the Thunder Run. Some sources reported that they were cleared by having tanks with mine-clearing devices at the front of the column when the attack was launched. However, others report interviews with engineers who cleared the mines by hand during the night and tank commanders who noted the narrow lanes marked through the minefield. Both statements may be correct—the engineers almost undoubtedly cleared a lane before the attack was launched and a prudent commander would have led the attack with tanks capable of clearing mines anywhere along the route.

The other example deals with the decision to launch the resupply convoy on April 7. Here one author reports a decision by the convoy commander to move out of the field where he has been sitting with fuel and ammunition trucks and proceed down the road to resupply heavily engaged units because the area had been targeted and he feared that his position would be attacked. Other sources indicate that the convoy was ordered to move out in

response to desperate needs for ammunition and fuel. Here again, both explanations may be correct. The convoy commander would have wanted to move out of his endangered position. This appears to have occurred about the same time as urgent requests for resupply were forwarded from the engaged units.

### **The Situation**

Coalition attacks into Iraq began on March 20 and consisted of three major thrusts, which are shown on Map 1:

- The British-led efforts in the south to capture Umm Qasr (the only port on the Persian Gulf) and the large city of Basra;
- Attacks led by the U.S. Marine forces through Jalibah and Nasiriyah (between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers) to seize the river crossings at Kut and Numaniyah, from which they could follow Route 6 to the city of Baghdad; and
- The U.S. Army's 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division, attacking up the valley of the Euphrates River through Najaf, Hillah, and Karbala, from which they would approach Baghdad.



**Map 1. The three-pronged coalition invasion of Iraq.**

According to Keegan, the key to the Army's approach was the seizure of the Karbala Gap (between the Euphrates River and Lake Razzazah) and forcing the Republican Guard units (deployed to defend the approaches to Baghdad) to fight, surrender in place, or retreat toward the city, exposing them to destruction from the air.<sup>1</sup> Between April 1 and April 3, the Third Infantry under MG Blount penetrated the Karbala Gap and reached their local objective, Baghdad International Airport (Objective LIONS) on the outskirts of the city. They also defeated major Iraqi efforts to counter-attack and regain control of the airport.

<sup>1</sup> Keegan. *The Iraq War*, pp145 & 187.

## The Plan for Baghdad

According to *On Point*, the Army commissioned analysis of the initial combat phase of the Iraqi war: “Once through the Karbala Gap, V Corps would prepare for the final phase of ground combat, the isolation of Baghdad, and attacks into the city designed to remove Saddam Hussein and the Ba’athist regime. The plan required effecting control of Baghdad, but V Corps, I MEF, and the CFLCC hoped to avoid a house-by-house, block-by-block, reduction of the defenses in the city.”

“The original plan envisaged the [V Corps] and the [1<sup>st</sup>] MEF advancing more or less abreast, with the 4<sup>th</sup> ID attacking from the north to isolate Baghdad. The soldiers and marines would concentrate on the city and establish an inner cordon. Never intended to be a hermetic seal, this cordon would rather consist of five brigade-sized operating bases placed on key terrain encircling the city and cutting the major roads in and out.”<sup>2</sup>

“The final battle for Baghdad would be a sequence of raids and limited objective attacks to control, neutralize, or destroy the regime’s symbolic and physical levers of power.”<sup>3</sup>

However, the forces involved at the tactical level had a different view of the plan for reducing the city. David Zucchini, a reporter who interviewed dozens of those involved in the thunder runs, indicates that the armor units had been told, before launching their attacks from Kuwait into Iraq, that their mission was to defeat enemy forces and capture the approaches to the city, but that the city would be cleared by light forces from the airborne divisions.<sup>4</sup> He indicates that Lieutenant Colonel Schwartz, commander of the Rogue Battalion (formally Task Force 1/64) that carried out the first thunder run and formed a key part of the second one, also assumed that the armor would set up blocking positions around the city, which would be cleared by airborne forces at a later date.<sup>5</sup> Zucchini notes elsewhere that Colonel Perkins, commander of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade, which included Task Force 1/64 and all the forces used on both thunder runs, “had attended a major planning conference in Kuwait in January in which the Forward Operating Base (FOB) model was adopted: armored units would surround Baghdad at strategically located forward bases while airborne infantry conducted raids designed to steadily destroy enemy resistance.”<sup>6</sup>

Moreover, enemy intelligence had a similar view. “Enemy prisoners of war in Najaf and Karbala had told U.S. interrogators that the Iraqi military was expecting American tanks to surround the city with what the Americans called FOBs—forward operating bases—

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<sup>2</sup> Of course, the 4<sup>th</sup> ID was alter denied the use of Turkey to launch its attacks. *On Point*. p246.

<sup>3</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p247.

<sup>4</sup> Zucchini. *Thunder Run*, p3.

<sup>5</sup> Zucchini, *ThunderRun*. p6.

<sup>6</sup> Zucchini, *ThunderRun*. p71.

while infantry from the 82<sup>nd</sup> Airborne and 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne cleared the capitol block by block.”<sup>7</sup>

In fact, the plans for the two thunder runs evolved based on the military situation. Having seized the airport, MG Blount decided to launch the first thunder run (April 5), an arching attack designed to penetrate Baghdad’s defenses, then join the forces already at the airport (see Map 2), primarily as armed reconnaissance.<sup>8</sup> As discussed in the next section, the intelligence about Baghdad’s defenses was poor. Moreover, this attack was an effort to both maintain the military initiative and to demonstrate U.S. success to the media in the city.

The second thunder run had a more ambitious set of objectives: seizing and, if possible, holding key terrain in the city. The plan depended on moving considerable combat power (an entire armor brigade rather than a battalion) into the city and establishing the capability to resupply and reinforce it as needed. This plan began by following the same route as the first attack, but at a key junction it called for the U.S. forces to swing toward the center of the city and seize crucial terrain that could be defended. The plan emerged in discussions between MG Blount (3<sup>rd</sup> ID) and LTG Wallace (V Corps) based on both the success of the first raid and the perceived need to make a clear (physical) statement to the international press and the Iraqi regime about U.S. capability.<sup>9</sup>

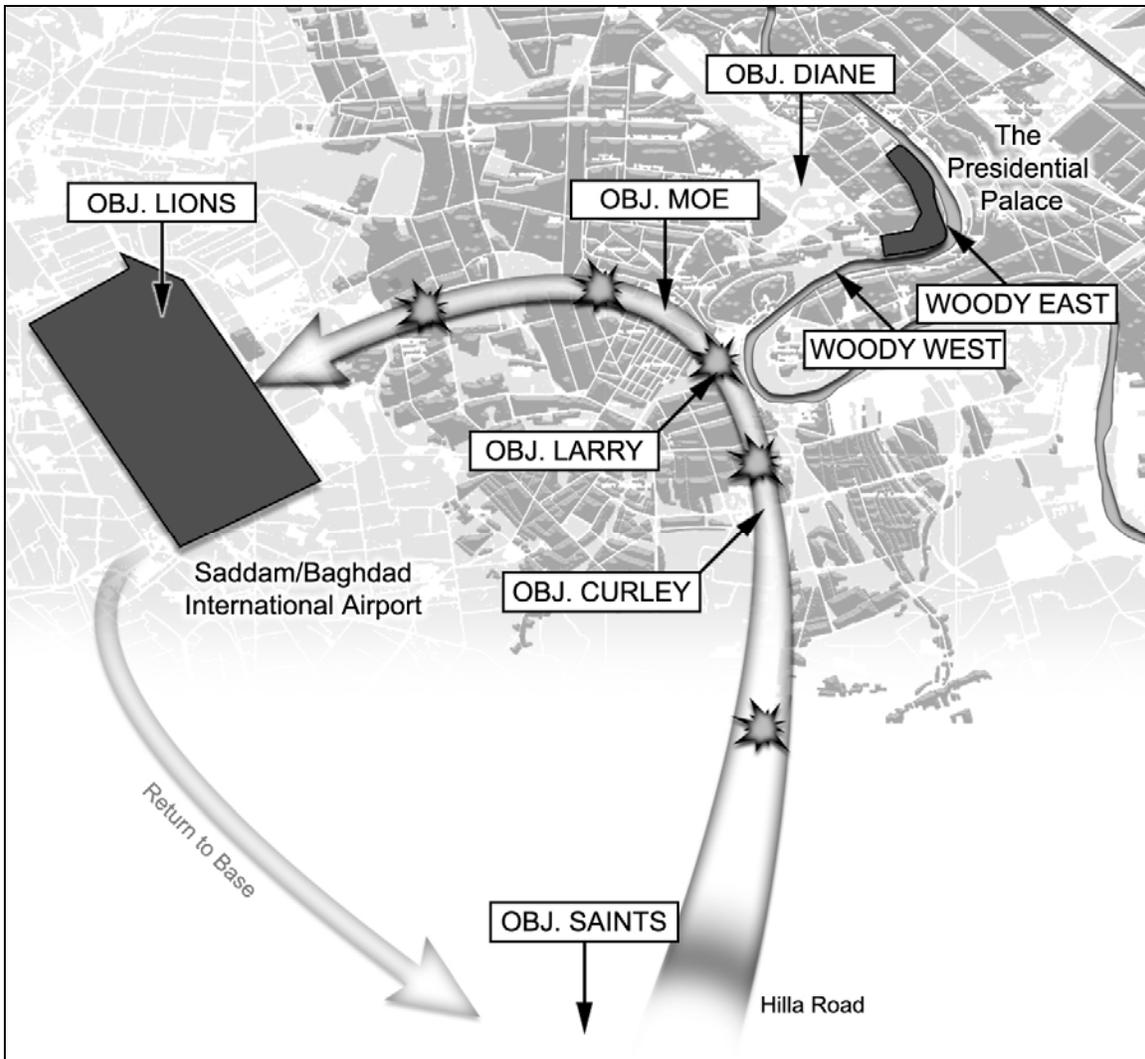
While using armor as the attacking force differed from the expectations of the tactical commanders, the first thunder run was planned as a raid beginning at one blocking position or forward operating base (FOB) (Objective SAINTS), penetrating the city, and ending at another FOB (Objective LIONS at the airport). This was clearly consistent with the early plan.

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<sup>7</sup> Zucchini, *Thunder Run*. p68.

<sup>8</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*. p341.

<sup>9</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn, *On Point*. p347.



**Map 2. Thunder Run of April 5**

Actual planning for these attacks was largely tactical and local. As is discussed below, some important decisions had been made well before the fact when the forces were configured, but those choices were made with the overall Iraqi War in mind, not with these specific attacks under consideration. Planning on the ground included decisions by the Brigade and Battalion commanders about which forces to use, the order of march within each column, how artillery was to be employed, which elements of the force were responsible for each element of the mission, and the timing of specific actions. However, these were not detailed plans. They included guidelines such as “keep moving” and “husband anti-tank ammunition.” Most of the tactical decisions were made as the military situation developed.

### **Intelligence Before the Fact**

According to *On Point* as the 3<sup>rd</sup> ID approached Baghdad, “intelligence officers at all echelons continued to have great difficulty accurately describing the threat in the

city...In October 2002, intelligence officers from the national level, CENTCOM, CFLCC, I MEF, and V Corps met and developed a common estimate of the enemy situation that they had separately continued to update.”

“Prior to D-day, intelligence officers estimated that no more than 9-12 company equivalents of the Republican Guard would successfully retreat into the city. They expected these units to be disorganized....There was some reason to believe the Iraqis had developed a sophisticated and potentially effective city-defense strategy that would leverage all of the advantages of a prepared defense in an urban environment. Captured documents revealed a detailed plan to divide Baghdad into sectors and defend it in a manner reminiscent of the First Battle of Grozny. The international airport and the palace complex area would be the most heavily defended sites in Baghdad. All intelligence reporting supported these assessments, indicating that the defense would crystallize around these two critical facilities. Prewar intelligence estimates noted the presence of paramilitary forces in large numbers, but were vague on how these might operate. The march up-country effectively answered that question, painting the picture of the potentially dangerous and difficult fight to come.”<sup>10</sup>

The same source comments on the defenses as U.S. forces approached the city. “Imagery and other reports inexplicably showed almost no preparations within the city. There were numerous small fighting positions, but none of the deliberate defenses that common sense and Iraqi doctrine indicated.”<sup>11</sup>

The lack of quality intelligence also shows up in Zucchini’s interviews. He notes that when he received the order to prepare for the first thunder run, brigade commander Colonel Schwartz found little to work with. “The brigade’s S-2 shop, the intelligence guys, had not been able to tell him much. In fact, when Schwartz had asked for specifics about enemy strength and positions...he got a vague, long-winded answer. Finally Schwartz said, ‘So you don’t know shit about the enemy in the city, do you?’ The intelligence officer told him, ‘No, nothing really.’”

“Nor were the intelligence officers entirely certain how badly coalition air strikes had degraded Saddam Hussein’s forces, what weapons the Iraqis had, or how determined they were to stand and fight. The brigade’s scouts, who normally went out ahead to conduct enemy surveillance, had not ventured north. It was too dangerous. And if any Special Forces teams had been into the city, Schwartz certainly did not know what, if anything, they had discovered.”<sup>12</sup>

Schwartz did have satellite imagery providing a black-and-white photographic view of Baghdad. But the imagery was several days old, perhaps a week or more. Even if it had

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<sup>10</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p335.

<sup>11</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p335.

<sup>12</sup> Zucchini, *Thunder Run*, p12.

been shot that morning, it would not have told Schwartz where the enemy was dug in. Moreover, as the battle developed, it was characterized by rapid movements of large numbers of Iraqi fighters. Satellite imagery could not pick up camouflaged bunkers or RPG teams hiding in alleyways and second story windows. The division had tried to order up a pass by a UAV...for real-time battlefield photos, but for various bureaucratic and technical reasons, it never happened.”

“To the best of Schwartz’s knowledge, Highway 8 was not blocked by any concerted Iraqi attempt at barricades. The Iraqis certainly had not blown the bridges or overpasses leading into the capital....Based on the most recent satellite imagery, and on reports from American pilots who had flown over the city, the highway was clear and relatively unscathed by coalition air strikes.”<sup>13</sup>

### **April 5 Thunder Run**

Lt. Col. Schwartz commanded 1-64 AR. Before deploying he “gave up his B Company, receiving in return C/3-15 IN, D/10<sup>th</sup> Engineers, an Air Force Tactical control party, a counterintelligence team, and a liaison party from a marine air and naval gunfire liaison company.”<sup>14</sup> Hence, this battalion task force was a combined arms team capable of using both air and artillery from outside units. The engineers loaded into M-113 armored personnel carriers and provided firepower on the move including machine guns that could elevate to fire into second and third stories that could not be reached by those on Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles. The task force comprised nearly 100 tracked vehicles and as many wheeled vehicles. Schwartz elected to leave all his wheeled support vehicles behind because of their lack of armament.<sup>15</sup>

Keegan and Donnelly also note that the first thunder run was also supported by both American gunship helicopters and A-10 Warthog anti-tank aircraft.<sup>16</sup> However, these assets were largely confined to striking Iraqi fighters in side streets as they moved toward the fight because those actually engaged with the American column were often hugging it, making the use of all but the most precise weapons very dangerous. Purdum reports that the A-10s were effective in destroying anti-aircraft batteries that had been turned into direct fire weapons against the American armor.<sup>17</sup> Air Force pilots were also able to provide some intelligence about enemy forces, both those in prepared positions in front of the column and also those moving toward it from side streets.<sup>18</sup> Murray and Scales

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<sup>13</sup> Zucchini. *Thunder Run*, p13.

<sup>14</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p341.

<sup>15</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p342.

<sup>16</sup> Keegan. *The Iraq War*, p194; Donnelly. *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, p80.

<sup>17</sup> Purdum. *A Time of Our Choosing*, p197.

<sup>18</sup> Zucchini, *Thunder Run*, p31.

indicate that artillery was also a factor in this first thunder run. According to them, some Iraqis had set up roadblocks and positioned armored vehicles in side streets from which they could fire into the American column as it drove by, but the MLRS (multiple launcher rocket system) was used to disrupt these efforts in front of the Task Force's advance.<sup>19</sup> However, like air power, artillery had to be used carefully to avoid friendly fire incidents.

The April 5 thunder run took only about two and a half hours. The attacking force covered approximately 17 kilometers. Its casualties were relatively light: one tank was lost when it was struck by a rocket or recoilless rifle in its vulnerable rear and the force suffered one killed and a half-dozen other serious wounds. Enemy casualties could only be estimated, with Third Infantry stating they were between 800 and 1,000 killed, while others have estimated totals as high as 3,000. The mission was clearly accomplished as the armed reconnaissance determined that the enemy was willing to fight and die, but his efforts were disorganized and supported only by relatively light weapons. While the column was engaged almost as soon as it crossed its line of departure and the small arms, RPG (rocket propelled grenade) fire, as well as some mortars and recoilless rifle fire continued throughout the operation, nothing in the Iraqi defenses was capable of defeating the Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles that comprised most of the American force.

This operation was monitored by higher headquarters using at least two different systems. Donnelly as well as Murray and Scales report that the V Corps commander was receiving imagery from a UAV over the column.<sup>20</sup> However, the feed from this asset was not available to Task Force 1-64 as it conducted the mission on the ground. The unit was also monitored using Blue Force Tracker (BFT), a satellite system that reads transponders on friendly vehicles. This system was used by 3<sup>rd</sup> ID Headquarters as well as 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade's Tactical Operating Center to follow the progress of the operation. It proved its value as the armored column approached its destination at Baghdad International Airport (Objective Lions), which was occupied by the First Brigade. The lead element of the thunder run detected tanks to its front and was concerned that it had encountered Iraqi armor. However, BFT imagery assisted the troops on the ground in confirming that those were friendly forces.<sup>21</sup> Hence, in addition to providing timely situation awareness, this system also helped to ensure that fratricide would be avoided. Very much to their credit, there is no indication in the record that any of the higher headquarters monitoring the thunder run made any effort to intervene or manage the tactical effort. Such "micro-management" is a major concern for many officers as systems like the Blue Force Tracker are brought into the force. Hence, having senior officers demonstrate the self-

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<sup>19</sup> Murray and Scales. *The Iraq War*, p209.

<sup>20</sup> Note that this contradicts Zucchini's report that the UAV was not available. Donnelly, *Operation*. p80. Murray and Scales, p210.

<sup>21</sup> Zucchini, *Thunder Run*, p61.

discipline to monitor an intense and important action without injecting themselves into tactical decisions and control is important.

While the April 5 thunder run was beset with the normal problems of any combat operation, the normal “fog of war” that must be expected, only one event threatened to create serious problems. The leading tank of the column was using a military map, a “Plugger” (a handheld GPS), and the road signs (which fortunately included the word “airport” in English as well as the familiar international symbol) to trace its route and look for the highway junction that would turn the unit toward its destination. Under the pressure of combat, the tank took the wrong ramp. This was corrected by making a u-turn through the concrete barrier that divided the highway (proving the value of tanks and the plows attached to those in the lead).<sup>22</sup> Later, another tank that had fallen behind as it stopped to help those on a disabled Abrams missed both the proper ramp and the u-turn, but was fortunately able to use a traffic circle to return to the proper route and therefore catch up with the rest of the column.<sup>23</sup> These errors might well have been avoided with better maps (the original error apparently came from an error on the map), providing UAV feed to those in the column and/or providing BFT or some other short range system that would show the vehicles in the column one another’s positions. Indeed, Zucchini reports that MG Blount had been monitoring the operation closely enough to have seen the column halt when the tank was hit and burning and both the u-turn and the individual tank turning back at the traffic circle.<sup>24</sup>

Finally, reporting about this first attack is replete with examples of appropriate information sharing and self-synchronized actions at the tactical level. For example, the vehicles not only identified and fired upon targets in their assigned sectors, but they also routinely identified threats and potential threats they could not engage for others following them in the column. This enabled the battalion to provide continuous fire against recognized threats. The units successfully self-synchronized when one Abrams tank was hit in the rear and caught fire, and the other vehicles moved into position to cover and take aboard the members of its crew and to assist in fighting the fire. Similarly, when casualties were taken, other vehicles provided cover as they were moved to the vehicles carrying medical personnel.

## **The Second Thunder Run**

The decision to conduct a second thunder run appears not to have been controversial. However, the precise objectives of the operation and the decisionmaking around them are not so straightforward. The first explicit discussion of undertaking this mission appears to have occurred at the Baghdad International Airport shortly after the troops returned from the April 5 attack. MG Blount, the 3<sup>rd</sup> ID Commander, met Colonel Perkins, 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade

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<sup>22</sup> Zucchini, *Thunder Run*, p36.

<sup>23</sup> Zucchini, *Thunder Run*, pp42-43.

<sup>24</sup> Zucchini, *Thunder Run*, p67.

commander, on the tarmac where they discussed the fact that another thunder run would be an important way to maintain momentum and keep pressure on the Iraqi regime. He told Perkins he expected higher headquarters (V Corps) would approve an attack for April 7. This would be a brigade attack, much larger than the battalion-sized raid just completed. Its objective would be similar, testing the Iraqi defenses, inflicting casualties on those still willing to fight, and returning to the Forward Operating Bases around the city. Hence, the raid would be consistent with the original approach to reducing the city except for the fact that armor would be employed instead of light forces. Late on the morning of the 5<sup>th</sup>, Blount sent a proposal for the thunder run to V Corps.<sup>25</sup>

However, Colonel Perkins developed a more ambitious concept of the operation. This was reportedly influenced heavily by the apparent success of Iraqi propaganda that was insisting the Americans had not penetrated the capital and were experiencing heavy losses when they tried. *On Point* notes that Perkins believed it was essential to show that this propaganda effort was false, partly to ensure that it did not embolden Iraqi fighters and partly to demonstrate success to the international media.<sup>26</sup> *Cobra II* makes the same point. Zucchini reports a conversation in which Perkins Executive Officer, Lt. Col. Eric Wesley, told him about listening to BBC reporting in which the Iraqi Minister of Information had reported defeating American armor and BBC correspondents had indicated they had not seen American tanks in the city center. Perkins is quoted as saying “You know, this just changed form a tactical war to an information war.”<sup>27</sup> Well before the mission was planned, Perkins wanted to find a way to penetrate the city and occupy visible positions. Zucchini reports that Perkins received approval for a thunder run on April 7, proceeding to the city center and then returning. Tactical planning for the operation would be Perkins’ responsibility.<sup>28</sup>

Other sources indicate that overnight on April 5-6, Blount conferred with the V Corps commander, Lt. Gen. Wallace, and the two of them concluded that they would conduct another thunder run. The purpose would again be to enter the city of Baghdad, occupy key intersections for a period of time, then come back out. Wallace reportedly considered an attack to the downtown area and occupation of the regime area there to be too ambitious a goal. Having watched the Iraqi forces close in behind the first thunder run, mining the roads used and preparing defenses in the expectation that the Americans would return the same way, Wallace was not fully confident that lines of communication

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<sup>25</sup> Zucchini. *Thunder Run*, pp67-68.

<sup>26</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p391.

<sup>27</sup> Zucchini. *Thunder Run*, p.72.

<sup>28</sup> Zucchini. *Thunder Run*, p.72

could be maintained for purposes of resupply.<sup>29</sup> Blount later recalled that Wallace had said, “Don’t go in to stay. We are not ready to go to the palace yet.”<sup>30</sup>

According to Gordon and Trainer, “Blount had his operations center pass the word to Perkins 2<sup>nd</sup> BCT: attack to the intersections and then pull out....Blount recalled ‘I am sure the division told the brigade to just go to the intersections and seize them. I always thought Perkins understood to stop at the intersections....’ Perkins, who was not in his tactical operations center when Blount’s staff called, never got the message. He assumed everyone was in agreement that he was to attack downtown.”<sup>31</sup>

There is little doubt about Perkins’ intentions. His Fragmentary Order for the Thunder Run on April 7 identifies the Task as “Attack to seize Objective DIANE (Baghdad City Center)” and the Purpose to be “To demonstrate American resolve and facilitate the fall of the Iraqi regime.”<sup>32</sup> His briefing to the leadership of the brigade on the afternoon of 6 April was also clear. He reportedly indicated that “the way to convince the world that the regime was falling was to put American tanks and Bradleys in the palace complex overnight.”<sup>33</sup> That is not to say that Perkins was not aware of the difficulties of the mission. Indeed, he articulated four conditions that would need to be fulfilled in order to go downtown and stay:

- The 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade Combat Team (BCT) would have to successfully fight its way into Baghdad;
- They would need to seize defensible, important, and symbolic terrain there;
- They would need to open and maintain an LOC into Baghdad; and
- They would need to be able to resupply sufficiently to remain overnight.<sup>34</sup>

Somewhat curiously, other sources reference the decisionmaking as more consistent over time and across echelons. According to Murray and Scales, “The time had come for another thunder run, but this time the army would remain in the city. During a brief teleconference, Blount, Wallace, McKiernan, and Franks scheduled the attack for the next day [April 7].<sup>35</sup> Donnelly also notes that, “In a teleconference on April 6, generals

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<sup>29</sup> Gordon and Trainor. *Cobra II* p.393; Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p 347.

<sup>30</sup> Gordon and Trainor. *Cobra II* p394.

<sup>31</sup> Gordon and Trainor. *Cobra II* p. 394.

<sup>32</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, page 347.

<sup>33</sup> Zucchini. *Thunder Run*, p. 81.

<sup>34</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p. 349.

<sup>35</sup> Murray and Scales, p212.

Blount, Wallace, McKiernan, and Franks agreed that the time had come for a larger, more decisive thunder run – indeed not a raid but a bold move to begin the actual seizure of Baghdad....This would not be a ‘drive by shooting,’ but an attack to seize the regime district up to the Tigris – to occupy Saddam’s presidential palace and its grounds – and hold it.”<sup>36</sup> Finally, Keegan notes that “[Blount] decided on a second ‘thunder run’.... If it made a successful penetration the raid would become a permanent occupation of the city center.... Generals McKiernan and Franks, conferring with the divisions and brigade commanders via their sophisticated communications systems...concurred.”<sup>37</sup> This last statement is probably in error as no other source suggests that Perkins participated directly in discussions with any commander other than Blount.

It seems fair to conclude that there was a multi-echelon teleconference and that the desirability of a second thunder run was discussed. However, three different decisions are involved: (a) whether to conduct another thunder run, (b) whether it would go to intersections or to downtown Baghdad and the palace grounds, and (c) whether to come back out immediately or stay overnight (or longer). The fact that these were not agreed across the senior leadership is clearly underlined when Wallace notes that the first time he was aware of a change in plans that would take the force downtown was “when he watched the blue icons on his BFT turn right off Highway 8.”<sup>38</sup>

### **Planning for the April 7 Thunder Run**

The lessons learned from the first thunder run helped plan for the one to take place on April 7. Two major observations were made: (a) the troops must maintain momentum and (b) overpasses were key pieces of terrain.<sup>39</sup> With this in mind, they decided to place strong points at Objectives Curley, Larry, and Moe in order to control the overpasses and key intersections along the major highways in and out of Baghdad.

While meeting with his planners the night of April 6, Perkins took their recommended strategies and revised them. The decision was made to position the brigade’s artillery pre-planned fires on the key intersections (specifically the overpasses from where the Iraqis could fire down on the column) so that they could take out the enemy before Perkins’ men arrived. The next decision was that the tank battalions would lead. They would be the first to come through the intersections with Schwartz’s I-64 Armor to lead the attack. DeCamp’s 4-64 Armor Battalion would follow, eventually heading for the Republican Palace. Finally Twitty’s 3-15 Infantry would be last and would hold the intersections open, allowing for resupply columns to support the effort. Perkins knew that the only way

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<sup>36</sup> Donnelly, Thomas. *Operation Iraqi Freedom*, p81.

<sup>37</sup> Keegan. *The Iraq War*, p195.

<sup>38</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p.349.

<sup>39</sup> Gordon and Trainor. *Cobra II*, p392.

his men could stay the night downtown was if they were able to hold the major intersections so that they could resupply the tanks with fuel and ammunition.

While Perkins was planning the attack, Blount briefed Wallace on the operation. Wallace felt it was too risky to attack downtown and authorized the division to seize the intersections, stay for several hours, and return home. As noted above, when this message was passed on to the tactical operations center, Perkins was not present and never received the news.<sup>40</sup> Hence, the operation began with very different understandings of the specific tactical objectives on the part of commanders at different levels. This is an interesting example of the danger of commanders talking to one another in pairs without ever creating a collaboration session where they might all hear what their peers are saying and relying on messages between headquarters staffs rather than direct communication.

### **April 7 Thunder Run: The Operation**

In the early morning before the operation began, anti-tank mines were noticed on Highway 8. Iraqis, anticipating an American return, laid a long field of mines that was over 400 deep.<sup>41</sup> The men had to decide how to remove the mines. Zucchini describes a painstaking effort to clear these mines in the dark. First they tried lassoing them and sliding them to the side of the road to detect if there were trip wires or anti-handling devices attached, and then by hand, after the mines remained intact when the first few were moved. In addition, Gordon and Trainor note that mine-plow-equipped tanks led the advance allowing the armored formations to move through quickly and build momentum toward the crucial intersections at Curley, Larry, and Moe.

The thunder run was set to move at 0530 with Schwartz's I-64 Armor in the lead. Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn note that due to delays in mine clearing, the brigade did not leave until 0600. Once they were on the move, they came under fire from small arms and RPGs, which pierced the fuel cell of one tank and caused it to lose power. Leaving that tank to be towed back for repair, the brigade moved forward. They took on continuous fire until they rounded the turn at Moe and headed for downtown Baghdad.

There was a lack of communication between the theater, division, and brigade levels since the planning for this attack began. Perkins, Blount, and Wallace never spoke directly to one another. When Blount saw Perkins make the turn at Moe towards downtown on the Blue Force Tracker, he had his deputy, BG Lloyd Austin, call Perkins to find out what was going on. Perkins told him he was heading downtown and had never received word that the attack downtown was off.<sup>42</sup> Blount then called Wallace at the V Corps Headquarters to tell him what was going on. Wallace stated "... [Blount] notified me that Perkins was en route downtown... And at that point, from my perspective, we

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<sup>40</sup> Gordon and Trainor. *Cobra II*. p394.

<sup>41</sup> Gordon and Trainor. *Cobra II*. p395.

<sup>42</sup> Gordon and Trainor. *Cobra II*. p396.

were committed to doing what Perkins was doing.”<sup>43</sup> Even though there was miscommunication among those in planning the attack, Wallace made the decision to stand behind the actions of his men.

Once they made the turn toward downtown, the hostilities lessened. The road into town contained far fewer obstacles than Highway 8 through the overpasses. After they passed the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the attacks began once again, this time by small groups of Iraqis on foot. DeCamp’s 4-64 Armor Battalion followed behind the I-64 Armor. The attacks they encountered were less intense and more sporadic; however, they did capture 25 prisoners and reportedly killed 47 dismounted troops.<sup>44</sup> The task forces made it into downtown Baghdad by 0700. Perkins now had to assess the conditions to determine if they would be able to stay the night downtown.

### *Curley, Larry, and Moe*

The overpasses where Curley, Larry and Moe were located experienced heavy fighting throughout the day. Larry and Moe were separated by about a mile and were defended by companies of Abrams and Bradleys from the mechanized infantry battalion.<sup>45</sup> Curley, the southernmost intersection, was defended by an ad hoc group rather than an infantry company. This force was commanded by Captain Hornbuckle. Even though most thought the fighting at Curley would be the weakest, they saw the heaviest fighting of all three interchanges. Most of the attacks were attempted car bombs at each of the three overpasses and at Curley the enemy had dug trenches around the area enabling the fighting to continue for longer than expected.

The companies at Larry and Moe witnessed a number of suicide bombing attempts throughout the day. They bulldozed berms and cut down light poles to create obstacles. When possible, they cleared lanes for vision to eliminate places where the enemy could hide. At Larry, Captain Hubbard led the fight with two tank platoons and a mechanized infantry platoon. Lt. Col. Twitty was also at Larry for most of the day and Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn note that he fought alongside the troops and maintained contact with his company teams. He also regularly updated Perkins on the situation at the overpasses. Moe, the closest overpass to downtown, saw more Republican Guard forces fighting around them. As the task force that was sent to stabilize Moe approached the overpass, Captain Wright, the task force leader, had to clear the area before they could defend it. He sent a tank platoon north of Moe to clear the area then they removed items and put up obstacles keeping the enemy from getting too close. As the day progressed, Moe ran the

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<sup>43</sup> Gordon and Trainor. *Cobra II*. p397.

<sup>44</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p354.

<sup>45</sup> Murray and Scales. *The Iraq War*. p214.

lowest of the three overpasses on ammunition as they reportedly destroyed more than 60 Iraqi vehicles and killed almost 200 enemy infantry.<sup>46</sup>

Objective Curley was the first overpass the brigade passed through and the farthest from downtown. Few expected the fighting to be so intense at Curley, and the task force defending Curley had not worked together in the past. They were led by Captain Hornbuckle, who was warned by Twitty that the fighting at Curley was not going to be light. Hornbuckle had a team of 80 soldiers that were thrown together at the last minute and had no tanks, five Bradleys and a few other vehicles without armor. As they reached Curley and started setting up they began to take fire from trenches and bunkers on both sides of the highway and from the neighborhood near by.<sup>47</sup> Vehicles started getting through the perimeter and attempting to car bomb the troops. Similar attacks continued throughout the day and Zucchini notes that Hornbuckle thought if the enemy coordinated attacks all at once, they might be able to take over his undermanned task force at Curley.

The news of the heavy fire and low levels of ammunition, especially at Moe, was relayed to Perkins. Perkins knew if Twitty's men could not secure these overpasses, the resupply lines would not be able to get through and make it downtown.

### *Challenges*

As Perkins was settling in downtown, he called Wesley at the brigade TOC to figure out how to get the resupply convoy through. As he spoke to Wesley, a surface-to-surface missile hit the TOC and knocked out communications and did major damage to the building leaving 5 dead, 17 wounded and 22 vehicles damaged or destroyed.<sup>48</sup> After the shock wore off, officers and soldiers began recovery operations. They quickly rescued those injured, set up a casualty collection point, and began to piece the TOC back together.<sup>49</sup>

Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn describe the situation shortly after the missile's impact and note that most of the men began the recovery operations even before receiving orders. This is a good example of self-synchronization. The situation was chaotic after the initial hit but the men pulled together to help those wounded and to repair the TOC to recover communication with the rest of the brigade.

Another good example of self-synchronization after the TOC was hit was the decision of Lieutenant Polsgrove to move his men away from the location of the missile fire. Again without receiving orders to move, Polsgrove along with his 21 ammunition and fuel

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<sup>46</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p370.

<sup>47</sup> Zucchini. *Thunder Run*, pp178-179.

<sup>48</sup> Gordon and Trainor. *Cobra II*, pp400-401.

<sup>49</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p355-357.

trucks began their route towards the overpasses. When the TOC was hit, the trucks were parked 100 feet away and it was his quick decision to go that got them out of the area before they too were hit. One of the problems now was that these trucks were about to take on a great deal of fire as they headed north.

Perkins now had to decide who was going to call in air strikes and artillery fire while the TOC was being relocated and reassembled. He relied on an Air Force captain and an artillery officer already forward with him to control fires and air strikes. Meanwhile, Lt. Col. Wesley along with the other men at the recently destroyed TOC reestablished the headquarters 300 meters south of its original location two hours after it was hit.

### *The Decision to Stay*

Two things now prompted Perkins to believe staying downtown was the best option: the outskirts of Baghdad were no longer safe after the TOC had been hit and the resupply line was on the move.

As soon as Polsgrove was moving, he radioed Captain Bailey, the supply officer, who was already at Curley and told him to come to the overpass immediately. Polsgrove requested Bradleys to escort him but was told it was not possible because they were taking so much fire.<sup>50</sup> However, they did encounter a small element from the brigade's scouts who added some greatly needed firepower to their column, again a self-synchronized decision by the tactical leaders on the ground. Without any armor, tanks, or Bradleys, the convoy made its way up to Curley and started taking fire as soon as they arrived. As soon as the overpass was under control, Perkins ordered Major Knapp to round up everyone at Curley and move them out after coordinating the handoff to the 2-7 battalion.<sup>51</sup> The new combat team to take over at Curley was comprised of a designated battalion from the division's First Brigade, the Second Battalion, and the Seventh Infantry pieced together by Blount and Perkins. This decision now allowed Perkins to meet his goal of having the supply convoy drop off ammunition and fuel to the combat teams at the three interchanges in order to keep Highway 8 open.

Once the Infantry arrived, 3-15 raced on with the supply column.<sup>52</sup> They were ordered not to stop until they reached the northernmost task forces so they passed through Larry and then Moe and continued on until they reached Perkins' men downtown. In the end, Twitty's mechanized infantry did their job, most of the R2 package made it through, Perkins was able to stay the night downtown, and the 2<sup>nd</sup> BCT claimed a portion of western Baghdad.<sup>53</sup>

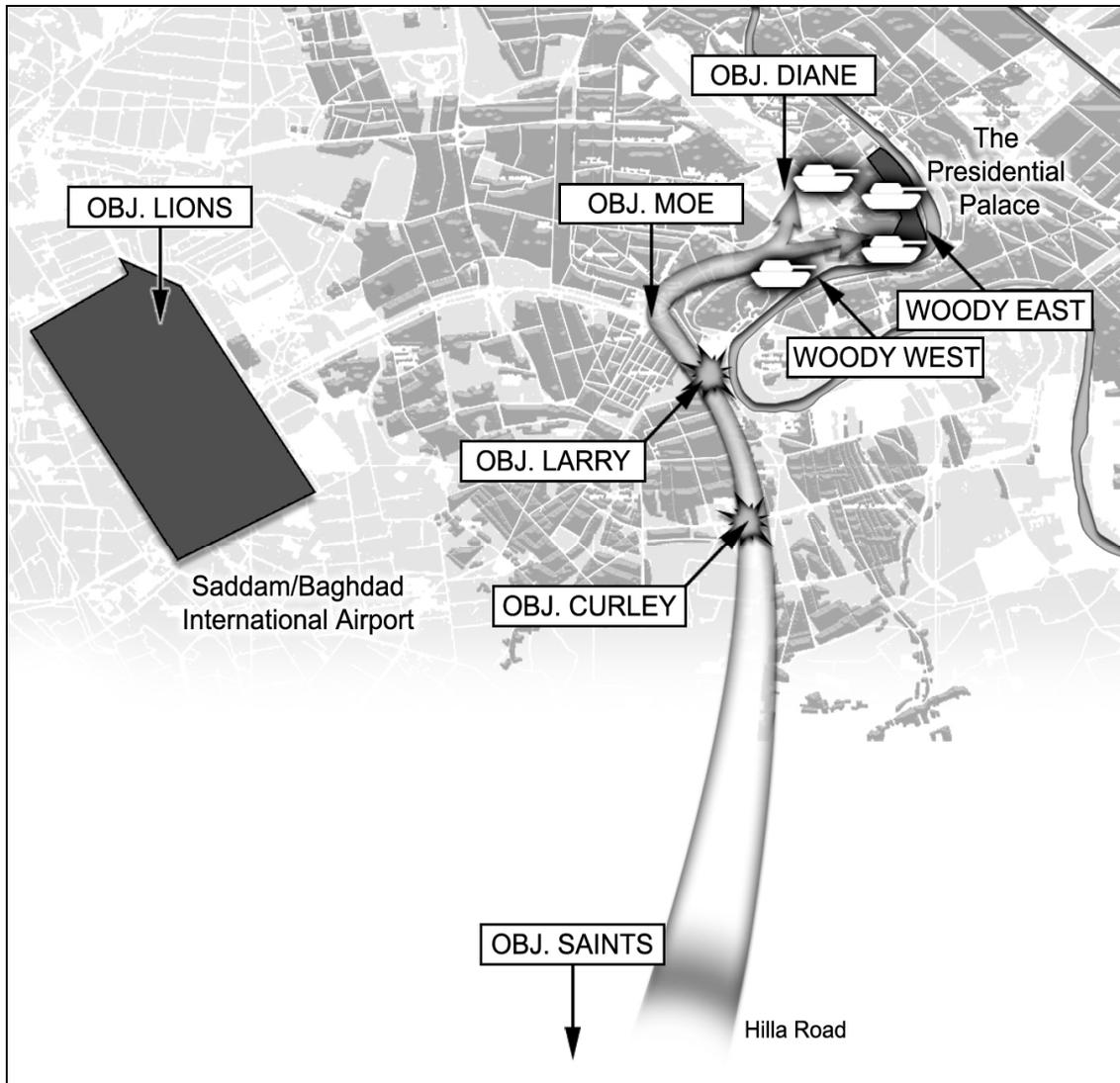
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<sup>50</sup> Zucchini. *Thunder Run*, p206.

<sup>51</sup> Zucchini. *Thunder Run*, p217.

<sup>52</sup> Fontenot, Degen, and Tohn. *On Point*, p370.

<sup>53</sup> Gordon and Trainor. *Cobra II*, p410.



**Map 3. Thunder Run of April 7**

### **Looking Back on the Second Thunder Run**

There were a number of issues that were not planned for but in the end were carried out effectively:

- There was some miscommunication among those involved in the planning of the second run;
- Fighting at the southernmost overpass was the heaviest, which caused a greater need for reinforcements than originally planned;

- The Americans believed that taking Baghdad would involve intensive hand-to-hand combat that might last for weeks.

During the planning stages of the second thunder run, both Blount and Wallace wanted a minimal run that resembled the first one. Perkins on the other hand, wanted to take it all the way downtown and believed this was the final plan agreed upon at the theater and division levels. There was imperfect communication among the three tactical levels of command. This could have caused a much greater problem; however, once Blount and Wallace saw that Perkins had already begun his move toward downtown, they backed his actions. This was very important to the mission's success that was already very difficult and required the commitment of all three levels. In *On Point*, the fact that Perkins' actions were consistent with the overall command intent is stressed, as is the fact that the senior commanders supported the actions strongly as they saw the battle develop.

The second issue that was not planned for was the intense level of fighting at Curley, which most thought would see the least amount of the fighting. Clearly the "pick-up force" originally deployed to defend that position was less than ideal. Because of this, reinforcements that were not planned for had to be sent in so that they would not have to give up the overpass.

One of the discoveries made that day was that the majority of the enemy fighting were believed to be Syrians, not Iraqis. This is pointed out by Keegan and Purdum, who argue that many of the Iraqis who survived the first thunder run were believed to have deserted their companies.

Finally, both Blount and Wallace thought the fight to take Baghdad would last much longer. To their surprise, the heaviest fighting took place on the outskirts of Baghdad while taking downtown was less difficult and less time-consuming than expected. The most difficult part was resupplying the force that had made it downtown.

### **Insights about Command and Control**

First, as in all intense combat, the decisive factors during the thunder runs into Baghdad were (a) the equipment of the forces engaged, (b) the level of training and professionalism of the individual soldiers at all ranks, and (c) the quality of the command and control functions of the forces. The American Army had massive advantages in all three areas, which allowed them to overcome huge differences in numbers and the willingness of the Iraqis and their fighting partners to sacrifice their lives.

Secondly, the importance of seizing and holding the initiative was underscored by the success of both thunder runs. The April 5 attack tested enemy defenses, developed rich insights into their capabilities and intentions, and demonstrated the superiority of the American armor to both sides. It enabled the command to overcome genuine weaknesses in its intelligence. It also demonstrated that the defenses of Baghdad were not able to destroy armored columns, an important issue for American and coalition commanders and planners. That attack also apparently discouraged many of the Iraqi forces who had participated in it. The fact that resistance to the second thunder run was lighter along the

highways and reportedly conducted more by Syrians than Iraqis suggests that the forces assigned to defend the city had begun to crumble as a result of the initial attack. The April 7 thunder run maintained, and may have increased, the initiative and momentum of the coalition in the battle for Baghdad. It was also a major factor in the information war, demonstrating to the world that American forces were in the city and occupying Saddam's palaces and central terrain.

Third, the capacity for self-synchronization demonstrated during these attacks is a recognition of the capability of the forces the United States can field today. Much of this was a reflection of training and standard operating procedures such as the rapid response to the loss of the TOC, the proper handling of disabled tanks, the timely clearance of the minefield before the second attack, and sending reserves forward to relieve the forces at Objective Curley. However, many of the tactical actions required quick thinking and initiative. These included the decision to move the supply convoy out of harm's way when the TOC was struck, the creation of a relief force when needed, the addition of the brigade scouts to add firepower to the resupply effort, and the decision to have the mechanized infantry move forward with the supply column and strengthen the positions at Moe and Larry.

The recognition by Colonel Schwartz that the battle for Baghdad was an information war is also important. It reflects the fact that the U.S. officer corps is growing in awareness and sophistication. Not reported here is that the second thunder run included imbedded reporters who were able to send out live television broadcasts from the palace grounds shortly after the Americans occupied that position. This broadcast was supported by Col. Schwartz. Hence, even the tactical leaders were aware of the effects-based nature of the conflict.

Finally, the inconsistency in the objectives set for the April 7 thunder run is instructive on several levels. Of course, it is a recognition that the fog of war will always be present, regardless of how sophisticated the information systems employed. No doubt MG Blount should have talked directly with Colonel Schwartz about the objective, particularly after his last conference with LTG Wallace. Leaving the communication of an important decision about the objective to staff-to-staff communication seems surprising given how closely the two commanders had been working. On the other hand, the responses from Blount and Wallace when they saw that the thunder run had turned toward downtown was highly professional and consistent with the best concepts of self-synchronization. They showed trust and confidence in the tactical commander. They also moved promptly to support his actions and increase the likelihood of success. In a way that few have yet come to appreciate, these commanders demonstrated the change in role that is arising as net-centric and network-enabled command functions and control functions are enabled. Rather than emphasizing the control function, they emphasized the command function and took actions to support the engaged forces. This change from *controller* to *enabler* is a key to success in the type of complex and dynamic battlespaces where our forces now find themselves engaged.

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