

Invasion of Iraq 2003 - Neil Rae

This is a summary set of notes that describes the invasion of Iraq in 2003 from the perspective of OC Workshop, 29 Commando Regiment RA.

Initial Preparation

I first heard that the US were planning to invade Iraq in May 2002. At the time, I was attached to HQ 3 Commando Brigade in Bagram airbase, Afghanistan on Op JACANA. This was an operation based around 45 Commando Group, but with support from wider brigade assets. We were collocated with the US Army's HQ 10th Mountain Division and interacted with their officers daily. They were clear that their parent Corps was already diverting attention away from Afghanistan and turning their focus to an invasion of Iraq the following year.

Around November 2002, Commander 3 Commando Brigade (Brig Jim Dutton), CO 40 Commando RM (Lt Col Gordon Messenger RM) and CO 29 Commando Regiment RA (Lt Col Simon Wolsey RA) went to a planning conference / recce with the US Marine Corps and CENTCOM in the Middle East for the potential invasion. BC 8 (Alma) Commando Battery RA (Maj Hugh Baker RA) also deployed to Bahrain with CO 40 Cdo to begin detailed planning with US Naval Special Warfare SEAL teams for a Joint and Combined aviation assault operation to secure strategic oil infrastructure on the Al Faw peninsula.

On CO 29 Cdo Regt's return, he held an initial briefing with his command team, including his key staff and sub-unit commanders. He described being in a US recce aircraft at night with the Bde Comd and CO 40 Cdo and seeing the Al Faw peninsula and potential Iraqi positions for their probable objectives.

He sketched out an initial Bde (-) scheme of manoeuvre:



This had 40 Cdo conducting a battlefield handover with US Navy Seal Team 3, who would have secured key nodes on the critical oil infrastructure at the tip of the Al Faw. 40 Cdo would then clear and secure the remainder of the oil infrastructure, before moving towards Basra to block any enemy in Basra from threatening the flanks and lines of supply of the US Marine Corps' 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (1 MEF) as they advanced on Baghdad. Whilst the combat power deployed in the Brigade increased, together with the geographical scope, the basic plan remained consistent up until H-Hr.

That winter, the Regiment faced 3 conflicting tasks, depending upon political events. A firemen's strike began and a third of 3 Commando Brigade were re-deployed to cover firefighting duties. This included 45 Commando RM and a third of 29 Commando Regiment. The Brigade was also preparing to deploy to Norway for its Arctic warfare training. There had not been an Arctic deployment the previous year, as a result of contingency planning for Afghanistan, followed by an actual operation (Op JACANA.)

There were therefore three possible outcomes for the Regiment in Jan 03:

1. We would deploy to Norway for winter warfare training as originally planned.
2. We would further reinforce the firemen's strike, if it widened in scale and duration.
3. We would deploy to Kuwait to invade Iraq.

Whilst the CO had briefed his command team to expect the third of these, we did not brief the likely scheme of manoeuvre outside the group. Instead, we began "contingency planning" to deploy the Regiment to Iraq, as no political decisions had been announced.

Since the political discussion around a potential invasion was about "Weapons of Mass Destruction", the RMO, Capt Dougie Reid RAMC briefed the Regiment on Anthrax jabs. He made the point that it had been widely used with considerable success for those working with cattle. He explained that the timing of the three jabs was very important and that he already had enough jabs to give everyone all three. He and his team began to make meticulous records of the inoculation of the Regiment.

The Regiment was visited by the Second Sea Lord, who told us that he just sacked the XO of a warship for not leading by example when it came to taking Anthrax jabs. He also told us that it just wasn't possible to replace the third of the Brigade devoted to the firemen's strike as that "would mean having to tie up another warship alongside".

We worked throughout November to get the Regiment's equipment fit to meet the planned Order of Battle (ORBAT). This consisted of:

- 7 (Sphinx) Commando Battery RA.
- 8 (Alma) Commando Battery RA.
- 23 (Gibraltar) Commando HQ Battery RA.
- 148 (Meiktila) Commando Forward Observation Battery RA.
- 29 Commando Regiment Workshop REME.

79 (Kirkee) Commando Battery RA had returned from Northern Ireland, where they had been operating as a rifle company attached to 42 Commando RM. Since the Regiment also

lacked a third of its manpower, commando gunners from 79 Bty were used to reinforce the other batteries. Two 105 mm Light Guns from 79 Bty were also given (one each) to 7 and 8 Btys, bringing them to seven Lt Guns each. 42 Cdo were added to the Brigade ORBAT to deploy also.

The available shipping did not have capacity for all of the sub-units' equipment. For example, each Lt Gun would deploy with just a single Pinzgauer to pull the gun, carry the crew, small arms ammunition and immediate gun ammunition. There were certain singleton vehicles, with specialist fits that were unique in the whole of the armed forces. Many vehicles were old and required considerable nursemaiding to keep on the road. Our 4T vehicles were still old Bedford MK variants, as no winterised/waterproofed variants had been procured when the Bedford fleet had been replaced for the rest of the Army.

Around the beginning of December, an operational name was issued: Op TELIC. The Regiment also passed the last safe moment to have time before the start of Christmas leave to change all of the oils in the vehicles to deploy to Norway. Our course was therefore set; we were going to Iraq.

Army Base Repair Organisation (ABRO) Warminster had been reluctant to prioritise the repair and return of a few key platforms to make up the ORBAT. Armed with the Op name, I phoned their military liaison officer with the aim of hastening these vehicles. He gave me a long lecture about how Iraq had a desert, any invasion would obviously involve armoured forces and 3 Cdo Bde would be extremely unlikely to deploy. I thanked him for his wisdom, gave him our operation name to charge any activity to and pointed out that we would need the platforms by early Dec in order to prepare to load onto shipping.

The Lt Guns had very recently been fitted with a new Automatic Pointing System (APS). This used GPS and enabled the guns to be brought into action much more rapidly. However, it hadn't yet been tested in earnest by the Regiment and we had no idea how reliable it would be. The old dial sights had been very reliable and spares for those parts that might be subject to wear could be easily carried by the Bty gun fitter. The new electronic system had a number of large Line Replaceable Units (LRUs) that, despite having a set of Electronic Repair Vehicles, the Regt Wksp was not trained nor authorised to repair. I was also not scaled to hold spare LRUs, so if a single box failed then that gun would have to revert to a very basic reversionary mode of using a prismatic compass to sight along the barrel to fire it. I asked the Lt Gun Equipment Manager to task issue two complete Lt Guns' worth of spare LRUs and also managed to get two guns from 79 Bty loaded onto DROPS flat racks to cannibalise for spares if needed.

We finally got the Regiment's limited ORBAT fit and ready to deploy the week before Christmas leave began.

Meanwhile, 1 (UK) Armoured Division had been planning to invade Iraq from Turkey. CO 29 Cdo Regt went to Germany to carry out a liaison visit with the Commander Royal Artillery (CRA 1 Div), Brig Andrew Gregory.

By around Christmas, HQ 1 Armd Div realised that they did not have the time and logistic capacity to deploy a complete armoured division and its combat supplies from Germany and

across Turkey to be positioned to invade by Mar 03. Later, Turkey denied the US-led coalition access via their territory, but this political position had little bearing on the logistic realities.

As a result, the UK role in the south was now increased from 3 Cdo Bde (-), to HQ 1 Armd Div with 7 Armoured Brigade, 16 Air Assault Brigade and 3 Cdo Bde (-) under command. 16 Air Assault Bde had been on fire fighting duty and were relieved of this, in order to deploy to theatre rapidly. (16 Air Assault Bde's manoeuvre units were made up from the Parachute Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment).

Deployment to Theatre

8 Bty deployed by sea with 40 Cdo in a Naval Amphibious Task Group, led by HMS Ark Royal. The battery noticed that the Royal Marines had a more recent edition of 'Survive to Fight', the NBC defence individual manual. The Regiment asked the Defence Publications branch to issue this later version, but they refused. It appeared that even this later version was now out of date and should not be used. A new version had not yet been written, and the older versions had drills that were no longer doctrinally correct. So, the Regiment had to stick with even more out of date versions of 'Survive to Fight.'

The Regiment's NBC instructors had inspected everyone's respirators and had found many with out of date seals. New seals had been demanded. NBC sheeting, to go under camouflage netting and to protect vehicles from chemical and nerve agents, as well as NBC detection equipment were also ordered.

The Nerve Agent detector (NAIAD) had just been withdrawn from service and had not yet been replaced, so it was not going to be possible to detect Nerve Agent. Chemical Agent Monitors (CAMs) were on back order. So, the Regimental Echelon had a single Residual Vapour Detector (RVD) to detect agents. This is a puffer bottle that is intended for sampling the air after an attack to check if agents are still present, not for detecting an attack in the first place.

We deployed by air to Kuwait sometime around the end of Jan 03. We arrived in an empty spot of desert, with an initial surrounding berm and a single locally sourced tent to get our heads down in darkness. We awoke to a massive sandstorm that was threatening to rip the tent into the sky and set about hammering stakes and tightening guy ropes. Over the next week or so, the area turned into Camp Gibraltar, as the rest of the Brigade arrived. Over the next month or so, the rest of the Division arrived around us, setting up other camps, as did the US 1 MEF and V Corps.

Brigade and Divisional Headquarters initially set up in a Kuwaiti Army base, named Camp Commando.

Planning and Rehearsal

An updated Scheme of Manoeuvre was developed. The US Marines' 15 Marine Expeditionary Unit (15 MEU) was attached to 3 Cdo Bde for the initial entry to Iraq, to increase the combat power of the brigade to 3 manoeuvre elements. Two 155mm AS90 batteries from 3rd Regiment Royal Horse Artillery were also grouped with 29 Cdo Regt for the initial entry. The Bde also received C Squadron of the Queen's Dragoon Guards (QDG) under command. The Squadron was equipped with Scimitar light reconnaissance tanks and supporting variants.

15 MEU were given the objective of securing Umm Qasr, with artillery support from one of 3 RHA's batteries. 29 Cdo Regt's two Lt Gun batteries, the second AS90 battery and 15 MEU's integral 155mm towed artillery battery were all to be positioned on Bubiyan Island facing the Al Faw peninsula. The island was entirely composed of mud flats, with a solitary raised road along the coast facing Iraq, so all of the batteries could only be positioned in a single line abreast.

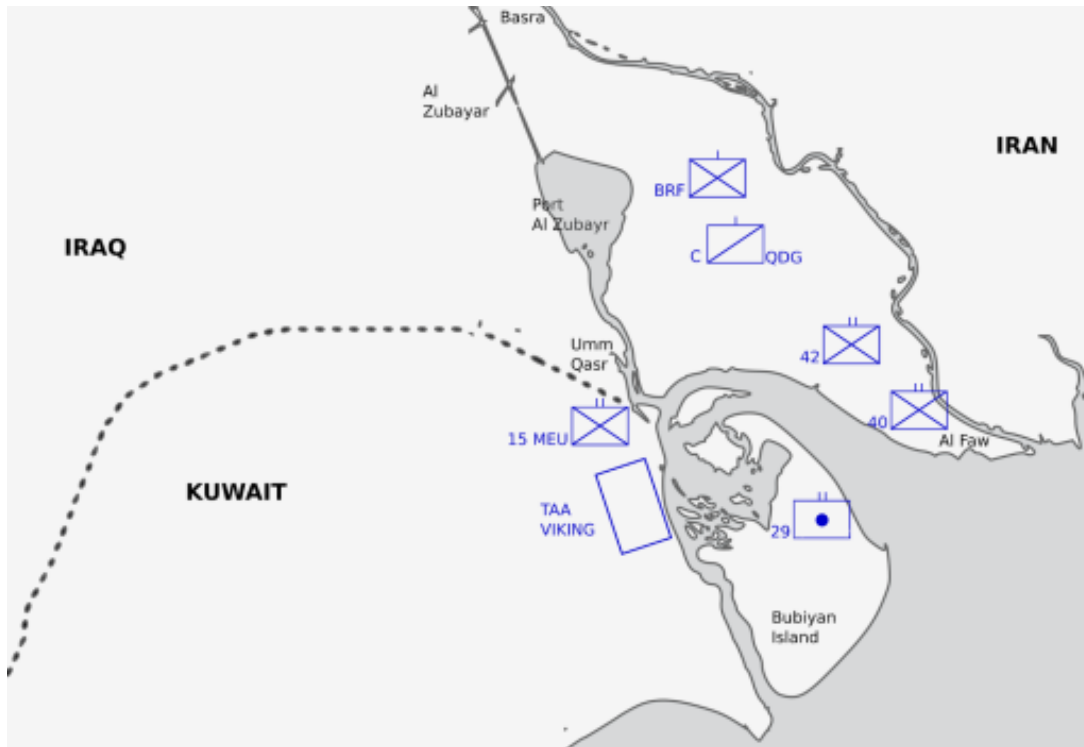
The Brigade was to deploy from Camp Gibraltar to Tactical Assembly Area Viking, roughly 15 km south of the Umm Qasr crossing at the Iraq Border.

The initial dispositions were as shown below, with lead elements of 40 Cdo initiating the aviation assault directly onto the primary objective from TAA Viking, reinforced by further Companies deploying from HMS Ocean, while 42 Cdo would subsequently launch from near TAA Viking. 40 Cdo would conduct a battlefield takeover from the US Navy Seals and secure the oil infrastructure, with 42 Cdo providing a blocking position to protect 40 Cdo from an Iraqi counter-attack from the direction of Basra.

C Sqn QDG and the Brigade Reconnaissance Force would provide a recce screen to the North West to pick up any counter attacks from Basra. The BRF was made up of:

- the Brigade Patrol Troop that had evolved from the Arctic and Mountain Warfare Cadre.
- Recce Troop, 59 Independent Commando Squadron RE.
- 148 Bty.

The BRF grouping had been an experimental construct in the Brigade.



The role of the Division was to block Iraqi forces in Basra from threatening the right flank of the US advance to Baghdad. 16 Bde were initially to secure the Rumaila oilfields, while 7 Bde were to move up to and secure the canal running from Al Zubayr along the western edge of Basra. 3 Cdo Bde would approach Basra from the South.

After the fact, the invasion of Iraq may appear to be a foregone conclusion, however, beforehand it looked like a considerable challenge. There was an Iraqi Division in the area of southern Basra, which was believed to have units deployed forward in Al Faw. There was also a coastal defence battalion in Al Faw and anti-ship missile batteries on the coastline facing Kuwait. I remember CO 29 Cdo Regt telling me that the force ratio facing 40 Cdo on insertion could be as high as 6:1 against them. Reliable intelligence about Iraqi positions and strengths was very limited.

29 Cdo Regt's fireplan for the initial assault on Al Faw therefore involved a considerable weight of fire, including:

- Two 105mm Lt Gun batteries (7 & 8 Bty).
- One 155mm AS90 battery (C Bty).
- One USMC 155mm battery (S Bty).
- Naval gunfire support from three Royal Navy frigates (HMS Marlborough, HMS Chatham, HMS Richmond).
- Naval gunfire support from a Royal Australian Navy frigate (HMAS ANZAC).
- An AC130 105mm gunship, initially in support of the Seals, but switching to 40 Cdo once they landed and had relieved the Seals.
- Joint Direct Attack Munitions - air delivered GPS guided bombs.
- Close Air Support from USMC 3rd Marine Air Wing.
- USMC Cobra Attack Helicopters.

- Lynx helicopters with Anti-Tank Guided Weapons from 847 Naval Air Squadron, Commando Helicopter Force.
- Drones, including Phoenix.

We were concerned about the potential for heavy counter battery fire against the positions on Bubiyan Island, particularly since there would be no room to manoeuvre. Our Recovery Mechanic, Sgt David Bogle, and myself went forward to do a recce of the road conditions and identified a forward location on the island to position him to recover the towed guns and vehicles if they became damaged. The AS90 battery would have its own Challenger Armoured Repair and Recovery Vehicle (CRARRV) to recover the AS90s. However we asked our Brigade Electrical and Mechanical Engineer (BEME), Major Spike Cope REME, to seek the support of an additional CRARRV from 1 Div to recover any damaged AS90s back to the mainland, over the bridge to the island. I would set up an Equipment Collection Point at the landward end of the bridge. This was also the location from where C Sqn QDG and the BRF vehicles would be moved by landing craft of 539 Assault Squadron RM and USMC hovercraft to the Al Faw peninsula.

We agreed with the BEME a priority for repair of assets that as I recall was:

1. Offensive support assets, i.e. Light Gun.
2. Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition & Reconnaissance (ISTAR) assets, e.g. Manportable Surveillance and Target Acquisition Radar (MSTAR).
3. Ground manoeuvre platforms, e.g. landrover and pinzgauer.
4. Logistic platforms, e.g. Demountable Rack Offload and Pickup System (DROPS) vehicles.

The window to launch an attack was small. There was only enough light for night flying for half the month and it was expected that temperatures would rise considerably by May and this would greatly impact the ability of aviation to fly.

The view from Bde was that we would have to go in a 2 week window from the end of March or it would be too late.

There was a focus on the potential for a blue on blue incident, particularly from air assets. This had occurred in the 1991 Gulf War. Manoeuvre sub-unit commanders were issued with the US Blue Force Tracker system, on the basis that they would be within a km or so of most of their sub-unit. Sand painted IR reflecting marker panels were also fitted to the sides of manoeuvre vehicles and fluorescent orange panels were attached to the top of vehicle cabs. All vehicles also had a coalition chevron marking painted on them. Individual soldiers sewed glint tape to the sleeves of their desert combat shirts to help with tactical identification via image intensifying night sights.

There was only limited planning for the later stages. I met a single Reservist Lt Col from the Royal Engineers, who was attached to Bde HQ to begin planning post hostility activities.

Conducting the preparation for the attack under peacetime constraints limited the ability to apply tactical considerations. I have a strong memory of the Brigade staff and recce parties from each unit doing a recce of TAA Viking to site their locations. This was in full view of the

main road to Umm Qasr, which was still busy with civilian traffic to and from the border. We rehearsed the occupation of the TAA and then fully occupied it a week or so later. This was conducted by night, where we drove with headlights on main beam on the highway but turned them to convoy lights on entering the TAA. As we did this, we could see the lights of the border crossing at Umm Qasr across the desert, so anyone near the border could see a Brigade sized convoy all mysteriously turn off their lights one by one at the same point. Once in TAA Viking, we could see oil tankers continuing to sail in and out of Iraq.

There were a number of other briefings and rehearsals. The Royal Marine illustrators had created a very detailed model of the Brigade's Tactical Area of Responsibility and this was used for a step by step walk through of the initial steps of the operation with the G1/G4 staff, led by the Brigade Deputy Chief of Staff. This included a discussion of prisoner of war handling and getting food and basic water to the towns in the area once they were under our control. The G4 representative from 15 MEU stated that it wasn't in their doctrine to handle prisoners of war and that they intended to be past Umm Qasr within 24 hours. The DCOS firmly told him that he needed to develop a plan to handle prisoners until they could be handed over to others, prior to moving back to the MEF and pushing on to Baghdad.

Lt Gen James Conway USMC, commanding 1 MEF, gave a talk to the Bde before the move to TAA Viking. He intended to apply an approach of moving rapidly, applying overwhelming force locally to overcome any blocks, using mortars, artillery and the massive air wing in the MEF. He illustrated his point by having two fighter jets fly over him at low level at the precise second that he mentioned them.

Maj Gen Robin Brims, commander 1 Div, also visited the Brigade. His talk was given from the decks of a Scimitar of the QDG. He sought to finish on a high note by telling the Bde to put their trust in their equipment and pointing at the venerable Scimitar beneath him. This resulted in a ripple of hollow laughter and fell rather flat.

In the final run up to operations we heard that 45 Cdo had been finally relieved of their firefighting duties and would be deployed into Western Iraq in support of Special Forces. The rest of 29 Cdo Regt still remained committed to firefighting contingencies back in the UK.

Logistic Preparation

The Brigade's logistic support had been worked up well as a result of experience of Ex Saif Sarrea 2 in Oman, extensive contingency preparation for Afghanistan, including pre-deployment of equipment in the Indian Ocean, and Op JACANA. As a result, the SO3 Logistic Support, Capt Steve Mellor RLC, and the Brigade Ordnance Warrant Officer, WO1 Smith, had worked up key stocks of combat supplies and theatre equipment (desert uniforms, etc) for the whole Brigade onboard the Amphibious Task Group's Royal Fleet Auxiliary shipping and with the Commando Logistic Regiment RM. However, this was now put under considerable pressure by the arrival of a Division on top of the Brigade.

The supply chain to theatre was also under very real pressure. In 1991, the military build up had been gradual, allowing for the deployment of a Division and the subsequent build up of in theatre combat supplies over a series of months. In 2003, the UK was trying in a few

weeks to deploy a Division, with a supporting logistic brigade and supporting air assets, configuring equipment for operations in the desert and potentially NBC conditions, as well as inloading combat supplies and spares for potentially protracted fighting. (Albeit, in 2003 the Division was deploying with 2 light Brigades and only one armoured Brigade.)

The inload of materiel via sea and air to theatre was itself slow, but the distribution of equipment on arrival was also a challenge. The logistic brigade was still arriving in theatre, instead of having deployed ahead of the manoeuvre brigades as had happened on Ex SAIF SAREEA 2.

By way of example, the task issue of Lt Gun APS spares that had been raised by the Equipment Manager at the start of December did not reach us until a couple of days before H Hr in late March. This fell well outside the pipeline time for even low priority spares. I can not actually recall any local spare demands being fulfilled from the UK during this period. Instead, our resourceful RLC Stores Section, under WO2 Geoff Murray, resorted to a system of barter, travelling around the brigade with a printout of our Global holdings to trade with other units over different spares. Items that did arrive had typically been demanded in the UK before deploying. I recall that basic arrangements were also put in place to source landrover spares from the landrover dealership in Kuwait City, since the Brigade's landrovers were still under warranty.

CO 29 Cdo Regt decided to bring the two spare guns that I had brought to cannibalise for APS spares into use, by adjusting the gun crews to operate all available guns with reduced teams. This brought the Regiment's firepower up to sixteen guns in two batteries of eight, with two back in the Royal Citadel in Plymouth. I asked the Quartermaster (Technical), Major Glen Lindsay RA, to have these brought out quickly to replace the other two for cannibalisation purposes. These were flown out on flat racks and arrived in the Regiment Echelon within around 2 weeks. The two flat racks would have taken up the best part of a C130 to fly out; considerably more space than the LRUs that I needed to be able to take off them. However, because as a unit we were able to deliver them to Brize Norton and to collect them in Kuwait, as well as being very obviously a priority weapon system, we were able to get them out to theatre more rapidly than anything else.

The workshop optronics section under SSgt Mark Murray had a broad range of systems to support. We had received 3 (and 1 spare) BV206 vehicles with the mounted Artillery Hunting Radar (ARTHUR) for Op JACANA in Afghanistan on lease from Norway. This had involved rapid training of both operators and maintainers in just a few weeks in Scandinavia, before deploying to Afghanistan. It had replaced the venerable and obsolescent Cymbeline system.

The systems' built in test equipment allowed technicians to carry out fault diagnosis down to board level on the platform itself. We had developed an SOP of deploying a technician forward with the radar as they were deployed at considerable reach. For example, in Afghanistan, one had been in Kabul, one in Bagram and one at Khost near the Pakistan border.

MSTAR was another critical asset, whose built in test equipment could not always be relied on. We had experienced this in 2001 on Ex SAIF SAREEA 2 in Oman in the immediate

aftermath of the September 11th attacks, where we needed the Regiment's small training scale of three MSTAR to enable an option for 8 Bty to be ready to deploy onwards into Afghanistan from the Indian Ocean with 40 Cdo. Where the test equipment was giving an erroneous diagnosis of a fault that required repair in the UK, Cpl Paul Franklin had used first principles and substitution to isolate a cable fault that he had been able to repair locally. We took this application of first principles by skilled maintainers, rather than sole reliance on systems and processes into the operational tempo of Telic.

Because of the careful anticipatory work by the Brigade staff, small arms ammunition was sufficiently available to issue at war time levels (e.g. 6 magazines of 5.56mm and a bandolier), but there were issues with other supplies.

Defence stores were almost non-existent. The Regimental Echelon had enough sandbags to build a single sangar for a sentry position. There was no wire and no trench equipment. The Quartermaster, Captain Ian Roberts RA, managed to source some plywood sheets, which we used to cover shelter bays in trenches before covering them with a layer of sand. Getting 18 inches of overhead protection against artillery fire was difficult as the sand would erode over a day or two. There was insufficient plywood and no stakes to reinforce the walls of trenches and I feared that they would be likely to collapse under a bombardment. Being only 15 km or so south of Umm Qasr, we were well within the potential range of Iraqi artillery.

We only had sufficient UK Operational Ration Packs (ORP) for offensive operations. During the build up, we lived on a mix of locally prepared fresh rations and "borrowed" US Meals Ready to Eat (MRE). The MREs each came with a small bottle of Tabasco and our Wksp HQ radio operator LCpl Campbell made a large collection of these in readiness for the switch to ORP. On Exercise SAIF SAREEA 2 we had gone for six weeks in the Omani desert with the same ORP menu and we anticipated more of the same.

NBC supplies were an ongoing issue.

The Division learned that the Regiment's RMO had a stock of Anthrax jabs and directed that they be repurposed to begin inoculation of the Divisional Signal Regiment. The RMO pointed out that he was carefully managing the inoculation programme so that individuals received their booster jabs within the correct window. He was told that the Division had carried out a risk assessment and had determined that the recommended window of a couple of days could now be extended to weeks.

Since no NBC detection equipment appeared to have arrived in theatre, the Division also required every unit to hand in their existing kit, so that the equipment could be redistributed to units 'according to the greatest need'. Handing in our paltry RVD was a sobering moment as the evident logistic challenges suggested that we might not receive any form of detection equipment in time. In fact, I was wrong in this and each subunit received two CAMs just before the start of offensive operations. NBC sheeting also arrived in the nick of time. Atropine injectors, new respirator canisters and Nerve Agent Pretreatment Set (NAPS) tablets were all also issued. We were directed to start taking the NAPS tablets in advance of operations. The new respirator seals that had been demanded back in the UK only arrived in small quantities and I recall being told that we still had 50% of the Regiment with out of date respirator seals when offensive operations started.

Offensive Action

A decision was taken not to have a prolonged air campaign to start the operation, unlike earlier operations in Kuwait 1991 and Kosovo 1999. Immediately prior to the start of operations, we moved to our starting positions. They were as follows:

- 7 and 8 Bty Fitter Sections under SSgt Moe Holmes and SSgt Terry Harvey were on Bubiyan Island with their supported batteries.
- The Wksp Foden Recovery vehicle was forward on Bubiyan island near the gun line with Sgt David Bogle and SSgt Si Wavell.
- Together with LCpl Campbell, I was at an ECP, just by the bridge to the island, collocated with a CRARRV, C Sqn QDG and the BRF vehicles.
- Wksp Main, under WO1 (ASM) Paul Crysell was with the Regimental Echelon in TAA Viking. Our small 148 Bty Fitter Section under Sgt Ewan McClelland was collocated with Wksp Main.
- 2Lt Sam Beevor REME, the Wksp 2IC was in a rebroadcast (rebro) site for the Regimental command net, collocated with 539 Asslt Sqn RM, on the coast, roughly halfway between TAA Viking and the gun line on Bubiyan Island.

Sandstorms had been a regular feature of our time in theatre thus far and I recall the first night of operations as being a stormy night.

The insertion of the BRF was carried out by helicopter, including a USMC CH-46 Sea Knight that crashed in the storm, killing everyone on board, including the senior members of the BRF and 3 members of 148 Bty (Sgt Les Hehir, LBdr Llywelyn Evans, Operator Maintainer (Communications) Class 2 Ian Seymour RN).

This was a particularly sobering moment for the whole Brigade and the close knit team of 148 Bty in particular. The Regiment had taken our first casualties, as a result of the extreme weather.

On that first night, 539 Assault Sqn RM and sappers from 59 Cdo Sqn RE conducted a beach recce to identify a safe landing location on the peninsula for C Sqn QDG and the BRF vehicles. However, they found the coast to be too heavily mined to be used for a landing and the crossing had to be cancelled.

The Iraqi military had a couple of anti-ship missile batteries on the Al Faw coast and they had begun to fire these towards 3 Cdo Bde's positions. However, they were not designed for this purpose and were inaccurate. I did not hear of an occurrence of them actually hitting anything. However, it did cause Bde HQ to follow the Chemical Safety Rule and treat the explosion as a potential gas attack. Accordingly, Bde HQ had begun sending "Gas, Gas, Gas" warnings on their various radio nets. At the Bubiyan bridge this caused a bit of a C2 issue, as each call sign was on a different Bde net. I would get a warning on the 29 Cdo Regt command net and then just as I got a "Gas Clear", C Sqn would get a warning on the Bde recce net. We were repeatedly masking up to "Gas, Gas, Gas" alerts from the various call signs around us. After this had happened a few times, I walked across to the Squadron Leader's Sultan command vehicle and banged on the hatch. After a delay, they reluctantly

opened the hatch and we agreed to respond to warnings from a single net. The warnings on the 29 Cdo Regt net appeared to be arriving first, so we agreed to follow the gunner net.

There was a busy night of fire missions on the Regimental Net as LCpl Campbell and I took it in turns to man the radio and listened to 8 Bty's Tac Gp land on the Al Faw with 40 Cdo, dealing with a series of enemy positions and threats around their objectives.

I went forward to the gun line the next morning and learned that during the night, the guns had sought to engage an Iraqi patrol boat.

A US Navy P3 Orion maritime reconnaissance aircraft had picked up the boat moored alongside a sunken oil tanker and had used its heat signature to confirm it was a Bogamol patrol boat. The Fire Support Coordination Cell had deployed a Phoenix drone to observe it and fired at the boat using the guns. However, the first fire mission was not observed by the Phoenix drone. A second fire mission also missed the boat, which began to move off. The US Navy Tactical Coordinator on the P3 Orion then passed the patrol boat as a target to an AC-130 gunship that was still supporting the US Navy Seals. The AC-130 destroyed the patrol boat and some of the Iraqi crew jumped into the water. The P3 Orion then guided HMAS ANZAC to pick them up.

That morning, preparations began to fly the two Lt Gun batteries onto the peninsula, flying forward the guns and their pinzgauers, with heavier equipment having to wait until a crossing could be effected. The AS90s returned to 3 RHA and 7 Bde, whilst the 155mm towed artillery re-grouped with 15 MEU.

Once on the Al Faw peninsula, 7 Bty occupied an old water treatment plant. They were resupplied with artillery ammunition by helicopter in preparation for a fire mission from that location, but instead were ordered to move forwards. Without their logistic vehicles, it was going to be a challenge to move 105mm ammunition between gun positions. The fitter section were asked if they could start an old yellow digger that had been found in the location, as it had an extra large front bucket. Cpl Mark Lynch successfully started it using a fork that he had filed into the shape of a plant key. The gunners filled the bucket with 105mm HE rounds and he set-off for the next gun position as the rear vehicle. He could not clearly see the front bucket, which crept downwards until it hit the ground. A shell fell out and jammed between the bucket and road. Unaware, Mark carried on, until SSgt Reid from the Bty spotted the shell and signalled him to stop. By this point, the shell casing had ground down in half, revealing the inner parts, but thankfully not detonating. The rest of the ammunition was safely delivered to the next gun position and fired. The digger then doubled up as a recovery asset for the fitter section.

The battle to take Umm Qasr took longer than the 24 hours estimated at the DCOS's conference. This was not entirely surprising as Umm Qasr had complex terrain with a variety of buildings to clear. 15 MEU pushed on towards Port Al Zubayr (a separate location to the south of Al Zubayr town).

An attempt was made to get the QDG across at Umm Qasr, but I gathered that this resulted in a drowned Scimitar. Eventually they were able to cross to the Al Faw by landing craft, together with the vehicles of both the BRF and the gun batteries. Once Port Al Zubayr was

secured, an M3 bridge was established north of the extensive marshes that surrounded the port.

15 MEU were relieved by 42 Cdo and were released to advance towards Baghdad. 42 Cdo began to clear the west side of the canal towards the boundary with 7 Bde south of Al Zubayr. 40 Cdo had begun to clear Iraqi positions in the date palm groves along the east coast of the peninsula, advancing NW towards Basra. 7 and 8 Bty were to their west taking up a series of gun positions to support the advance. North of the batteries was a recce screen of the BRF and the QDG, moving forwards towards an Iraqi armoured concentration just south of Basra.

I had only had limited communications with the fitter sections on the peninsula and the APS LRUs were failing regularly. It is my memory that in approximately 2 weeks of firing we used up all four Lt Guns worth of APS spares. The Pinzgauers had already begun to fail in theatre, as their pressurised suspension system was operating well outside its load and temperature limits. The electric pump on the suspension was burning out and melting its casing and spare pumps had run out. We had introduced a work around by taking bi-metallic strips from boiling vessels and using these as a cut out to stop the pump from operating once it got too hot. This reduced the efficacy of the suspension but saved the pump and stopped complete failure.

I wanted to get a feel from the fitter sections about how both the equipment we supported and they themselves were bearing up under the continual activity. I asked CO 29 Cdo Regt if I could drive forward to the battery positions and confirmed the cleared route with Bde HQ. LCpl Campbell and I drove north to the M3 crossing point and then across the northern edge of the marshes to meet up with the gun batteries.

Whilst we were forward, Wksp Main had been led by 2Lt Sam Beevor and WO1 Paul Crysell up to Port Al Zubayr, where Sam had recce'd a new location in the port and set up a defensive perimeter and guard positions. We met back up with Wksp Main in its new location.

We learned that a vessel from 539 Assault Squadron had had a tragic blue on blue incident in the marshes, after being fired on by a 42 Cdo Milan anti-tank guided weapon.

The Iraqi forces in Basra began to attempt a series of armoured counter attacks. One of these led to a "half squadron" of Iraqi T55 tanks advancing towards 7 Bty's gun line at night. The Battery Sergeant Major, WO2 Alec Harvey, took forward a small party, including members of the Fitter Section, equipped with 94mm Light Anti Tank Weapons and small arms to seek to protect the guns from this advance. Cpl Mark Lynch from 7 Bty Fitter Section called in a fire mission to stop the tanks. I remember sitting in the Regimental Echelon Command Post at the time and plotting on the map the locations of the enemy tanks and the team. They were 800m apart. The 94mm LAW has an effective range of 3-500m, which is the same as a soldier's personal weapon. If the fire mission did not work, then the situation would have become pretty bleak. Thankfully, the fire mission stopped the Iraqi tanks and the guns were not threatened again that night.

Given the increased armoured threat, C Squadron from the Royal Scots Dragoon Guards (Scots DG) was detached from 7 Bde to join 3 Bde on the Al Faw peninsula.

During a deliberate attack by 40 Cdo on an Iraqi held position around Abu al Khasib, the Scots DG had a Challenger 2 tank that threw a track whilst under enemy fire. I gather that their REME recovery mechanic had to cut the track with an oxy-acetalene torch, whilst the tank was hit many times by rocket propelled grenades. Once the track was cut, the tank was able to be dragged back out of the line of fire and was repaired.

The Scots DG squadron and 40 Commando destroyed the Iraqi armoured unit south of Basra through a combination of artillery from 29 Cdo Regt RA and 3 RHA, Close Air Support, and direct fire from the tanks. Members of the REME Fitter Sections attached to the two Cdo Gun Batteries continued to assist with ammunition and loading to support the intense demand for artillery missions throughout, much of it at "Danger Close" ranges.

40 Cdo and 42 Cdo then began to move into the South Eastern part of Basra, finally arriving at Saddam Hussein's palace in the city. Elsewhere, both 7 Armd Bde and 16 AA Bde began to patrol into the city and formal Iraqi military defence of Basra collapsed.

I had been phoned by Army Personnel Centre Glasgow in December to tell me that they wanted to post me to a training team in Slovakia as soon as possible. CO 29 Cdo Regt had made it very clear that he would not release me until the end of any warfighting in Iraq. This had been a relief, but we had now reached that point. My replacement, Capt James Trembath REME, had just arrived in theatre and the batteries, together with their fitter sections joined us in Port Al Zubayr. I was able to have a short time with the whole workshop, for just a couple of hours. It was an opportunity to briefly congratulate everyone on coming through and keeping the Regiment able to fight. My focus was on handing over to James Trembath and wanting to give him the best possible start in the job. And then, like that, I was on my way back to Plymouth, a week's leave and then a tiny training team in the middle of the Tatras mountains.

Reflection

I hope these notes are of some use to those now needing to be ready to deploy on short notice operations across the globe.

Under such circumstances, logistic lift will always be limited, communication will be difficult and equipment should be expected to break when you need it most. At such a time, you will need to rely on junior NCOs to think creatively and to overcome considerable friction through perseverance and skill. The enemy will not be particular about whom they engage and it will be important that all ranks have trained hard to face that challenge.

For the REME and RLC soldiers of 29 Commando Regiment Workshop, I will always be grateful for their determination to keep the guns in action and the Regiment on the move. Despite a challenging set of obstacles, they successfully enabled continual close fire support for the Royal Marines throughout a difficult operation that began in the face of considerable odds.

Notes:

1. Mapping data is from <https://www.openstreetmap.org/> licensed under the [Open Data Commons Open Database Licence](#) (ODbL) by the [OpenStreetMap Foundation](#) (OSMF).
2. The information in this document has been reviewed and suggestions gratefully received from:
 - a. Hugh Baker (BC 8 Bty).
 - b. Philip Shepheard-Walwyn (BC 148 Bty).
 - c. Sam Beevor (2IC 29 Cdo Regt Wksp).
 - d. Moe Holmes (7 Bty Fitter Section Comd).
 - e. Terry Harvey (8 Bty Fitter Section Comd).
 - f. Mark Lynch (7 Bty Fitter Section VM).