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REVIEW ESSAYS

CONTEMPORARY OPERATIONAL-LEVEL WAR FIGHTING

James S. Robbins

Reynolds, Nicholas E. *Basrah, Baghdad, and Beyond: The U.S. Marine Corps in the Second Iraq War*. Annapolis, Md.: Naval Institute Press, 2005. 276pp. \$32.95

Basrah, Baghdad, and Beyond is one of the first broad, theater-level accounts of the Marine Corps's most recent conventional conflict. It is not an official history but, in the author's words, "a framework for understanding Marine participation in the Iraq war." The book opens with Operation ENDURING FREEDOM and swiftly moves to the preparation, planning, and execution of IRAQI FREEDOM (OIF). It is an operational-level account, focused primarily on campaign planning and execution from the point of view of I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF),

operating as part of the Coalition Forces Land Component Command. The book is based generally on such primary sources as interviews, official documents, contemporary reports, and firsthand observations. The author, retired Marine Corps Reserve colonel Nicholas E. Reynolds, served as Marine Corps Officer in Charge of Field History from 1999 to 2004 and supervised Marine history operations during IRAQI FREEDOM. His work has benefited from the fact that this campaign was one of the best documented in history, particularly on the Marine side; the Corps had embedded numerous historians and "lessons learned" analysts at every level in the MEF. As hostilities wound down, a "kind of historical wolf pack" was deployed to conduct a week's worth of interviews with Marines

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from the MEF commander on down. Add to these materials journalists' accounts, "mil-blogs," and participant memoirs, and one is left with an unequaled documentary record from which to draw.

The book naturally focuses on the relationship between campaign planning and execution, and one can see from the beginning in Afghanistan that the most important elements in the process are relationships, communication, and trust. Reynolds highlights the importance of human factors in command; even though technology makes it possible for a commander to lead "virtually" from a distant networked headquarters, warfare is still a human undertaking, and the personal touch is important. Personalities play a central role. MEF commander Lieutenant General James T. Conway is as ubiquitous throughout the book as he was in the theater, leading his men from the front to the extent practicable. "Almost like a commander in the U.S. Civil War," Reynolds writes, "he wanted to see, and be seen by, his Marines before the battle." Brigadier General James N. Mattis, 1st Marine Division commander, followed this example as well, and "in search of a purer form of war fighting, set off on the battlefield with a tiny retinue and a cell phone." By staying close to the front and interacting personally with their field officers, the generals were better able to adapt to the fluidity of the battle space. This ties into another theme developed throughout the book, namely that "the plan itself was nothing but the planning was everything." That is, planning processes that encumber themselves with too much detail at the front end waste time by emphasizing form over function. A good plan is one that allows the war fighter to prepare to adapt as conditions on the ground inevitably change. If good processes are in place, it does not matter whether the plan is complete to the last bullet, bean, and Band-Aid.

The evolution of the planned air phase of the offensive is one example. The original plan followed the Operation DESERT STORM model, with a month-long aerial preparation to induce "shock and awe" among the Iraqis. The long duration of the planned air campaign was of special concern to the MEF because it affected how the Marine air wing could be utilized—if the air and ground campaigns were asynchronous, as was originally planned, it would be more difficult to commit airframes to ground-support missions. But as the start of the war neared, the air campaign was shortened, first to around two weeks, then to five days, and ultimately to a planned fifteen hours. Ironically, the attempted decapitation strike on the Iraqi leadership on the night of 19–20 March forced the ground phase into action prematurely to secure the southern oil fields, and the air "preparation" followed a day later. This had the benefit of achieving a measure of surprise on the Iraqi ground forces, who had expected to face a period of aerial bombing before fighting on the ground, and resulted in a completely synchronous battle space for the Marine air-ground elements, which was what the Marine commanders had wanted from the beginning.

The ground campaign plan itself underwent significant revisions as the battle unfolded. It was originally planned for 125 days, which overestimated the resistance potential of the regime. Saddam Hussein had no well-thought-out defensive plan, no evident strategic concept. Thus as Iraqi forces collapsed before them, the Marines had to adapt to the greatly accelerated timeline. Likewise, coalition forces found that the planned-for opposition from elite Republican Guard and Special Republican Guard units was not as deadly as that from Fedayeen Saddam and other irregular forces, particularly in built-up areas. These fighters—General Mattis called them “as worthless an example of men as we’ve ever fought”—lacked the firepower to engage decisively, but as was shown in battles such as An Nasiriyah, they were flexible, opportunistic, and oblivious of the laws of war, and they could do heavy damage to isolated groups of Marines.

At An Nasiriyah—which the author describes as “an uninviting Third World ‘sprawl of slums and industrial compounds,’ with two- to-three-story concrete buildings set on a grind of bad roads and alleyways, many strewn with garbage and raw sewage”—the narrative dips into the tactical level to give a sense of the battlefield environment, though the focus of the book is on the operational level. There is a gripping account of Charlie Company, 1st Battalion, 2nd Marines being engaged by A-10s that had mistaken them for Iraqis. There are illustrative tactical anecdotes scattered throughout, such as the account of First Lieutenant Brian R. Chontosh, whose combined anti-armor team platoon was caught in an ambush on the highway to Baghdad. Lieutenant Chontosh directed his driver through a gap in the berm by the side of the road directly into the enemy positions, then dismounted and personally engaged the enemy with a succession of weapons (M-16, 9mm pistol, AK-47, RPG), ending the ambush with a burst of sudden violence and physical bravery. Chontosh was awarded the Navy Cross.

Baghdad represented another planning evolution. Most planners believed that Saddam would make his stand in the capital and that Baghdad would be the scene of punishing urban warfare. The Marines faced some tough fighting along the approaches to the city from irregular troops and foreign fighters. Originally, Baghdad was assigned wholly to Army V Corps, to avoid boundary conflicts between two corps-level elements. The MEF was assigned cordoning and support responsibilities, though the land component commander, Lieutenant General David D. McKiernan, had felt that should circumstances arise in which the MEF would be more directly involved, the natural split would be the Tigris River. When it became clear by 3 April that the regime was “going down fast, going down final,” the Marines were assigned half the city and shifted plans several times in a few days from cordoning to conducting raids, and then to moving decisively into the city center, where they were greeted by enthusiastic crowds of Iraqis.

“Phase IV” planning, which is discussed throughout the book, is particularly noteworthy given that it has yet to terminate. Reynolds notes early in the narrative, “there was very little guidance from higher headquarters on Phase IV, not even a basic policy decree.” Marine planners tried to get ahead of the question even without guidance, knowing that they would have to handle at least some Phase IV duties. Questions sent to higher authorities on basic planning guidelines—whether the Iraqi electrical grid, the economy, or the human infrastructure (e.g., the bureaucracy and police) would be intact—were met with “hazy assumptions” or no answers at all. As it turned out, the men on the ground adapted to the situations as they encountered them, and they generally did well. Stopgap solutions provided the basics for the Iraqis and kept order, at least for a few months after the brief initial “looting” phase. The author notes well the significance of the “surprise move” by the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer, who on 23 May 2003 disbanded the Iraqi army and, perhaps more significantly, canceled their pensions. The “predictable result” of this short-sighted move was to destabilize the country and give birth to the insurgency, but the long-term effects go beyond the scope of the work under review.

The author periodically discusses the use of contemporary networked planning tools and makes some good observations on the “near obsession” with PowerPoint in the military. Some such briefings are the result of the distillation of hours of staff work, carefully reduced to a few key concepts, artfully constructed and carefully worded to fit on a slide. However, after being sent up the chain a few levels, other hands (not necessarily commanders) might begin editing, changing, rewording, or rearranging slides based on personal preferences or random inputs, without the benefit of the depth of knowledge that was behind the original briefing. “The result could be a course of action that looked good on a PowerPoint slide but had not been thoroughly staffed,” Reynolds writes. “That part of the plan would be ‘one PowerPoint brief’ deep, and would either collapse of its own weight or have to be rescued by planners scrambling to do the staff work to back up the change.” The Marines generally resisted putting too much detail into early planning, since the plans were certain to change later on. In addition, their experience in Afghanistan taught them that large planning staffs and detailed plans hundreds of pages long were unnecessary, even counterproductive. It was better to rely on “common sense, good liaison officers, and ‘hand con’” (i.e., relationships based on a handshake). Reynolds also gives a favorable account of the British planning system, which is highly informal while still professional and abjures PowerPoint completely.

Sometimes higher commands received too much information, from official channels and otherwise. It was “literally impossible to get away from TV images of the war.” Media accounts of actions on the battlefield would occasionally have

a negative impact on information management; press reports were generally seen at higher headquarters more quickly than official reports, and in some cases when the situation was hot, headquarters would be pressing down the chain to get more information right away. This tended to make the information jam even worse; as one staff officer observed memorably, “If you want information bad, you will get bad information.” Reynolds also occasionally mentions the negative role of pundits, “the experts on television with their nonstop stream of commentary and free advice, usually from thousands of miles away.” This stands in contrast to the attitude toward the embedded reporters, who were held in high repute by the men on the ground and were generally seen as providing accurate reportage.

Reynolds’s tone is sometimes colloquial, which keeps the book accessible, especially given the subject matter. The book is inevitably acronym heavy, so it helps if the reader is comfortable in that environment. A useful glossary is provided. The author notes that the reader who had a hard time keeping track of the specialized terminology would not be alone: “In this war, there was an often-confusing mix of civilian and military acronyms whose meanings were not entirely clear to everyone.” One shortcoming is the lack of adequate maps; the few that are included are reference maps that do not show force dispositions, plans, or movements. That being said, *Basrah, Baghdad, and Beyond* is an excellent book for officers or other professionals seeking to improve their understanding of contemporary operational-level war fighting and could profitably be studied at intermediate-level professional military education schools for seminars on operational art. There is clearly much more to be written about this campaign, but this book provides a good framework to launch the process.