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Target Basra

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Extract

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Introduction: The Point of the Spear

The few hundred men of 40 Commando who were waiting tensely to board their helicopters on the night of 20 March 2003 were in a uniquely hazardous position. They knew that they were going to be the first troops on the ground in Iraq as part of Operation Iraqi Freedom. Some knew they were going to be the first British troops to make a helicopter-borne assault in more than fifty years. One or two of their commanding officers were aware that, with members of 42 Commando, who would be airborne an hour later, this would be the largest helicopter-borne operation carried out since the Vietnam war. None of this made the operation more of a gamble than it should have been. What did was that, in defiance of well-established military convention, the attack they were about to launch would be against well-defended targets that were surrounded by concentrations of enemy troops.

They were embarking on a mission of high strategic

importance, and would take severe risks to ensure success.

The Marines were waiting on that desert evening in Kuwait because negotiations about their deployment had been taking place long before the controversy about invading Iraq had surfaced. That controversy centred in Britain on the legal justification to intervene militarily in a foreign country, and on the extent to which Saddam Hussein's government was in breach of United Nations resolutions ordering him to destroy his stocks of chemical and nuclear weapons. He had used chemical weapons against Iran, and against his own population in Kurdistan. During the war in 1991 to remove Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait, ground troops had behaved as though chemical warfare was possible, and in 2003 the marines in Kuwait were fully trained to take precautions against the danger of chemical weapons and nerve agents. In the first few days of the war they did so frequently, and were conscious that the ground they walked on was contaminated by bombardment from chemical weapons used in the Iran–Iraq war.

However, the political debate about the existence of chemical weapons in Iraq was a sideshow. The invasion of Iraq was, for the United States' government, a necessary conclusion to the war in 1991 when Saddam's forces had been driven out of Kuwait. That conflict had ended inconclusively, a reminder of US impotence in the region. The destruction of the World Trade Center in New York, with the resulting war on terror, proved the catalyst. The question for the British government was how far to support the US in its invasion of Iraq while pursuing the fundamental policy of remaining America's closest ally: the public's distaste for war was well known.

Despite statements to the contrary in the 1970s, no British government has found it possible to lose military interest in the world outside Europe. The war between Iraq and Iran, and then the invasion of Kuwait, had meant that, once more, British forces were dragged east of Suez. By 1998 the government planned to create a military unit called a Joint Rapid Reaction Force, with the ability to mount and sustain a medium-scale war-fighting operation. It would be more or less permanently established, so that it could be sent quickly into action, and would be composed of special forces, an attack submarine, surface warships and a task force drawn from the Royal Marines of 3 Commando Brigade, the Parachute Regiment, tanks and artillery, with helicopter and combat-aircraft support. In a complete reversal of the previous thirty years of military planning Britain was preparing to intervene anywhere around the world.

In Iraq 40 Commando was the point of a very long spear, whose shaft was the ships and helicopters of the Navy Task Group that had carried them through the Mediterranean, with the sailors that supported them. Without that back-up, they could never have been the effective fighting force that they were. The Royal Marines of 3 Commando Brigade were the first to land in Iraq, and kicked down the door to Basra, but they were never originally intended to be there. Their presence as part of a coalition with US forces was the product of a much wider tail of alliances and collaborations, within which the senior officers of the Royal Navy were working to maximize the involvement of British forces, despite the political debates that were taking place. These relationships occur and continue outside the public gaze, but the senior liaison officers, joint exercises and exchanges, without which

much of the planning for 40 Commando's assault would not have taken place, are part of a long-standing strategic British policy that culminated in the assault on the al-Faw peninsula. Behind it lie the self-confidence and desire to put into practice the war-fighting skills honed over many years. As one officer remarked, 'It's like training to drive a bus and never being given the opportunity.'

3 Commando Brigade is far more deadly than a bus but they were sent to the deserts of Kuwait when the British fleet was in an extremely weak state. Two landing ships, HMS *Fearless* and HMS *Intrepid*, had been recently scrapped, and the one new replacement in service, HMS *Ocean*, was in refit. The Task Group was centred on HMS *Ark Royal*, an aircraft-carrier that was rapidly converted to carry helicopters, and HMS *Ocean*, rushed out of dry dock to sea. Despite the government's intention behind the Joint Rapid Reaction Force, the Commandos would be heavily dependent on their US allies for air support and helicopter transport.

On the first day of the operation US support vanished, creating the potential for the failure of the whole operation. This was avoided by quick, flexible planning, which became a hallmark of the Commandos' operations on the al-Faw peninsula and in the key actions prior to the assault on Basra. This city, the second largest in Iraq, had never been an element of the US military campaign, which was focused entirely on Baghdad and the expected rapid collapse of Saddam's regime. As the campaign encountered difficulties, Basra became increasingly important politically as well as militarily. It was the first major city in Iraq to fall to Allied forces, and did so without the enormous casualties that would normally result from fierce urban fighting. As CNN

headlined the day after the city had fallen, 'Basra offers a lesson on taking Baghdad.'

Whether it did or not, the Commandos of 40 Commando, who had spent weeks meticulously planning an assault on the very first day of the war, found themselves ten days later fighting a battle on the outskirts of Basra based on a plan that barely covered the back of an envelope. In both battles, and in the intervening days of rapid deployments and firefights, aggression, flexibility, determination and belief in themselves brought them out on top.

On 20 March, gathered round their small individual portable stoves for a last brew before the bullets started flying, the Royal Marines had no illusions as to the strategic importance of their preliminary objectives that night and how vital it was that they succeeded. They had no idea however that just over a week later they would be in the midst of an operation that would break the back of the resistance in Basra and claim the first major victory for the Alliance. Neither would their commanding officers have put money on them all being alive to see it.

The Royal Marines of 3 Commando Brigade were probably the first soldiers in Iraq to understand that the military planning was based on poor intelligence. The substantial Iraqi armed forces that had been employed in the Iran–Iraq war and in the invasion of Kuwait no longer existed. Instead, the enemy was politically motivated, and had become embedded in the civilian population. The dream of an early collapse of resistance was precisely that: a dream.

When the fighting was over, many company commanders took responsibility for the day-to-day tasks of running a country that the overthrown regime was no longer there to

carry out. In the vacuum of any contingency planning for post-war operations, the young officers of 3 Commando Brigade found themselves in charge of towns and villages on which, days previously, they had unleashed violent assaults. It was absurd, but the commanders of A and B companies, in charge of towns in which some of the hardest fighting had taken place, tried to discharge their responsibilities conscientiously and sympathetically. One officer commented that overnight the lads had had to make the transition from fighting to peacekeeping, and had done it as well as they had fought on the al-Faw peninsula.

The war in Iraq was unpopular, motivated solely by politics, and badly planned. The company commanders, acting as quasi-mayors, were not only in the forefront of the fighting but also had advance notice of the conflicts and problems that had been waiting to erupt with the collapse of Saddam's regime.