

## The Conflict In Iraq: Night Patrols

Marines' Raids Underline Push In Crucial Area

By JOHN F. BURNS

MAHMUDIYA, Iraq- For marines staging a night raid on suspected rebel hide-outs across this insurgent heartland outside Baghdad, heading out of their heavily fortified base at midnight on Friday was a moment to make sinews stiffen.

Clearing the base's maze of dirt-filled blast barriers, Marine Strike Force Two, in a convoy of unlit Humvees, entered some of Iraq's deadliest terrain. Through dark towns and roads, dense palm groves and heaves of broken earth offered potential attackers ample cover. Men standing through Humvee roofs with night-vision goggles scanned the landscape for impending ambushes and roadside bombs.

In the 10 weeks since their battalion began operating in this area south of Baghdad, raids like this one by Strike Force Two have captured more than 250 people identified as suspected insurgents. Others, fleeing or resisting, have been killed.

The raids have taken an American toll, too. Since late September, the Second Battalion of the 24th Marine



Marines guarded a detainee Thursday in Mahmudiyah, Iraq during a nighttime raid.

Expeditionary Unit has lost eight men. It has deployed in what has become, since November's battle for Falluja, one of the war's most crucial battle zones, some American officers would say its ground zero.

If American objectives in Iraq are to be achieved, commanders say, it is on small, closely knit units like Strike Force Two, with 32 men, and on the raids they stage almost nightly, that success may ultimately depend.

The primary mission of the 2/24 battalion, a Chicago-based Reserve force of 1,200 troops, is to destroy a network of insurgent cells that United States military intelligence has

identified as the nerve center of the Sunni insurgency in central Iraq.

Until its capture last month, Falluja, 40 miles northwest of here, served as the insurgents' main fortress. Denying Falluja to the rebels as a sanctuary, American commanders believe, was a crucial first step toward regaining the initiative in the war. But according to American officers, months of intensive intelligence work have shown that Falluja served as a forward base for an insurgency that finds its enduring heartland here -- in the powerful tribal families at its core, in uncompromising loyalties to Saddam Hussein and the Baath Party, and a seemingly

inexhaustible supply of hidden munitions. The American commanders call the area, 25 miles wide and 50 miles deep between the Euphrates and the Tigris rivers, the "throat of Baghdad."

Commanders acknowledge that forces reaching Baghdad after the invasion last year understood little of the tribal underpinnings of Mr. Hussein's power -- a social, economic, religious and political matrix that was transformed, after his overthrow, into a platform for underground resistance. While much about the insurgency remains obscure, the commanders are convinced now that much that is crucial to rebel operations is centered in this troubled region south of the capital.

At intelligence briefings in the former chicken factory that serves as the 2/24's forward operating base outside Mahmudiya, American officers ran laser pointers across a satellite map showing towns like Rashid, Yusufiya, Mahmudiya, Latifiya, Iskandariya, Haswa and Musayyib, saying interrogations of captured Iraqis have shown that these towns, and a score of outlying villages, mostly lying to the west of Highway 1, the four-lane highway connecting Baghdad to the south, are the key to many insurgent attacks mounted much farther afield, including bombings and kidnappings in the capital.

The focus of the marines' attention has been on two powerful tribal families, the Janabis and the Kargoulis,

feudal overlords of much of the land between the rivers that the 2/24 marines now patrol.

Under Mr. Hussein, the Janabis and the Kargoulis were richly rewarded. Their area was the base for Republican Guard units, munitions factories, weapons research establishments and battlefield testing grounds, as well as a host of new industrial plants and depots. After the Persian Gulf war in 1991, when a Shiite uprising across southern Iraq was met with brutal repression, parts of the area around Mahmudiya, Latifiya and Iskandariya, where Sunnis and Shiites mixed were subjected to a form of ethnic cleansing, with Shiites of military age rounded up and shot and their houses bulldozed to make way for new Sunni homes.

### **Stalwarts of Insurgency**

After Mr. Hussein's downfall, American intelligence officers believe, powerful elements in the Janabi and Kargouli families became stalwarts of the resistance, and an insurgent axis developed that turned the region south of Baghdad into a powerful support base for the insurgent stronghold in Falluja.

The tribes' most powerful figure, Sheik Abdullah al-Janabi, serving as the chief imam in the Mahmudiya mosque in Falluja, emerged as the effective leader of the insurgency in central Iraq. Shortly before American troops overran the mosque, he fled the city.

One of his brothers, Mehdi, made his power base in

Yusufiya, a town that has been a center of the insurgency. Mehdi, too, is a fugitive, probably in Baghdad, American officers say. A third brother, Mahmoud, identified by the American forces as a financier of the insurgency, was detained, and is in Abu Ghraib prison.

American forces moved into this area as Baghdad fell, but a shortage of troops, and command decisions that limited offensives, led early this year to a situation in which much of the region became a rebel stronghold. Journeys through it became a deadly lottery, with daily bombings, ambushes and kidnappings.

Just as the assault on Falluja last month signaled a turn to a more aggressive posture by the United States command, so too has the evolution of American tactics here. Under the 2/24 marines, the policy since September has been to go after the insurgents. New forward bases have been opened in Yusufiya and Latifiya. The marines have conducted regular foot patrols through the towns. Raids on insurgent hide-outs and weapons caches have become routine.

The marines have fought pitched battles, including one on Nov. 12 at Mullah Fayyad, west of Yusufiya, that began with an insurgent ambush and developed into a fight that lasted more than four hours. Lt. Col. Mark A. Smith, the 2/24's commander, said the rebels were trying to open lines of retreat from Falluja.

"This is where the leadership of the insurgency have always lived, and now that they can't be in Falluja, they've got to come home," he said. "But our rule is, 'You ain't comin' home.'"

Colonel Smith, 40, an Indiana state trooper in civilian life, is the embodiment of the new, more aggressive approach -- muscular, salty tongued and impatient. "We're going out where the bad guys live, and we're going to slay them in their ZIP code," he said.

"People around here are beginning to believe that the Americans are going to stay and go after the bad guys, and they're not going to leave until the job's been done," he added. "As that sinks in, opinion is swinging to our side."

Whether that is true is hard for reporters to gauge, considering that the only approximately safe way to venture into the towns is with a heavily armed Marine foot patrol. Beyond that, it is an axiom of life here that, just as under Mr. Hussein's rule, opinion among Iraqis is intimidation-led. People in the battle zones tend to tell reporters whatever they judge to be safest.

On an hourlong patrol through Yusufiya, though, some signs seemed to favor the marines. People of all ages approached them, some with complaints about relatives detained or wounded in the fighting, but far more with requests for medical attention, inquiries about reopening schools and clinics, or assistance in finding work. The market in the town, closed when

the marines arrived in early October, has reopened.

When some in a crowd that clustered about the patrol appealed for the Americans to withdraw from the town so the insurgents would attack elsewhere, a debate ensued, rare for American troops anywhere in Iraq.

"Saddam didn't harm anybody in Yusufiya; at least he didn't kill anybody who didn't cause trouble," said a middle-aged Sunni woman named Fadila. "In any case, the situation was much safer under Saddam than it is now."

The patrol leader, Cpl. Jared Tio, 24, from Franklin, Wis., countered with a set piece of his own.

"We want you to live in peace," he told her. "But we need to work together to make this work."

Perhaps the most successful of the marines' tactics have been the nighttime raids. With more than 70 police officers in the battalion, the work-up for the raids at the Mahmudiya base has been strongly influenced by American police tactics. Colonel Smith said he attributed much of the unit's success in tracking down wanted insurgents to Warrant Officer Jim Roussell, a 53-year-old Chicago police sergeant who spent years working with the city's gang unit.

Mr. Roussell, a tall, spare man with a graying crew cut, agreed that tracking down insurgents in

Iraq was not so different from hunting down street gang members. "In both cases, you're dealing with young people who are disenfranchised and angry and pick up weapons," he said.

To identify them, he said, the marines' intelligence unit follows family ties, picks up tips from street patrols and develops "snitches," many of them captured insurgents.

"It's ground-level intelligence, it's patrolling, it's interacting with people," he said. "At base, it's straightforward police work."

The raid by Strike Force Two on Friday night was based on a tip from an inmate at Abu Ghraib. The man had identified four brothers in adjacent farmhouses near Mahmudiya as participants in several recent insurgent attacks, including the seizure on Nov. 8 of 12 newly trained men of the Iraqi National Guard near Latifiya.

The 12 were found dead shortly afterward, machine-gunned against the wall of an abandoned mosque.

The four brothers fit the profile marines have come to expect of insurgents: Sunni Arabs, with experience in Mr. Hussein's armed forces, followed by government-assigned jobs in local industries, living comfortably off a plot of government-granted land. After their capture, they were handcuffed and loaded onto an armored truck for the ride back to the base.

## **Protesting Innocence**

There, they were bundled into a detainee-processing center known among the marines as "the tent of no return," electronically fingerprinted, photographed and lined up for an iris-recognition test.

Throughout the raid, the men protested their innocence, as those rounded up usually do.

"America good! England good! Saddam bye-bye!" said a heavily mustached man who identified himself as Ali, a 14-year veteran of the old Iraqi Army. Around the corner from where he squatted uneasily in his handcuffs, his wife, his mother and his four children sat still amid a tumble of blankets where they were sleeping when the Americans burst through their front door.

They seemed calm, almost puzzled, by the commotion as the marines went through closets and boxes of documents and assured them that their men would be released if they were found to have no involvement in rebel attacks.

On Sunday, those assurances were fulfilled when Mr. Roussell, the warrant officer, and others in the intelligence unit at Mahmudiya ordered all four men released, having concluded there was no evidence to justify holding them in the killing of the guardsmen, or any other attack.

"It looks like the snitch in Abu Ghraib was acting on a grudge," Mr. Roussell said. "But that's O.K. We're following American principles here, and that means that we've got to be pretty

darned sure we've got the right men before we lock them away. We don't want to be sending innocent men to Abu Ghraib."

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