

Stand In The Door

By Pete Svoboda

They were going to miss it! The war had started without them. Now all they were going to get to do was watch it on the jumbotron TVs in this circus tent of a mess hall. The ground grunts were speeding into Iraq and they were unwilling observers. Members of the 82nd Airborne Division's 2nd Brigade Combat Team were sitting at Camp Champion in a tent city next to Kuwait International Airport. No coveted mustard stain (the star on a paratrooper's jump wings that denotes a combat jump), maybe no CIB (Combat Infantryman Badge). These are the symbols of exposure to the violence of combat that would define their military service. Now it appeared that they would not have a chance to have their courage tested under fire. They had volunteered for this duty, not only for the Army, but for the opportunity to earn their jump wings, take a job as a trigger puller and ultimately go into combat by parachute as their predecessors had done in North Africa, Normandy, the Rhine, Corregidor and other battles so long ago forgotten by so many Americans.

Their goal had been to jump in, seize the airfield in Baghdad, known as Saddam Hussein International. Holding it until relieved in place (RIP) by the large mechanized armor force bearing down on the Iraqi capitol and finish up with a glorious, victorious return to Fort Bragg by July. It all sounded too good to be true.

The paratroopers of the Falcon Brigade had trained hard for this moment. Since September 11, 2001, the 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment had been waiting for the word to forward deploy. Their brethren of the division's other two regiments, the 504th and

505th, had already seen combat in Afghanistan. The three regiments or brigades comprise the bulk of the combat punch of the 82nd Airborne Division. Now it appeared that they would not be part of this piece of history. There hadn't been a mission such as this since the entire 82nd had jumped into Panama. When the division is delivered by parachute it means close to 17,000 troops fill the skies. This mission would deploy 4000-plus paratroopers along with a wide assortment of combat support assets onto the airport by parachute. The Falcons would hold until relieved.

It would be a massive undertaking that required heavy drop rigging all the equipment of the brigade. This involved tying all the supplies of war (heavy weapons, ammunition, rations, water) to shock resistant platforms and attaching gigantic parachutes to them. When the drop zone is reached, they'd be rolled out the back of a cargo aircraft and delivered to the battlespace. In addition, there had to be sufficient parachutes and aircraft ready to deliver three battalions of infantrymen on a dangerous and risky mission. The Joes would jump with all their personal gear, 500 rounds of small arms ammunition, 6 fragmentation grenades and of course their individual rifle (M4 carbine), squad assault rifle (SAW), 240 machine gun and/or 60mm mortar pieces including one (1) mortar round each. These weigh just over three pounds and are about the length of a brick.

If you were to see these paratroopers moving to an aircraft fully loaded, the waddling of penguins on the ice would come to mind. With a parachute on their back, a rucksack suspended at the waist, reserve parachute strapped to their chest, their weapon strapped to their leg it's impossible to walk any other way. When on the ground and carrying all the necessities of war, weapons, ammunition, rucksack, water, body armor

and helmet an infantryman has the hunched shoulders and thick muscular back that is synonymous with long road marches fully loaded with their kit.

Knowing the extremes of operating in this environment, preparation would be essential. Even in February the days in Kuwait are hot so places like Udari Range and Faylakah Island prepared them for the harsh climate as well as the combat conditions they would face. Temperatures could reach well above 100 degrees in the summer. Wearing the equipment of war in these extremes meant acclimatizing as quickly as possible. Sandstorms were not uncommon and they were both blinding and ferocious in their intensity. There had been more than one report of a soldier becoming lost or disoriented during these sudden events, not being able to find their way or just ducking into the closest tent or truck to ride it out.

On March 24th, as the Joes watched the combat unfold on CNN and Fox, a change of mission was in the works that would send the paratrooper force charging ahead into history not by parachute but by truck. There was a fast conventional fight being waged in southern/central Iraq. Abrams tanks, Bradley fighting vehicles, humvees, and fuel tankers along with all the other machines of war were moving at break neck speed toward Baghdad. In fact, they were moving so fast that it was no longer necessary for the airborne troops to make their historic combat jump. In addition, the intelligence indicating that Baghdad's airport was heavily defended by air defense artillery (ADA), which would seriously jeopardize the ability of the airborne forces to avoid being slaughtered before they even reached the ground. Add to that a need identified by senior commanders that towns bypassed due to speed the victory lap in Baghdad had caused problems with the coalition to secure the lines of communication/logistics behind the

initial force. Pockets of enemy troops were harassing the logistics trains and making it difficult to keep the supplies moving forward to the combat troops. Major General Chuck Swannack would deliver the change in mission to Colonel Arnold Bray, the 325/2nd Brigade Combat Team (BCT) commander. It would involve the town of As Samawah, a vital crossing on the Euphrates River.

As Samawah was held by Saddam Fedayeen or Men of Sacrifice. They were a young militia force loyal to Saddam. These fighters had been moved there to create havoc in the rear of the advancing coalition forces. Bray observed that there were “two forms of threat confronting the brigade. The Iraqi regulars dressed in standard issue uniforms. And secondly, armed Fedayen, usually in all black attire, but this wasn’t considered a uniform. Using wartime rules of engagement (ROE), if they had uniforms, they would be engaged and neutralized without assessing intent.” In other words, find, fix and kill the enemy. Intelligence estimates varied depending on the source. A Special Forces Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) Team that had been in the city conducting covert operations estimated an enemy strength of 1500. Not only would COL Bray’s troops need to secure As Samawah and the three bridges, the additional objective was to draw additional enemy forces in to the trap and destroy all of them at once. Major Mike Marti and his 9-member intelligence (intell or MI) shop had their work cut out for them. All the documents and plans that had been developed for the airborne assault on airport had to be scrapped. They began to reach out to the national intelligence community in an effort to provide a picture of the fight in As Samawah. They would have to revert to the old school days of “acetate and grease pencils.” They would develop operation orders (OPORD), the document that explains all the details of a mission. The OPORD would be

copied to thumb drives. In turn, delivered to the individual infantry battalion commanders and their battle staffs. They'd be disseminate the intell down to the companies and platoons who would be doing the fighting.

In the mean time, figuring out how to move this many troops in 24 hours was no small feat. It was decided to fly the rifle companies, 9 total with 200 infantrymen each, by C-130 aircraft along with the assault command post. They would land at Talill Air Base, which had been secured by mechanized (Bradley fighting vehicles) troops from the 1st Battalion of the 41st Infantry Regiment. The remainder of the force that would attack As Samawah would proceed to Talill by trucks procured for a ground assault convoy (GAC). The trip would take 24 hours over the desolate desert terrain of southern Iraq. Once a link up had occurred they would again GAC another 8 hours to As Samawah.

1st Battalion (BN) under the command of Lieutenant Colonel Eric Nantz arrived on the outskirts of the city on March 28th just before daylight. They linked up with 5 Bradley Fighting Vehicles (1-141 Mechanized Infantry) at their de-trucking point and within 30 minutes they were in a significant firefight. The Bradley, an armored personnel carrier that has a 25mm chain gun that looks like and functions in the same manner as a machine gun but with more punch, was giving the paratroopers an added firepower advantage over the enemy. The enemy force engaged Nantz's force with at least 150 strong. They fired heavy machineguns, rocket propelled grenades (RPGs), AK-47s & mortars. 1st BN/Nantz engaged with every weapon system in the battalion task force. Nantz called for, received and controlled OH-58Ds Kiowa Warrior helicopters assigned to the 82nd along with navy and air force close air support fighter aircraft. This combined arms array forced the withdrawal of the Fedayen and Republic Guard troops

After these initial operations, the next objective would be the three bridges across the Euphrates. The three battalions of the 325th were positioned for the attack. Using a clock as a point of reference, “with As Samawah in the center, 1st BN/Nantz was at the 3-5 o’clock position (southeast side). 2nd BN, under LTC Dave Haight arrived and linked up with 1st BN down around the 4 o’clock position. 3rd BN under the command of LTC John Castles arrived at the 3 o’clock position and moved in between the 7 and 10 o’clock position.”

To increase the pressure on As Samawah and set conditions for more offensive operations, 3rd BN (Castles) would secure the western side of As Samawah, linking up with 1-41 before first light on the 28 March. Castles positioned his forces with his Alpha Company in the north, Bravo Company in the middle and Charlie Company in the south. The BN assault CP positioned itself up along the Euphrates, behind Alpha Company.

At first light, COL Bray wanted an assault conducted to seize the bridges. The bridges run north-south over the Euphrates River which runs east-west. 2nd BN/Haight would be approaching from the 2 o’clock position. That would put 1st BN/Nantz on their right flank to the north of them. They’d conduct an assault to seize two of those bridges. Imagery showed that there were four and in actuality one was a footbridge. The bridges would be essential to keeping the lines of communication and logistics open. In the mean time, 3rd BN/Castles would conduct a feint attack further along the riverbed to create the illusion that the main effort was going to be accomplished by an attack from the west. The battle began to unfold at 5am with 2nd BN’s A Company in the lead, B and C Company moving abreast behind them. They were moving along Route Red, which was a road that ran parallel to the river on an east-west axis toward the bridges. Suddenly, the

right flank began to receive enemy fire from the opposite side of the river. The enemy had crossed further north of the bridge and was now threatening 2nd BN's side. Haight quickly employed his "large direct fire weapons systems," both mortars that are part of infantry battalion arsenal as well as calling in howitzer fire from the two artillery batteries. This effectively suppressed the enemy.

The bridges were numbered 1 thru 4, east to west. Bridge 1 was the main bridge and the others being numbered in reverse order (right to left). Bridge 2 was a pontoon bridge, Bridge 3 was another full size structure that led into some trees leading to downtown and Bridge 4 was a walking bridge designed for train traffic. Approximately approximately 50-100 meters separated the bridges. "The objective was to create the illusion of securing the south side of the bridges and then hold them for 4 to 4 1/2 hours," said Bray. "Let's trick the enemy into thinking that a major attack was about to occur." The intent was to draw enemy forces from Hilla and Karbala to move to the east. Intel assets from V Corps were focused on trying to give that read. GEN Swannack told COL Bray that it would be necessary to remain in contact with the enemy for 4 1/2 hours. COL Bray would later assess that he believes that somewhere in his communications he never effectively transmitted the attack as a feint or 2nd BN didn't understand that they were part of a feint. Bray later said he learned this after the fact that because the 2nd BN was moving to Bridge 4 to completely open all routes. They only needed to move on Bridges 1 and 2 to create the conditions of a feint. 2nd BN moved up diligently under the cover of darkness. Then, before daylight hit, they began receiving fire from the north side of the bridge. Dave Haight's Bravo and Charlie Companies secured Bridges 1, 2 and 3. Suddenly, from the north side, they begin receiving fire on Bridges 2 and 3. This

occurred around 1 hour into the feint. Now, well into daylight, they were able to use mortar fire but would not be able to bring the OH58s into the fight until full daylight.

As the day continued, 3rd BN was on the west near the railroad tracks and 2nd BN two bridges. Ammunition supplies were running low due to the fact that the BDE had moved with the quantities issued for the airborne assault. COL Bray had already directed to consolidate at Bridge 1 and Dave Haight pulled Charlie Company off of bridges 2 and 3. Also, forces were consolidated on bridge 1. The effort was being made to get forces into a more defensive position, redistribute ammunition and await resupply.

On April 1st, the decision was made to take the city. This needed to be done in order to take the pressure off of forces that were fighting further north and prepare for incoming forces approaching from the south to pass through unimpeded. On the evening of April 3rd, elements begin to move into position. The battle plan was to attack a tributary and seize a road juncture using them as crossing sites just north of As Samawah. As the 1/41 penetrated with its mechanized assets, once the last track crossed, 2nd BN would move dismounted and would begin to provide security along with clearing buildings along the north side of the Euphrates. 1st BN would attack from its present location west and south with it. Attacking to a tributary and seize a road juncture as crossing sites just north of As Samawah. As the 1/41 penetrated, once the last track crossed, 2nd BN would move dismounted and would begin to provide security along with clearing buildings along the north side of the Euphrates.

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On the morning of the 4 April, prep fires begin. Mortar fire from the enemy began and there were 3 WIAs (wounded in action) from 1st BN. 1st BN performed a pincer move and occupied the area. Since the rest of the force was going to move right through 1st BN., 1st BN was also providing security for the assembly areas for 2nd BN along with providing overwatch. The enemy was overwhelmed by 10am and the north side had been secured.

This would be just the beginning of a complex series of campaigns. In a matter of days, the paratroopers would unknowingly begin the counterinsurgency fight. The Battle of As Samawah would be one of the last true combined arms conventional fights taken on by the 82nd.