

Cannon Cockers at War: The 11th Marines in Operation Iraqi Freedom

By Lieutenant Colonel Michael R. Melillo, USMC



During the 1st Marine Division's epic attack from northern Kuwait to Basrah, Al Kut, Baghdad and Tikrit, the 11th Marine Regiment moved farther and faster than any Marine artillery regiment in history.

Despite the arduous conditions, rapid advance and difficult terrain, the 11th Marines engaged the enemy in every battle of the campaign. No other regiment can make that claim. The 11th Marines processed more than 1,900 radar missions and fired 19,883 rounds with tremendous accuracy and devastating effects in support of the 1st Marine Division.

This is the story of the 11th Marines in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF).

The 11th Marine Regiment began deploying in support of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and OIF on 17 January 2003 when elements of the 1st Battalion, 11th Marines (1/11) set sail from San Diego, California, as part of the seven-ship flotilla comprising Amphibious Task Force West (ATF-West).

Training for War. Although 17 January marked the beginning of the regiment's deployment, the 11th Marines began preparing for the deployment and eventual combat operations months before. All training focused on the potential deployment: moving rap-

idly, delivering accurately massed fires and defeating the Iraqi Army's potent artillery threat.

Initial training exercises at Camp Pendleton, California, (July 2002) and the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center (MCAGCC) at Twentynine Palms, California, (September 2002) focused on moving through restricted terrain, deploying using maritime prepositioning force (MPF) assets, meeting the five requirements of accurate predicted fire and streamlining command and control (C²) of the regiment. This initial training culminated with a live-fire division tactical exercise without troops (TEWT) at MCAGCC.



Marines of Gun Two, Lima Battery fire their M198 towed howitzer at a target in Iraq.

Photo by LCpl Andreas A. Plaza, USMC

Upon returning from Twentynine Palms, the regiment participated in a I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) exercise that served as a rehearsal for operations in Iraq. This enabled the regiment to integrate many of the command, control, communications and computer (C⁴) systems that were not employed during the division TEWT in September and exercise C² in a scenario it was likely to face in the near future.

In each of these exercises, the regiment learned new lessons. The interaction between the staffs within the regiment served to build a cohesive team and developed a greater understanding of the enemy and the terrain on which the regiment would fight.

FA-Air Wing Quick-Fire Counterfire Tactics, Techniques and Procedures (TTP). In the fall, as the regiment began more detailed planning for initial operations against the Iraqi III Corps in southeastern Iraq, the 11th Marines developed TTP to strike at the enemy's tactical center of gravity: his artillery. Based on the 11th Marines' assessment, the threat was, specifically, the Iraqi Army's multiple rocket launchers (MRLs) and its long-range artillery (GHN-45 and G-5 howitzers).

To counteract this threat, the regiment developed, tested and established a reactive counterfire procedure that integrated the division's artillery with the Marine air wing's fixed-wing aircraft using a "quick-fire" link between the 11th Marines combat operations center (COC) and the direct air support center (DASC).

The regiment communicated digitally—via the advanced FA tactical data system (AFATDS)—with the 1st Marine Division fire support coordination center (FSCC) and used a DASC hotline to accelerate the tasking of "on-station" aircraft to the target, which had been located by a radar. This process reduced the time it took to pass the request between sensor and shooter and to destroy the enemy artillery through a combination of artillery and fixed-wing fires.

Through command post exercises (CPXs) at the I MEF and MCAGCC Simulation Center and a subsequent live-fire exercise at Camp Pendleton, the 11th Marines validated the quick-fire TTP and trained to aggressively employ Q-46A and Q-37 radars to locate the enemy artillery and destroy it with artillery and fixed-wing fires. Throughout the campaign in Iraq, these procedures were employed with great success.

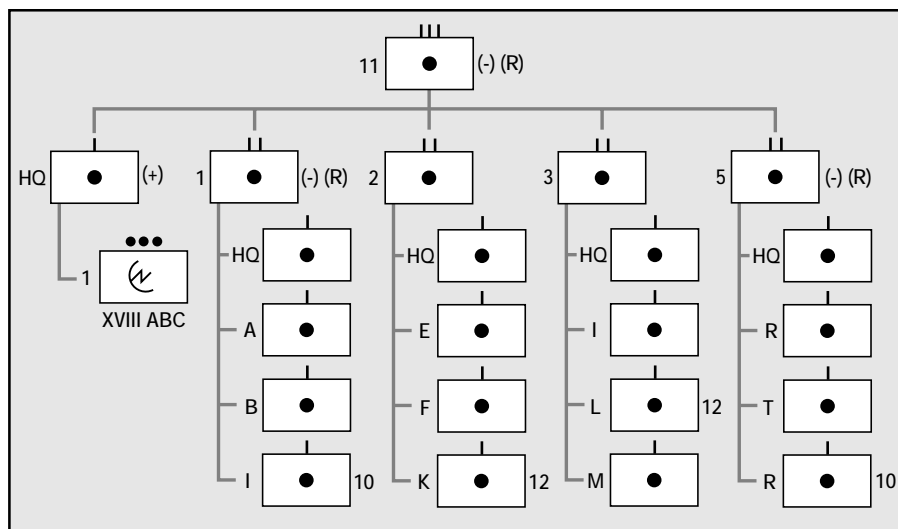


Figure 1: 11th Marines Task Organization. The 1st Battalion, 11th Marines (1/11) and 5/11 were reinforcing (R).

11th Marines Task Organization.

The 11th Marines deployed to Kuwait during January and February in support of OEF. Deployed by both air and sea, the regiment had a combination MPF and organic equipment. (See the 11th Marines task organization in Figure 1.) In Kuwait, the regiment had a counter-battery radar (CBR) detachment from the 10th Marines attached—four Q-46A radars, a target processing center (TPC) and 23 Marines—as well as two batteries (I/3/10 and R/5/10). (The two batteries from the 12th Marines were in their six-month rotation with the 11th Marines as part of the routine unit deployment program.) Additionally, the 1st FA Detachment (1st FAD) from the Army's XVIII Airborne Corps in Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was attached, bringing two Q-37 radars, a TPC and 24 soldiers.

During February as the entire regiment slowly reassembled in Kuwait, the regiment maximized its time planning and rehearsing through a combination of CPXs and live-fire training. The regiment calibrated propellant lots on the MPF shipping and conducted a live-fire rehearsal of anticipated initial combat tasks.

By early March, the 11th Marines had integrated its attached units. On 5 March, the regiment occupied position areas in northern Kuwait to provide counter-battery support to the engineers conducting berm-clearing operations along the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border. On 19 March, the 1st Marine Division was ordered to move to attack positions in northern Kuwait.

Going into this operation, the 11th Marines Commanding Officer's guid-

ance to his staff and subordinate commanders was simple: "We must *kill* the enemy at every opportunity—no *pinpricks*." His intent was equally succinct and left no doubt as to the 11th Marines' purpose: "Protect the Marines and sailors of the 1st Marine Division from the effects of enemy indirect fire systems."

These straightforward words resonated throughout the 11th Marines and were put into action during the 1st Marine Division's attack from northern Kuwait to Al Kut, Baghdad and then Tikrit.

Early on 19 March, the 11th Marine Regiment occupied its tactical dispersal areas south of the Kuwaiti-Iraqi border and made final preparations for the attack into southern Iraq. Task organized with its four organic cannon battalions, the additional CBR detachment from the 10th Marines and the 1st FAD, the regiment was reinforced by two British Army artillery units: the 7th Royal Horse Artillery (RHA) Regiment (18 L118 105-mm towed howitzers) and the 3d RHA (-) (16 AS-90 155-mm self-propelled howitzers).

Integrating these combined forces required detailed coordination to establish unique C² arrangements and assign tactical missions to exploit the British artillery's capabilities and complement the division's scheme of maneuver. (See the 1st Marine Division scheme of maneuver in Figure 2 on Page 26.)

With 106 howitzers, six Q-46A radars, two Q-37 radars and more than 3,000 Marines, sailors and soldiers from two allied nations, the 11th Marines was prepared to support the 1st Marine Division's "Opening Gambit." This was

the division's simultaneous two-pronged attack to seize the Ar Rumaylah Oilfields with Regimental Combat Team 5 (RCT-5) in the west and destroy the Iraqi 51st Mechanized Division with RCT-7 in the east, the latter the division's main effort.

Opening Gambit. Early on 20 March, the 11th Marines occupied their initial position areas just south of the international border. While the remainder of the division occupied its attack positions, the regiment continued to provide counterbattery coverage across the division zone.

At 1132Z, the 11th Marines fired the first rounds of OIF in counterfire to Iraqi cross-border mortar fires. The regiment's response to the mortar fire—a two battalion fire-for-effect (FFE)—set the tone for the war.

H-Hour was planned for 0300Z on 21 March. At 1500 on 20 March, the division issued a fragmentary order (FRAGO) altering the timing of the attack. RCT-5 was to start its attack to seize the key gas-oil separation plants in the Ar Rumaylah Oilfields at 1730Z, nine and one-half hours earlier than planned. In response to this order, 1/11 and 2/11 displaced forward immediately to their planned firing positions.

At 1700Z, the 11th Marines initiated the 1st Division attack against the enemy with a 30-minute counterbattery

program against the 51st Mechanized Division and III Corps Artillery defending the Ar Rumaylah Oilfields.

Because the weather conditions on 20 and 21 March reduced the number of close air support (CAS) sorties flown, the 11th Marines had to fill the gap in fire support. Firing at targets previously planned for aviation attacks, the regiment fired with deadly accuracy nearly non-stop throughout the night, destroying several high-payoff targets (HPTs). The HPTs included two Iraqi artillery D-30 battalions, a Type 59-1 battery, a regimental command post, armored vehicles, tanks and an entrenched infantry battalion.

The division FSCC played a key role in the unfolding fight, directing artillery on previously planned air targets and coordinating with the division collections officer for unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) coverage. The UAVs located the enemy artillery and armor formations, and the 11th massed multiple artillery battalions on the formations.

When RCT-7 crossed the line of departure (LD) at 0300Z on 21 March, the 11th Marines weighted the main effort with three battalions. Leapfrogging battalions to keep pace with RCT-7's tank and mechanized task forces, the regiment delivered unrelenting artillery fires

with devastating effects, stripping the enemy defenders of their will to resist.

Within 24 hours, the 1st Marine Division had secured the critical oil infrastructure and rendered the 51st Mechanized Division ineffective—the 11th Marines had silenced the Iraqi artillery.

By nightfall on 22 March, the opening gambit was complete. No friendly forces suffered casualties due to indirect fire, the relief in place by the 1st Armor Division (United Kingdom) was complete, the 7th and 3d RHA Regiments reverted to the tactical control of the 1st Armor Division, and the 11th Marines were displacing west in preparation for the next attack.

Attack Across the Euphrates. On 23 March, the 1st Marine Division attacked across the Euphrates River on a movement-to-contact toward Ad Diwaniyah. By 24 March, sandstorms blinded the force and fuel was in short supply. Fedayeen forces engaged the halted division column all along Highway 1 east of Ad Diwaniyah.

Because visibility was near zero, the conditions prevented aviation from supporting the division. The 11th Marines were the only fire support available to protect the division's forward elements from mortar and surface attack.

For six days and nights, despite fatigue, severely worsening weather, countless enemy mortar attacks and constant probing by Fedayeen "death squads," the 11th Marines provided reactive counterbattery and suppressive fires all along the division's main supply route, Highway 1. (See the map on Page 3.)

Attack Along Highway 7. Simultaneously, for the division's supporting attack up Highway 7, the regiment weighted 1/11 with a TPC and an additional radar to support RCT-1's attack in the east. This decision had an impact on the counterfire fight to the east as one Q-46A radar that routinely supported RCT-1 was down with mechanical problems; the additional radar had to serve as the sole counterfire "eyes."

Once the 11th Marines were within range of Al Kut, the regiment took the division fight to the Baghdad Republican Guard Division, destroying multiple artillery batteries, fortified positions and a regimental headquarters.

While the Division amassed adequate logistics to continue its attack to Baghdad, the 11th Marines coordinated with RCT-5, the division's lead regiment, to integrate 11th Marines units into its column for the attack north. Because of

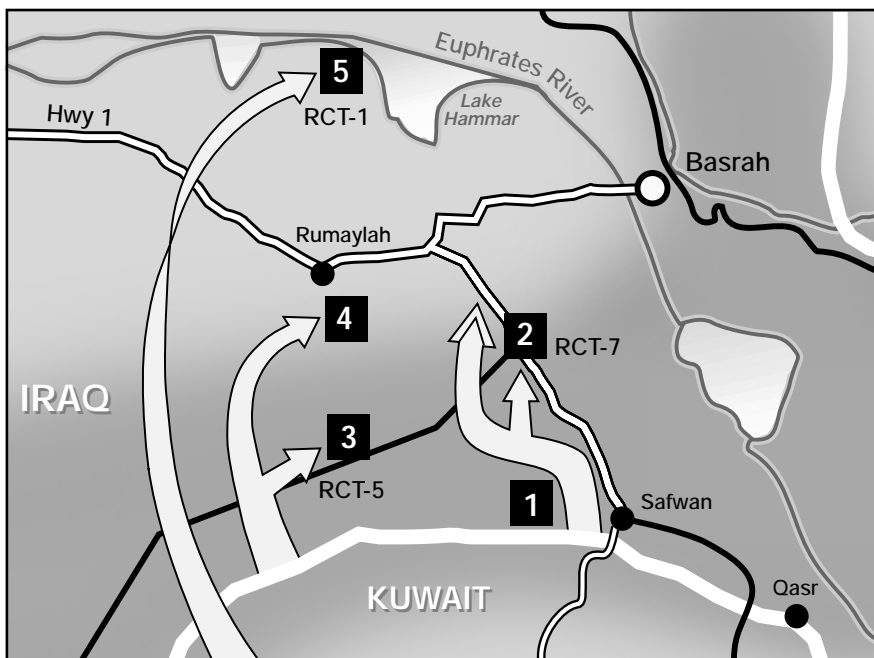


Figure 2: 1st Marine Division's "Opening Gambit." Early on 20 and 21 March, regimental combat teams (RCTs) moved rapidly into Iraq to secure five objectives: 1. Safwan Hill, a high point on the battlefield; 2. Az Zubayr Pumping Station; 3. and 4. Southern and Northern Gas-Oil Separation Plants (GOSP), respectively; and 5. Rumaylah bridgehead across the Euphrates River. Simultaneously, the 1st Armored Division (United Kingdom) moved into Iraq and north to isolate and contain Basrah.

the narrow attack corridor and the length of the column, integrating the artillery with the mechanized infantry and armor was the only way to ensure the artillery could range RCT-5's forward battalion.

This required the already fatigued regiment to move more aggressively and maintain the speed and flexibility of the mechanized infantry and tanks. The regimental headquarters integrated its forward and main COCs into the subordinate battalions' convoys and employed battalion clusters to maximize the limited terrain that was suitable for howitzers and trucks.

Due largely to this innovation on-the-fly, the 11th Marines consistently maintained at least two battalions within range to support the division's main effort in its attack across the Tigris River while fighting the Baghdad and Al Nida Republican Guard Divisions.

On 31 March, the division continued its attack toward Baghdad, seizing the Hantush Airstrip on Highway 1 to sustain subsequent attacks across the Tigris River toward Baghdad. The next day RCT-5 secured a vital crossing site over the Saddam Canal and, by 2 April, had seized the bridge across the Tigris River at An Numaniyah, a few kilometers east of Sabat.

Throughout this historic advance, the 11th Marines were directly behind the lead maneuver battalion with never less than two artillery battalions and six radars providing close support and counterbattery fires.

11th Marines Crosses the Tigris River. On 3 April, the division attacked to destroy the Baghdad Republican Guard Division at Al Kut. RCT-7 attacked from the west along Highway 6 north of the Tigris (supported by 3/11 and reinforced by 5/11), and RCT-1 fixed the enemy division from the south along Highway 7 (supported by 1/11).

When the battle was won, the main effort shifted back to RCT-5 as it sustained the division's advance toward Baghdad along Highway 6. Interspersed with RCT-5 were 2/11 in direct support (DS), 5/11 reinforcing 2/11, 3/11 in general support (GS) to the 1st Marine Division and the 11th Marines' forward and main COCs.

By 4 April, the 11th Marines had reassembled for the first time since 21 March. (1/11 had been DS to RCT-1 for its attack up Highway 7 to Al Kut and completed an arduous 200-kilometer road march to rejoin the regiment). Lo-



The 11th Marines cross the Tigris River.

cated less than four kilometers behind the 3d Battalion, 5th Marines (3/5) along Highway 6 and just east of the Diyala River, the entire regiment assembled in a four-kilometer area. The regiment was so close to 3/5 that it had to fire reduced charges to provide close support to the infantry battalion during its battle with the Egyptian, Iraqi and Syrian "Jihadists" who stopped its advance.

To break through the enemy blocking force, RCT-5 broke contact with the dug-in enemy forces to allow a six-minute regimental mass mission using



Lance Corporal Oscar Hernandez, an artillery observer from Mike Battery 3/11, receives a message from another platoon about abandoned Iraqi T-55 tanks outside an oil storage/refinery in Az Zubayr on 23 March. Photo by Lance Corporal Kevin C. Quihuis, Jr.

dual-purpose improved conventional munitions (DPICM). This four-battalion fire mission disintegrated the battalion-sized enemy formation, reopened Highway 6 and allowed RCT-5 to regain the momentum. The mass mission also cleared the remaining enemy forces in zone, thus opening the route for the rest of the 1st Marine Division to advance to the eastern approaches to Baghdad on 5 April.

Artillery Adaptability in Baghdad.

As the Division established its cordon around the city, the 11th Marines continued to provide counterbattery fires against the Iraqi artillery, firing from within the open areas in the city (stadiums, racetracks, roadways and military complexes). To minimize collateral damage to noncombatants and civilian infrastructure, many of the radar-acquired targets were passed exclusively to aviation to engage with precision munitions using the quick-fire TTP the regiment established before the operation.

In another innovation, the COC used high-resolution imagery to check for the potential of collateral damage before initiating counterfire missions.

Artillery targets became fewer, and by 11 April, the 11th Marines headquarters and two battalions, 1/11 and 3/11, were in the city conducting security and stability operations and establishing the 1st Marine Division civil-military operations center (CMOC).

Also on 11 April, 5/11 was ordered to support Task Force Tripoli's attack to Tikrit, 170 kilometers north of Baghdad. To support the operation, two Q-46A radars and a TPC were attached to 5/11

to provide target acquisition. In the ensuing seven-day operation, the battalion fired 36 counterbattery missions against enemy mortars and artillery and confirmed the destruction of two D-30 batteries defending the city.

Upon entering Baghdad, the 11th Marines gained two additional tasks not typically assigned to an artillery regiment: establish the 1st Marine Division CMOC and establish its own zone in which to conduct security and stability operations. The 11th Marines approached these new tasks with the same gusto and professionalism it had when preparing to cross the LD 22 days earlier.

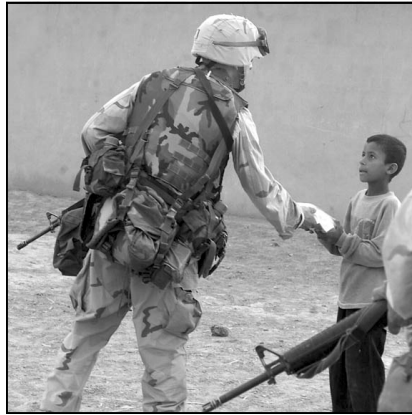
Security and Stability Ops. The regimental headquarters immediately established two command posts: one in the 11th Marines' zone to command and control security and stabilization operations in the 11th Marines sector and a second at the Palestine Hotel in downtown Baghdad where the CMOC would operate.

In the 11th Marines zone, the regiment's task was to restore order and help ease suffering. Within 24 hours, the zone was greatly improved and 1/11 and 3/11 were in the community conducting patrols, removing weapons caches, detaining looters and showing the Iraqi people that Americans were not conquerors, but liberators. Throughout it all, the 11th Marines still maintained a firing capability to support in and around the city.

The 11th Marines Commanding Officer was assigned as the Civil-Military Operations Coordinator for the 1st Marine Division, and he set the tone for accomplishing the daunting challenges in Baghdad. He had daily meetings with the RCT commanders, 3d Civil Affairs Group liaison detachment, civic leaders, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) (such as the International Red Cross and Red Crescent, CARE, Doctors Without Borders, etc.), and former Iraqi government officials. He organized the CMOC into functional departments to focus the humanitarian efforts in east Baghdad, the 1st Marine Division's area of responsibility.

The priorities of work were security, electrical power, water and medical support. Each day the CMOC accomplished more, achieving small victories to improve the situation in Baghdad.

Working with RCTs 1 and 7, the 11th Marines began providing security at key locations within the city (hospitals, government ministries, power plants,



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the banking district, and food and medical storage warehouses). This prevented looting of critical supplies and provided a secure environment for Iraqi citizens to return to work and help in the recovery effort. Policemen who returned were incorporated into a "ride along" program with Marines with positive results.

Water. Daily fuel convoys delivered fuel to fill the generator tanks that pump fresh water from northern watersheds to help provide clean water to the 6.5 million residents of Baghdad.

In Saddam City, where a large Shi'ite population resides, the water infrastructure had to be reinforced with water storage bladders to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. The 11th Marines' logistics train delivered in excess of 55,000 gallons of fresh water made by Combat Service Support Group 11 (CSSG-11).

Key Infrastructure. The CMOC coordinated convoy escort for key infrastructure personnel and support agencies (electrical engineers, medical personnel and NGO/private volunteer organizations) to assess electrical power plants, water treatment facilities, telephone switching centers and hospitals.

Explosive Ordnance Clean Up. 11th Marines coordinated the division's explosive ordnance retrieval and disposal. It established an ordnance storage site at the Rasheed Military Complex and a disposal site that destroyed several hundred tons of ordnance recovered in the division's zone.

The conditions in Baghdad began to improve.

Taking Tikrit. The 11th Marines steadily coordinated its own "three-block war" for 11 days with one battalion fighting with Task Force Tripoli at Tikrit, one supporting RCT-5 north of

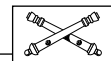
the city and two battalions conducting security in zone. The regiment's remaining resources were fully engaged in the humanitarian efforts throughout east Baghdad.

On 21 April, the 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) relieved the 1st Marine Division in Baghdad with the ACR's civil affairs (CA) assuming the duties as CMOC in east Baghdad. The Next day, 3-7 Infantry conducted a relief-in-place with the 11th Marines, and by 23 April, the 11th Marines were in the division assembly area at Ad Diwanayah, awaiting guidance on MPF reconstitution and redeployment.

During OIF, the 11th Marines provided complete fire support to the 1st Marine Division. The results of the 32-day campaign bear witness to the devastatingly accurate fires and decisive impact the regiment had on the enemy—and the equally positive impact the regiment had on the people of Baghdad while conducting civil-military operations.

The effectiveness of the 11th Marines as the division's counterfire shield was significant with few casualties due to enemy indirect fires—a testament to the regiment's pre-war foresight, professionalism and battle leadership.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the Marines, soldiers, and sailors of the 11th Marines wrote a new chapter in the long and proud history of Marine Corps Artillery support.



Lieutenant Colonel Michael R. Melillo, USMC, is the Executive Officer of the 11th Marine Regiment and deployed with the regiment to Iraq for Operation Iraqi Freedom. In his previous billets, he was the G3 Future Operations Officer of the Central Command (CENTCOM) Branch and the Regional Planner in the G5 (CENTCOM), both in the I Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF), Camp Pendleton, California. He was the Commanding Officer of A Battery, 1st Battalion, 12th Marines at Marine Corps Air Station Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. In September 1991, he deployed to Southwest Asia as an Operations Officer (S3) of the Security Detachment of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Brigade to provide security for the reconstitution of the maritime prepositioning force. Lieutenant Colonel Melillo is a graduate of the Marine Command and Staff College at Quantico, Virginia, from which he graduated with Distinction, and earned a Master of Military Studies degree. He then attended the School of Advanced Warfighting at Quantico.