

Operation PROVIDE COMFORT: Humanitarian and Security Assistance in Northern Iraq

The multinational relief effort to aid Kurdish refugees in southern Turkey and northern Iraq was a "joint" operation in every sense of the word. Here, the commanding officer of the principal Marine unit involved, the 24th MEU(SOC), details the events that triggered this humanitarian mission.

by Col James L. Jones

Hoping to take advantage of the allies victory over Iraq in DESERT STORM, dissident factions within Iraq seized on the moment to launch a courageous, but unsuccessful attempt to topple Saddam Hussein from power this past March. In the aftermath of his army's defeat, Saddam Hussein unleashed the still-capable remnants of his battered force against the Kurdish population of northern Iraq, triggering a desperate human exodus towards sanctuaries in the bordering nations of Turkey, Iran, and to a lesser extent, Syria.

As the media of the world focused on the developing human tragedy of the Kurdish people fleeing by the hundreds of thousands before a vengeful Iraqi Army, worldwide outrage galvanized allied coalition support. From the moment the decision was made to air drop supplies to the fleeing refugees on 7 April, it was clear that there was yet another chapter to be written about DESERT SHIELD/DESERT STORM. It would become known as PROVIDE COMFORT.

As the situation unfolded during March and early April, the Kurds' flight ended in the mountains of southern Turkey, where an estimated

500,000 refugees were massed, having been pushed over the border and herded into so-called "sanctuaries" by Turkish forces. To the east and south, an estimated 1.3 million Kurdish refugees huddled in similar camps along the Iranian border. The fate of this group has yet to be determined.

It was during the last few days of March that BGen Richard Potter, USA, was ordered to insert his 10th Special Forces Group into the refugee camps. At this time there were 12 such camps with an average population of approximately 45,000. Conservative estimates had approximately 600 people dying of exposure, malnutrition, and disease daily. In this area of the world, March is still a winter month and many camps abutted snow-capped peaks. The many trails from Iraq were littered with abandoned possessions that no longer served any utility—broken-down cars, appliances, family heirlooms, furniture, suitcases that had become too heavy to carry, and tragically, people who were unable to withstand the rigors of the march and simply stopped walking, waiting for the cold to end their suffering.

Within days of its insertion, the 10th Special Forces Group organized and identified camps and drop zones, pro-

vided medical assistance as needed, and made plans for security requirements. The 10th Special Forces Group formed the first element of what became Joint Task Force Alpha (JTF-A), whose principal mission was resupply of the Kurdish refugees. JTF-A was based in Incirlik, Turkey, along with the headquarters for Combined Task Force (CTF) PROVIDE COMFORT, initially commanded by MGen James Jamerson, USAF, and subsequently by LtGen John M. Shalikashvili, USA.

On 9 April, the 24th Special Operations Capable Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU(SOC)) was into its third month of a planned six-month Mediterranean deployment when the call went out to respond to the rapidly developing situation in northern Iraq. Embarked aboard the USS *Guadalcanal* (LPH 7), USS *Austin* (LPD 4), and USS *Charleston* (LKA 113), the 24th MEU(SOC) was in the midst of a landing operation in Sardinia, Italy, when the commander, U.S. Sixth Fleet, ordered the amphibious ready group to begin backload, depart the waters of the western Mediterranean, and proceed to the port of Iskenderun, Turkey, for duty with CTF PROVIDE COMFORT. The backload was completed the next morning and the three ships arrived on station on 13 April. The following morning, the 24th MEU(SOC) and Amphibious Squadron 8 (PhibRon-8), commanded by Capt Dean Turner, USN, reported to MGen Jamerson and his deputy, BGen Anthony C. Zinni.

The mission was clear. The 24th MEU(SOC) was to establish a forward support base at Silopi, Turkey, from which helicopters could begin to carry supplies to refugee camps in the mountains. Implied in the mission was the establishment of a forward arming and refueling point (FARP) and a Marine air control detachment to run the airfield. By 15 April, HMM-264, the aviation combat element of the 24th MEU(SOC), had displaced itself 450 miles inland, set up its base, and had begun its humanitarian mission with 23 helicopters in support of BGen Potter and JTF-A (see "Into a Sea of Refugees" insert on p. 101). During the following two weeks the Squadron would deliver over 1 million pounds of relief supplies and fly in excess of 1,000 hours without mishap.

Rapidly changing events revealed that the entire 24th MEU(SOC) would

be required ashore in short time. Within a few days, the unit was operating out of Silopi, Turkey, preparing to be part of the security force that was to enter northern Iraq. On 19 April, Marines provided the security element for a meeting between LtGen Shalikashvili and an Iraqi delegation at the Habur Bridge border crossing in Iraq. At that meeting, Iraqi representatives were informed that coalition forces intended to enter Iraq on 20 April; the mission was to be humanitarian; there was no intent to engage Iraqi forces; Iraqi forces were to offer no resistance; and a Military Coordination Committee would be formed for the purpose of maintaining direct communication with both Kurdish and Iraqi authorities.

While plans to cross the border to the west of the city of Zakhu were being finalized on 19 April, allied coalition forces received instructions from their respective governments to proceed towards the Turkish-Iraqi border. CTF PROVIDE COMFORT responded to the orders of the Supreme Allied Commander Europe, Gen John R. Galvin, USA, the unified commander in Germany who had cognizance over all operations in the area, to proceed into northern Iraq and establish security zones to expedite the safe transfer of refugees from their mountain havens to the countryside they had originated from. LtGen Shalikashvili quickly activated Joint Task Force-Bravo (JTF-B), which would be responsible for this part of the mission. Its focus would be to neutralize the Iraqi Army in the northern region of Iraq and implement a plan to reintroduce 500,000 Kurdish refugees back into that country.

The problem for JTF-B was in creating conditions in Iraq that would entice the refugees to return voluntarily to the region. Climatic conditions are such that there are only two seasons in the region—winter and summer. Coalition forces were already witnessing winter's last gasp. Soon the mountain streams, which were the main source of water for many of the refugees, would dry up under the intense heat of summer. For obvious reasons, it was critical that the refugees be out of the hills before this occurred.

On 17 April, MajGen Jay M. Garner, USA, arrived in Silopi from his post as deputy commanding general, V Corps, in Germany, with the lead element of what was to become the JTF-

B staff. At the outset his troop list consisted of the 24th MEU(SOC), which was given the task of conducting a heliborne assault into a valley to the east of Zakhu on the morning of 20 April. Overhead U.S. Air Force A-10s, F-15s, and F-16s provided air cover, while the Iraqi Army watched precariously from the high ground surrounding Zakhu. Previously inserted force reconnaissance Marines and Navy SEALs had established observation posts along the main avenues of approach and key terrain around the city. Assault helicopters were deployed carrying Marines from Battalion Landing Team 2/8 (BLT 2/8), commanded by LtCol Tony L. Corwin, to designated zones near the city. Reports from the recon units confirmed the presence of a significant number of Iraqi reinforcements billeted near the MEU command element. Consequently, LtCol Corwin sent emissaries to the Iraqi positions with clear instructions concerning the movements he expected the Iraqi Army to make in withdrawing from the region and the city of Zakhu. As a demonstration of humanitarian intent, Marines erected 12 refugee tents before nightfall on 20 April in what was to ultimately become one of the largest resettlement camps ever built. Patience and firmness paid off within a few days as the Iraqi Army issued orders to withdraw. By nightfall on 23 April, Marines occupied the key positions and road network around the city.

MajGen Garner and his JTF-B staff were headquartered along with the command element of the 24th MEU(SOC) in the deserted headquarters of the Iraqi 44th Infantry Division. Garner immediately directed the bridge and road leading from the border to Zakhu to be opened for traffic. This was particularly significant as the Habur Bridge at the border would become the only means by which surface convoys could pass from Turkey into Iraq.

On 22 April, LtCol Jonathan Thompson, commanding officer, 45th Commando, Royal Marines (United Kingdom), and LtCol Cees Van Egmond, 1st Air Combat Group, Royal Netherlands Marines, reported for duty to MajGen Garner, who placed both units under the tactical control of the 24th MEU(SOC). With a total force of 3,400 Marines from three nations, MajGen Garner

Into a Sea of Refugees: HMM-264

by LtCol Joseph A. Byrtus, Jr.

Small camp sites dotted the countryside below as the aircraft followed the steep valley northeastward. From 500 feet above ground level, the camp at Isikveren was overwhelming with 80,000 starving and freezing people tightly congregated on the steep mountain side in a patchwork of garish blue, white, and orange tents. A pall of smoke from thousands of small cooking fires hung perhaps 20 feet above the camp in a thin, neat layer. Because every square foot of land suitable for landing was occupied by refugees, the Super Stallions had to land one at a time in one of the few level areas not blocked by the tall, defoliated trees that dotted the camp. As the lead aircraft transitioned to landing from a high hover, a landing zone was cleared below as people ran from the rotor wash, followed by their tents and meager belongings. Once safely on deck, the crew inside the aircraft attempted to unload as rapidly as possible so that the next aircraft could land. Initially, the crowd was kept back by the rotor

wash of the aircraft.

Within moments, however, the crowd surrounding the CH-53E had doubled or tripled in size. As the first pallet was pushed from the ramp, a crowd of 10,000 or more rushed the aircraft from all sides in a desperate dash for food and water. Fearing the results of a mob scene at the rear of his aircraft, the aircraft commander lifted into a low hover and slowly air-taxied its way forward, temporarily blowing the Kurds back and clearing an area below the aircraft for the remaining pallets to fall. The second and third aircraft followed the first's lead and delivered their loads from a low hover too. Once this was accomplished all three helos departed the refugee camp and headed back to Silopi to recover the MEU commanding officer and his ground combat commander for the return trip to the USS *Guadalcanal*. The return flight, however, was diverted to Incerlik, Turkey, for the evening as reduced visibility precluded a return to the USS *Guadalcanal*.

lost no time in developing a plan to rid Zakhu of Iraqi oppression.

Zakhu, a city of 150,000 under normal times, was a ghost town when coalition forces arrived there on 20 April. Fewer than 2,000 inhabitants remained. Those missing were still in the mountain camps of southern Turkey. Their homes had been looted and vandalized by the Iraqi Army, which continued pillaging local towns and villages as it retreated south.

Despite agreeing to withdraw his army, Saddam was not about to surrender Zakhu without a last effort to retain control of the city. He did so by ordering 300 "policemen" into Zakhu to maintain law and order and protect coalition forces from Kurdish rebels. Clearly, the few residents left in Zakhu were still being terrorized. Something had to be done.

Col Richard Naab, USA, the recently assigned head of the Military Coordination Committee, met daily with BGen Danoun Nashwan of the Iraqi Army to explain coalition intent and expectations. After several meetings, a demarche was drafted and released on

24 April. Its key points are listed below:

- Iraqi armed forces will continue to withdraw to a point 30 kilometers in all directions from Zakhu (in other words, out of artillery range).
- Iraqi police will be immediately withdrawn from Zakhu.
- Iraq will be allowed no more than 50 uniformed policemen in Zakhu at any one time. They would have to be indigenous to the region, carry only one pistol, and display coalition force identification badges at all times.
- On 26 April coalition forces will enter Zakhu for the purpose of verifying compliance and would begin to regularly patrol the city.
- Coalition forces will establish a security zone complete with checkpoints within a 30-kilometer radius around Zakhu. No weapons other than those of coalition forces will be permitted in the zone.
- No members of the Iraqi Army will be permitted in the security zone—in or out of uniform—without approval from the Military Coordination Committee.

Shortly after the issuing of this demarche, the Iraqi police were observed boarding buses headed south. While the full impact of the demarche was being studied by the Iraqis, LtGen Shalikhvili and MajGen Garner lost no time in directing the 24th MEU(SOC) to establish this security zone, which it was thought would permit the Kurds to consider coming out of the mountains without fear.

During the hours of darkness on 25 April, BLT 2/8 cordoned off the city from the south, east, and north, while Dutch Marines sealed off the western approaches and ensured the integrity of the bridges at the border. British Royal Marines from 45th Commando, having just arrived from Northern Ireland, were tasked with patrolling the streets of Zakhu, sending what few Iraqis remained scurrying for an escape route. By nightfall on 26 April, Zakhu enjoyed its first taste of freedom.

During this time, the resupply effort continued. On 26 April alone, HMM-264 delivered 24.5 tons of relief supplies to the refugees. They were soon augmented by helicopter assets from other coalition forces that had begun to arrive in the area, making operational the Combined Service Command (CSC) at Silopi, Turkey. Other reinforcements were forthcoming as well. On the morning of 27 April, the 3d Battalion, 325th (3/325) Airborne Combat Team, commanded by LtCol John Abizaid, was placed under the tactical control of the 24th MEU. The 18th Engineer Brigade, commanded by Col Steven Windsor, USA, reinforced by Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 133 (SeaBees), also arrived during this same timeframe, providing much needed relief for the Sailors and Marines of the 24th MEU(SOC) who, alone, had raised 1,100 tents in 10 days.

Another capability of critical importance throughout PROVIDE COMFORT was the presence of the U.S. State Department Disaster Assistance Relief Team headed by Fred Cuny, a former Marine. This team was critical in helping coordinate the actions of the many multinational government and nongovernmental organizations that played a role in the operation. Bolstered by years of expertise in such matters, Cuny was invaluable in prosecuting a humanitarian campaign that ultimate-

ly relocated 500,000 Kurds in 60 days.

24th MEU(SOC)'s MEU Service Support Group (MSSG-24), commanded by LtCol Richard T. Kohl, also showed its mettle early on by installing a reverse osmosis water purification unit and establishing medical/dental civic action projects in Zakhu. Almost overnight, the local hospital sprang to operating capability. Coalition engineers sought to restore electricity and water to a city that had been without for months. Stores slowly reopened and people once again took to the streets. (see "Pushing Logistics to the Limit" insert on p. 104). These initiatives were key in convincing the citizens of Zakhu that this was an army, perhaps the first in memory, that only meant them goodwill.

It didn't take long for the message to reach the mountains. Local community leaders and Pesh Merge chiefs began arriving in Zakhu to verify for themselves the changes underway and to give proper guidance to their people in the mountains. The allies referred to Zakhu and its growing refugee camp to the east as the coalition security zone. As the demarche noted, it was to be free of visible weapons, rules which were meant to apply to Kurds as well as the Iraqi Army.

At first, only a trickle of refugees dared to leave the camps to begin the trip back to Zakhu. Soon, however, as news of a secure city inside Iraq spread to the mountains, many residents slowly began to return to their former homes. A large number of refugees, however, still refused to budge from their hilltop havens. They were waiting to see what coalition forces would do next.

As Zakhu was being repopulated, coalition leaders decided that the next move should be to the east. Already, British and French forces had probed in that direction and plans to extend the zone eastward were put into effect. First, 45th Commando pushed to the town of Batufa, a small but strategically important city, then onto the airfield at Sirsenk, another important objective, and finally to the city of Al Amadiyah, a veritable fortress dating back some 3,000 years; this became the eastern limit of what was referred to as the British sector under the 3d Commando Brigade, commanded by BGen A. M. Keeling, OBE. Again, the instruction to the



Clockwise from top left: Gen Danoun Nasituan of the Iraqi Army meets with two of his counterparts in the JTF, Col Richard Naab, USA, and MajGen Jay Garner, USA; a helicopter from HMM-264, along with several LAVs, moves to resupply refugees massed along the Turkish border; BLT 2/8 lands in Iraq on 20 April; the U.S. Army's 10th Special Forces Group provides security for one refugee camp in Iraq.



Iraqis via the Military Coordination Committee was clear and unequivocal—back off and let us do our job. Compliance occurred shortly thereafter.

One area that received special consideration was Saddam Hussein's palace complex, which was a series of partially completed mansions intended for use by Iraq's elite. These modern structures, erected on choice properties, were guarded by elements of the Iraqi army. Iraqi negotiators did not want coalition forces to take possession of these properties and an agreement was reached that allowed Iraq to retain control of the palaces, maintain a small numerically controlled security force on the grounds, and that coalition forces would not enter the properties.

Of far greater value to coalition forces, however, was the airfield at Sirsenk. The airfield was a DESERT STORM-damaged runway, which, when repaired, could accommodate C-130 aircraft. The airfield was being looked at as the key supply point for JTF-B in northern Iraq. Soldiers, Sailors, and Airmen worked feverishly for six days to repair the damaged runway. By 14 May, the airfield was operational, and a key logistical forward base in Iraq

had been established.

Another key element in PROVIDE COMFORT's logistical network involved Marines and Sailors from the 3d Force Service Support Group (FSSG), which was based with III Marine Expeditionary Force on Okinawa. Early in the operation it became apparent that additional skills resident in the landing support battalion of an FSSG would be needed. Consequently, a request was sent from CTF headquarters asking for two companies to meet combat service support requirements. As the flow of relief supplies grew, the need for this unit became greater. In response, Contingency Marine Air-Ground Task Force 1-91 (CMAGTF 1-91), under the command of LtCol Robert L. Bailey, was formed and flown in theater from Okinawa, setting up initially at Silopi. CMAGTF 1-91 organized CSS detachments that were spread out over the entire CTF operating area. Throughout the operation, CMAGTF 1-91's element remained headquartered in Silopi, providing combat service support detachments to various nodes in the relief supply network that had been established.

The expansion of our security zone, however, was still incomplete. Coali-

tion forces continued to press eastward, beyond Al Amadiyah. French forces, under the command of BGen Xavier Prevost, pushed out to the town of Suri, which was to become the easternmost point of advance for the allies. The famous 8th Regiment Parachutiste d'Infanterie de Marine, reinforced with medical and humanitarian capabilities (not to mention a field bakery capable of producing 20,000 loafs of bread per day), formed the centerpiece of the French sector.

By this time, the skies of northern Iraq were becoming crowded. French Pumas, British Sea Kings and Gazelles, Dutch Alouettes, Italian and Spanish Hueys, Spanish CH-47s, and American transport, cargo, and attack helicopters of every type and variety contributed heavily to the humanitarian and security missions. The 4th Brigade of the 3d Infantry Division, commanded by Col Butch Whitehead, USA, reported for duty on 26 April. This maneuver element gave Gen Garner the "eyes" he needed—day and night—to see exactly what the Iraqi Army was up to in the south. To this day, these units still patrol the skies of the coalition zone, reminding both Kurds and Iraqis that there will be no repeat of last winter's human tragedy.

By 10 May 1991, the coalition security zone, from east to west, was 160 kilometers in length and was secured by the physical presence of allied forces. This was an important point for the Kurds who maintained that they would only return to those areas that were physically occupied by coalition forces. As dramatic as it was, the expansion of the zone to the east did not have the desired effect of launching a human exodus from the camps back into Iraq. By now, however, the reason was becoming clear. The majority of refugees in Turkey came from the city of Dahuk, the provincial capital located 40 kilometers south of the allies security zone. Kurds were willing to use resettlement camps as temporary way stations en route to their former homes, but they were unwilling to accept these camps as a permanent solution. Thus, moving towards this city became the key to resolving the refugee problem in southern Turkey where approximately 350,000 refugees still remained.

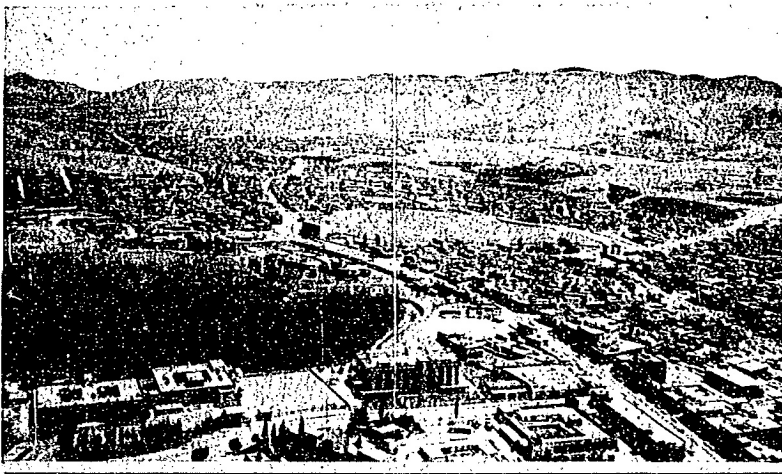
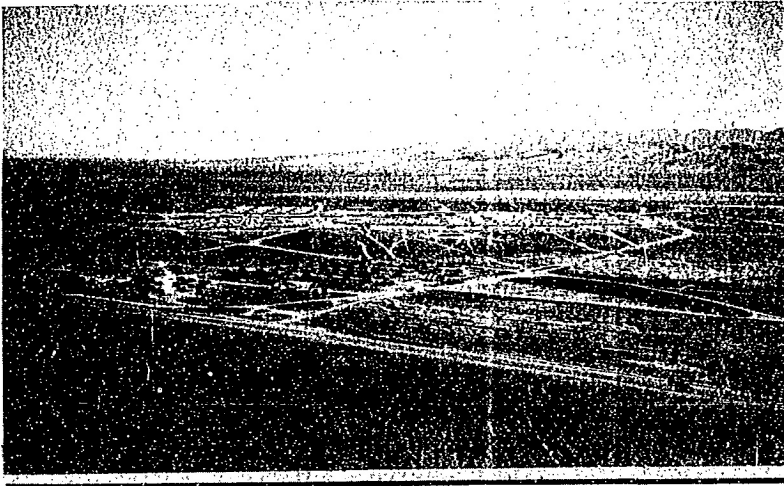
Pushing Logistics to the Limit: MSSG-24

by LtCol Richard T. Kohl

Initially, MSSG-24 established a combat service support detachment to the forward support base it had previously set up at Silopi, Turkey, by mid April. The task to assist displaced civilians was right up MSSG-24's alley. The unit possessed organic motor transport, supply, medical, dental, and engineer detachments that could easily task organize for such operations, while simultaneously providing logistics sustainment for the MEU. From the forward support base, logistics requirements were moved via helicopter and tactical vehicle convoy, to logistics control points located in the rear of forward-deployed units. Replenishment of depleted stocks from the continental United States (CONUS) and intratheater sources was continuous.

Throughout the operation, MSSG-24 provided direct support for 24th

MEU(SOC) and all the other allied forces in JTF-B at one time or another. This was due to the fact that most other units involved in PROVIDE COMFORT did not come with an organic logistical support capability built into them, as the 24th MEU(SOC) did. As a consequence, the 15 days of logistics sustainability that Marine doctrine requires an MSSG to prepare for clearly stretched capabilities to the limit as it had to operate continuously in a combat-intense environment without much assistance for approximately two to three weeks and support more units than normally expected to support. The MSSG (-) for this operation consisted of 251 Marines and Sailors located more than 450 miles from the port of Iskenderun. This is believed to be the furthest inland an entire MSSG has ever been established.



*Top to bottom: Tent camp east of
Zakhu, Iraq; Al Amadiyah, Iraq; Dahuk,
Iraq.*

BLT 2/8 Moves South

by LtCol Tony L. Corwin

The beginning of May began as busy as the last two weeks of April. Companies E and F were each tasked to provide one rifle platoon with either a combined antiarmor team or a fast attack vehicle team attached to replace allied forces controlling roadblocks to the west and south of the city, as these forces prepared to move east. Company G was tasked with providing a platoon for security purposes at the Zakhu hospital. Our light armored infantry (LAI) platoon continued its reconnaissance along the southern portion of our main supply route. The heavy LAI section, consisting of two 25mm light armored vehicles (LAV-25s), an antitank variant (LAV-AT), a logistical variant (LAV-L), and the 105mm howitzer platoon from H Battery, was attached to the 3d Royal Marine Commando Brigade to conduct operations in the central and eastern areas of northern Iraq.

As negotiations over the size of the security zone continued between CTF PROVIDE COMFORT and Iraqi officials, coalition forces focused their attention on expanding the security zone to the east and south. The 3d Commando, with the 3d Battalion, 325th Regiment, Airborne Combat Team attached, and the Dutch Royal Marines were assigned an area of responsibility to the east while the BLT prepared to move south.

On the morning of 4 May, a platoon from Company E relieved Company F at the southern roadblock, allowing it to begin its movement southward. Company F was mounted in assault amphibious vehicles and reinforced by one LAI section and two combined antiarmor teams, with an 81mm mor-

tar platoon and H Battery providing direct fire support.

Each time the Company moved forward, it forced an Iraqi company ahead of it to withdraw. Roadblocks were also established along the route to prevent any unauthorized movement north toward Zakhu.

After reaching its final destination, an area five kilometers northwest of Summayl, Company G was inserted by helicopter to strengthen Company F's position. With sufficient forces forward and a safe zone cleared north to Zakhu, BLT 2/8's command element and Company H moved south on 9 May to Muqbal where they established a fire support base.

This pushed logistics to the limit. Both military and commercial vehicles had to be employed to keep supplies moving from Zakhu to Muqbal. To lessen this strain, the BLT employed a number of civilian refuelers, but primarily made use of Battery H's organic five-ton truck assets.

While this consolidation of forces continued in the Muqbal area, plans were developed for an unopposed and opposed seizure of Dahuk, depending on what circumstances dictated. Although Iraqi forces remained outside the 30-kilometer buffer they agreed on regarding Zakhu, their continued presence in the region was still somewhat of a destabilizing factor. When the decision was made that BLT 2/8 would push on towards Dahuk, it was assigned the 29th British Commando artillery battalion and an Italian special forces company. The British artillery battalion significantly enhanced the BLT's indirect fire support capability

with 3 firing batteries, each with 6 light-weight 105mm howitzers with ranges extending from 15 to 30 kilometers. The Italian special forces company that the BLT received operated and trained with our reconnaissance and scout sniper platoons. By incorporating the Italians into our operations this way, we were capable of maintaining an active reconnaissance and surveillance presence around Dahuk at all times.

The BLT remained at the Muqbal fire support base from 9 May to 15 June, while the city of Dahuk was being resettled by the Kurds. To provide the companies relief from static defensive duty, a rotation system was established to move units every six days from the forward checkpoint back to Zakhu and Muqbal for rear area and perimeter security duty. Companies rotating to Muqbal were afforded the opportunity to partake in live fire exercises, squad-size patrols, and in organized athletic events.

During the last weeks of May, the BLT initiated planning for a phased retrograde of all units back to Iskenderun, Turkey. On 1 June, Company H was the first unit to leave Muqbal. The company was tasked with providing security for equipment and cargo at the port facility and assist in the washdown of BLT vehicles. For the next two weeks selected equipment, vehicles, and personnel retrograded to Iskenderun via Silopi. On 15 June, responsibility for the BLT sector was transitioned to Italian forces, and the remaining combat elements of the BLT retrograded to Silopi. BLT 2/8's mission was complete.

In early May, overflights of Dahuk revealed that the city was abandoned except for elements of the Iraqi Army. During normal times, Dahuk is a bustling city of 350,000, modern by contrast to most other villages or cities in the security zone. Two major roads intersect just west of the city, one going to Zakhu, the other towards Al Amadiyah. Built for the efficient movement of Iraq's army, these roadways were also the economic lifeline of the region.

The remaining refugees in the mountains were getting restless, waiting and watching for any sign that coalition

forces would move south. On the 12th of May, perhaps celebrating their new found freedom, 1,500 Kurds demonstrated in Zakhu calling for allies to move towards the city of Dahuk.

Soon after, JTF-B ordered the 24th MEU(SOC), reinforced by the 3d Battalion, 325th Regiment, Airborne Combat Team, to move south and establish checkpoints to the west and east of the city at the edge of the allied security zone (see "BLT 2/8 Moves South" insert on p. 96). Ongoing negotiations between the Iraqis and the Military Coordination Committee resulted in

an agreement that would allow humanitarian and logistical forces to enter the city along with United Nations (U.N.) forces and nongovernment organizations. Combat forces were to advance no further beyond their present positions. In return, Iraq agreed to withdraw all armed forces and secret police from Dahuk and take up new positions 15 kilometers to the south of the city. On 20 May, a small convoy of coalition vehicles entered Dahuk and established a forward command post in an empty hotel in the heart of the city. The security zone now extended

160 kilometers east to west and 60 kilometers north to south below the Turkish-Iraqi border.

Although there was considerable doubt as to whether this would be enough to attract refugees from the camps, the presence of an airborne combat team to the east of Dahuk and BLT 2/8 to the west, the patrols of the 18th Military Police Brigade throughout JTF-B's main supply routes, the increasing capabilities of Italian and Spanish forces around Zakhu, and the presence of British, Dutch, and French forces nearby, all seemed to convince Kurdish leaders that the time was right to repopulate the security zone. Thousands of Kurds began leaving their temporary shelters heading for Dahuk.

All available transportation was used during this movement. Many refugees walked, but once on the roads and footpaths, they helped one another using cars, mule-driven carts, buses, tractors, motorcycles—whatever could be found. Coalition forces sent teams of mechanics and fuel trucks into the mountains to provide assistance to those attempting to return home. Intermediary way stations were set up by civil affairs units under the command of Col John Easton, USMCR, JTF-B's chief of staff, to provide food, water, and medical assistance at various points along the journey.

By 25 May, the movement of refugees reached its peak. 55,200 refugees sought temporary refuge in what had become three camps in the valley east of Zakhu. The activity was feverish, but incredibly well controlled. People who had never dreamed of an operation of this magnitude were thrust together to make critical decisions. They overcame language, cultural, and ethnic barriers. Nongovernmental workers from all parts of the world joined with military forces to make this effort successful. Even U.N. representatives joined in the race against time to get the Kurdish people out of the mountains. By 2 June, the U.N. had taken over the administration of both refugee camps from coalition forces, which by this time numbered over 13,000 personnel.

At the 90-day mark, it was clear that coalition objectives were achieved. Kurdish refugees were out of the mountains and either back in their villages of origin, on their way there, or in camps built by coalition forces. In

the Mediterranean, the USS *Theodore Roosevelt* (CVN 71), which had flown air cover over northern Iraq for much of PROVIDE COMFORT, was relieved on station by the USS *Forrestal* (CV 59). At Silopi, Turkey, the Combined Support Command, under the direction of BGen Hal Burch, USA, was now functioning as the logistical pivot for all supplies flowing into Iraq.

On 8 June, JTF-A was deactivated and BGen Potter's troops began their retrograde out of Turkey. On 12 June, the Civil Affairs Command was also deactivated.

The remaining days of coalition presence in northern Iraq were devoted to continuing to stabilize the region and reassuring Kurdish leaders that although coalition forces would soon be leaving, this act would not signify a change in the resolve of the allied forces to support the Kurdish people. It was also a period of planning for the allies, who were now tasked with retrograding their forces and material from northern Iraq. At this time the unannounced date for coalition forces to be out of Iraq was 15 July. A second demarche was drawn up and presented to the Iraqi government outlining the type of conduct coalition forces expected of Iraq in the future. In essence, its terms were as follows:

- Iraqi fixed- and rotary-wing aircraft were not to fly north of the 36th parallel, which is approximately 60 kilometers south of Dahuk.
- The Iraqi Army and secret police were not to enter the security zone.
- A coalition ground combat force, composed of forces representing several nations, would be maintained across the border in Silopi, Turkey.
- Coalition aircraft, both fixed- and rotary-wing, would continue to patrol the skies above the security zone.
- The Military Coordination Committee would continue to monitor the

security zone and Iraqi compliance of the terms of the demarche.

In the ensuing days, coalition forces continued their drawdown. On the morning of 15 July, Marines from BLT 2/8 along with paratroopers from 3/325 Airborne Combat Team were the last combat elements to withdraw from northern Iraq. In the early afternoon, the American flag was lowered for the last time at JTF-B headquarters at Zakhu. Minutes later, U.S. military leaders, who had entered Iraq on 20 April, walked across the bridge over the Habur River, leaving Iraq for the last time. Two Air Force F-16s followed by two A-10s made low passes over the bridge as the group made its way across the bridge. On 19 July, the 24th MEU(SOC), now back aboard amphibious shipping watched as the city of Iskenderun and the Turkish horizon slipped into the sea. After a six-month deployment, it too was finally on its way home.



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