

The Rangers Take Hadithah Dam



by James Schroder

ON 1 April 2003, B Company, 3rd Ranger Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, stormed the Al-Qadisiyah (Hadithah) Dam complex northwest of Baghdad. Their mission was to prevent Saddam Hussein and his forces from destroying the dam. If the dam was breached, the resulting flood would not only impede 3rd Infantry Division's advance through the Karbala pass en route to Baghdad, but devastate the population and agricultural centers in the floodplain. However, the Rangers proved their effectiveness as a strike force by fighting and winning a fierce week-long battle to prevent any such strategic delay, or humanitarian or environmental disaster.

B Company arrived at H1, a dusty airfield in west-central Iraq, on 29 March 2003. There, they linked up with the bulk of 3rd Ranger Battalion, which had jumped in five days earlier. The new arrivals had little time for reunions, however, as they were almost immediately ordered to move out for Objective Lynx—Hadithah Dam. 3rd Battalion's mission was to draw the Iraqi Army's attention way from the dam, so that special operations forces could cross and secure the facility. At least, that was the plan.¹

On 30 March, Captain (CPT) David Doyle led B Company, and the attached section of 120 mm heavy mortars, from H1 to a remote desert landing strip (DLS) for refuel on the way to a remain-over-day (ROD) site. CPT Doyle soon figured out

that his mission was expanding by the minute, because at the DLS his company was supplemented by a platoon from C Company and attachments from 3rd Battalion's tactical operations center (TOC) II: an Air Force enlisted terminal attack controller (ETAC), a physician assistant (PA), the Command Sergeant Major (CSM), and the battalion's executive officer (XO). Once everybody was refueled and positioned, the convoy of seventeen vehicles and 140 Rangers penetrated the moonless night.

The company arrived at the ROD site just as the sun welcomed a new day. While gathering intelligence about enemy locations and troop strengths, CPT Doyle received a message from Major (MAJ) Kilburn (pseudonym), the battalion XO; at 1400, B Company had received a digitally transmitted fragmentation order to seize Hadithah Dam and prevent its destruction. Returning to the ROD site, CPT Doyle assembled his First Sergeant, MAJ Kilburn, and SFC Stanley Morgan (pseudonym), the fire support noncommissioned officer, to develop a plan. Opening his well-worn Ranger handbook on the hood of his vehicle, Doyle quickly constructed an operations order. Platoon leaders furiously took notes as Doyle laid out the plan on his map, and the group surveyed the available imagery. The time: 1730 hours.

The Rangers anticipated that the dam would be very well defended, with at least

Hadithah Dam was a key objective early in OIF. 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, was tasked with preventing its destruction by hostile forces, an act that resulted in a humanitarian and environmental disaster, and a strategic delay for coalition forces.

a platoon on Objective Lynx, and a mechanized company to the south, near Hadithah village. CPT Doyle outlined the plan: 2nd Platoon would lead the main effort, seizing a foothold on the dam and clearing the inside of the dam complex; 1st Platoon would be the supporting effort, seizing the dominating high ground to the west of the dam; and between the B Company platoons, 3rd Platoon, C Company, would clear Objective Cobalt, an area south of the dam structure comprising power station buildings and a transformer yard. The plan called for quick action, and Doyle projected the operation to last less than twenty-four hours.²

Believing they only had two hours to prepare, platoon leaders and squad leaders further defined their units' missions and disseminated the plan for coordination. While Rangers scrambled to finalize operational details, a pair of AH-6 Little Bird attack helicopters arrived at the assembly site to provide an aerial escort and close air support to the assault force. CPT Doyle briefed his plan to the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment (SOAR) pilots and tweaked the fire support plan. After several coordination delays, the Rangers ultimately moved out at 2240, two hours later than planned. With First Lieutenant (1LT) Gra-



2nd Platoon cleared the dam's western administrative building in less than three hours. In the course of the action, the Rangers gathered intelligence assets and secured twenty-five civilian dam workers.

ham White on point, the convoy headed northeast into the night, following a route designed to avoid enemy troop concentrations. The terrain grew more treacherous as they neared the dam, with barren desert giving way to scrub-covered hills and dry wadis (gravel streambeds). The convoy lost its aerial escort when a ground vehicle's broken gearbox delayed progress to the point where the Little Birds had to divert for fuel.³



A single vehicle carrying fourteen Iraqi guards charged a 2nd Platoon squad as it crossed the dam. Several hundred .50 caliber rounds stopped the truck cold, but left nine of its occupants alive to challenge the Rangers in an hour-long firefight.

With a replacement flight of Little Birds providing reconnaissance, the Rangers breached the final barrier, racing to reach the dam before daylight broke. 1LT White and his driver, Sergeant (SGT) Thomas Corley (pseudonym), guided the formation through the narrow opening in the breached fence, and onto a raised gravel road, which precipitously dropped thirty feet down on each side. White desperately searched for the gravel road that would lead them to the dam. Then, as if in a movie, he hit it dead on: there was the gravel road, and the asphalt road two hundred meters further on. This was the cue to steel for the assault.

The Rangers rapidly reduced the distance between vehicles, and raced toward the objective at sixty kilometers per hour. As they approached the six-mile-long dam, the Rangers recognized the spillway, the dam crane, and the tall entrance towers on either side of the spillway.⁴ The dam itself was an enormous concrete structure rising more than fifteen stories above ground, and boasting six major spillways. The convoy separated and the Rangers followed the assault plan, each platoon focusing on its assigned objective.

Objective Lynx

Dividing 2nd Platoon into two elements, 1LT White led one section toward the western administrative tower, and his platoon sergeant, Sergeant First Class (SFC) Jeffrey Duncan, led the other eastward across the causeway. The lead Rangers in Duncan's element dismounted their vehicles near the western entrance of the dam, and paused to get their bearings. Spotting two armed Iraqi guards with his night vision devices ("Nods"), lead vehicle gunner Specialist (SPC) Watson aimed his M2 .50 caliber machine gun at them.

Holding fire and calling out commands in Arabic, Staff Sergeant (SSG) James Narrow (pseudonym) and several other Rangers flex-cuffed the guards to a handrail along the road. As the section moved into blocking positions, they suddenly heard gunfire.⁵

While 1LT White was walking across the road and searching for an entrance to the western administrative buildings, he heard a Ranger shout, “He’s got a gun!” SSG Smith had observed someone dive under a piece of sheet metal, and then spotted the barrel of a weapon. Smith aimed and registered the first enemy kill of the operation. Soon after the sniper had been taken care of, two more Rangers discovered three armed and dazed guards in an apparently unmanned shack. The three Iraqis were similarly dealt with. Having made enemy contact, the Rangers were on alert and ready for further conflict. Yet, nobody exited the eastern side of the dam.⁶

Finally locating a door into the administrative building, White brought up two squads to clear the facility and search for demolitions. Using a “hooligan” tool—a combination axe and crowbar used by emergency personnel—the Rangers pried open the heavy metal door. White soon realized that clearing the administrative building would take at least three hours. The Herculean task of clearing nine floors of ten offices each, a control room, locked bathrooms, and balconies, rested solely on White’s section of approximately twenty Rangers. In true Ranger fashion, the section methodically cleared the building by kicking down doors, blowing off locks, and placing items with potential intelligence value into the hallways. The Rangers were beginning to flag from the grueling work when they made an adrenaline-producing discovery.⁷

On the sixth floor, the Rangers found twenty-five startled civilian dam workers. Energized by the encounter, the Rangers separated the dam workers into cells, photographed each man, and temporarily restrained them. The senior employee of the group expedited the search for demolitions by guiding a squad to key locations within the facility. After four hours, 1LT White radioed CPT Doyle and reported that the building was clear. Leaving a small guard detail for the workers, the rest of the Rangers moved topside, and observed that outside the building “all hell had broken loose.”⁸

SFC Duncan’s element saw little additional action until after daybreak. As the sun illuminated the surrounding terrain, sniper SSG Ronnie Jones (pseudonym) spotted Iraqis shooting rocket-propelled grenades (RPGs) from the west side of the river, 990 meters away. One man stood in front of an apparent propane tank with an RPG, and the two others were standing behind the tank. SSG Narrow cleared Jones to engage, and in seconds the silent round from Jones’ rifle struck the first Iraqi, passed through his body, and hit the propane tank, which exploded and killed the other two men.⁹

Soon after the three Iraqis were taken care of, CPT Doyle directed Duncan to move his element and secure the eastern side of the dam. A quarter of the way across, a vehicle came barreling down on the Rangers. SPC Watson fired several hundred .50 caliber rounds into the vehicle, stopping it cold. Five of the armed



Objective Cobalt lay to the south of the dam, and consisted of a power station complex and transformer yard—and an antiaircraft artillery academy that had not been previously identified by intelligence sources.

Iraqi guards died instantly, and another nine piled out of the truck, taking cover behind the concrete railings along the dam. In the course of the hour-long firefight, the Rangers killed or wounded several guards, and forced five to surrender.¹⁰

During the clash, two of the wounded Iraqis jumped the concrete barrier and tried to escape down the steep embankment. CSM Alfred Birch and SFC Duncan decided that they could not leave the wounded men to die. Duncan radioed CPT Doyle, relayed the situation, and requested permission to recover the wounded Iraqis. With permission granted, Birch and Duncan sprinted down the hill, under antiaircraft artillery fire (firing in a direct fire mode) from the south. The Rangers located the guards, rendered first aid, and carried them up to the top of the dam, all while still under attack from the south. Their actions earned CSM Birch and SFC Duncan Silver Star commendations.¹¹

Objective Cobalt

While 2nd Platoon began its assault, 3rd Platoon focused on seizing Objective Cobalt, which consisted of an entry control point to the power station, the power station itself, and the transformer yard south of the earthen dam. Unable to access the area from the top of the dam, CPT Taylor directed his men to reverse course and head

back through 1st Platoon's blocking position. With 1st Squad leader SSG Jesse Ragan in the lead, three vehicles and twenty-seven Rangers maneuvered down the steep embankment into Objective Cobalt.

Through the predawn darkness, the Rangers spotted three armed individuals standing in front of a small building, seemingly just looking around. Based on their Afghanistan experience, the Rangers knew that a guy with a weapon did not actually indicate combatant status; everyone carried weapons, both militia and civilians. However, when the Iraqis shot at the lead vehicle and then dove into a bunker, the Rangers concluded that these particular armed individuals were, indeed, hostile. As CPT Brad Thompson was moving forward to the lead vehicle, team leader SSG Pete Corri-gan (pseudonym) tossed a grenade and yelled, "Frag out!" The fragmentation grenade exploded, illuminating the objective and enough Iraqis to cause the platoon to pull back long enough to regroup.

Thompson quickly adjusted his attack. He directed 1st Squad to suppress the guards, while 3rd Squad flanked from the left and entered near the gatehouse. Platoon sergeant SFC Roger Sherry (pseudonym) spotted an Iraqi peeking from behind the gatehouse, but he was quickly captured. Meanwhile, the Rangers pulling rear security located a bunker with five armed Iraqis and RPG launchers. Seemingly resigned to their fate, the men simply sat there and looked at their captors impassively. The Rangers accepted the Iraqi's surrender, but left them in the bunker, unarmed and flex-cuffed; the platoon did not have the manpower or time to guard them.¹²

Having penetrated the objective, CPT Thompson called forward the vehicle that he had left on top of the dam with the TOC II element. Unfortunately, SPC Alan (pseudonym) made a wrong turn on the way down, and entered a developed area serving as an academy for antiaircraft artillery. Almost immediately, RPG and small arms fire crisscrossed over the hood of the vehicle. One round struck Alan's left foot, and then penetrated the truck's oil filter. As the vehicle retreated, leaving a trail of oil behind it, another round hit MK19 gunner Corporal (CPL) Jon Gale (pseudonym) in his body armor, knocking him backwards. SPC Alan floored the gas pedal and drove out of the kill zone on four flat tires. The bullet-riddled and oil-leaking vehicle finally died just short of 1st Platoon's position. The Rangers pushed it the final fifty meters to safety. Amazingly, Alan escaped with only a gunshot wound to his toe, and Gale was unhurt.¹³

Blocking Positions

Last in the movement order, 1st Platoon established two blocking positions across the road leading to the dam complex. Platoon sergeant SFC James Lauder (pseudonym) led a squad to the south side of the road to clear buildings. Anticipating two buildings, Lauder and his men soon discovered twelve more buildings not depicted on maps. Searching the additional structures, the Rangers found that one contained training materials for the antiaircraft

artillery school: sand tables of western Iraq, posters detailing Iraqi weapon systems, and photographs of artillery pieces.¹⁴

Hearing the attack on SPC Alan and CPL Gale to the south, SFC Lauder called his platoon leader for reinforcements. The 2nd Squad Rangers repositioned their vehicles on the north side of the road and responded to the enemy fire with MK19 grenade launchers and heavy weapons of their own. Lauder called in



The power station and transformer yard lay to the south of Hadithah Dam, where the predawn darkness initially hid aggressive guards from the Rangers' sight. Superior strategy and training enabled the Ranger squad to neutralize several guards, and take five more into custody.

Little Bird attack helicopters for additional support. After thirty intense minutes of fighting, the Night Stalkers had killed the mortar positions, and the Rangers had broken the thrust of the enemy attack.

Hard Fight Won

Soon after 1st Platoon's firefight, CPT Doyle repositioned his troops and prepared for the next phase of the once-uncomplicated mission. Doyle pulled 3rd Platoon back to the dam and positioned it between 2nd and 1st Platoons. Knowing that the Night Stalkers had stayed long beyond the protection of darkness, he released them with gratitude. By midday of the 1st, CPT Doyle felt that the Rangers effectively controlled the dam. Taking advantage of the bright daylight, he directed his platoons to concentrate on

clearing areas skipped during the frenzy of the initial assault. 1st Platoon continued working two buildings dubbed CAS 1 and CAS 2, from which the bulk of the enemy force had rallied and attacked. 2nd Platoon took the time to fortify its positions on the east side of the dam. 3rd Platoon spent the morning consolidating enemy prisoners and improving its own fighting positions.¹⁵

In the afternoon, CPT Doyle issued an order to CPT Thompson to clear the eastern half of the dam complex. Thompson took twenty men from 3rd Platoon and began the arduous task of clearing fifteen stories and over one hundred offices. The Rangers followed the same procedure as in the western building, breaking and blowing down doors, and collecting all items of potential intelligence value. Two hours later, the building was clear. Mission complete, CPT Thompson consolidated his platoon atop the dam and hunkered down for the night.¹⁶

Dawn brought new conflict on the dam. As darkness fled, the Iraqis attacked both flanks of the dam with squad-sized elements of ten to twelve men. The Rangers quickly repelled the initial assault, but, as the morning passed, indirect fire increased. A combination of mortar and 152 millimeter artillery shells rained down on the concrete surface near the Ranger positions. Fortunately, the Rangers had ample close air support, and passed the fire mission to the A-10 Thunderbolt (“Warthog”) pilots. Throughout the day, the A-10s pounded the relentless enemy.

During the day, 1LT White had pushed

his squads east, out past the dam buildings. That night the enemy closed to within two hundred meters of 2nd Platoon’s positions, pinning down the Rangers with RPGs. The angle of attack prevented the Rangers from returning effective fire, so they were forced to call in air support. Within minutes, an A-10 rolled in and dropped a two thousand pound bomb just three hundred meters from 2nd Platoon’s location. The bomb obliterated the attackers, and shattered every window in the dam complex.

By 3 April, the enemy mortar fire attacks had declined to one round every two hours. Unfortunately, the mortars were replaced by 152 millimeter heavy artillery from the southwest. While most of the rounds fell in the lake, every platoon had a few shells fall within a kilometer of their position. One round even impacted the concrete rail only seventy-five meters from CPT Doyle’s command post; luckily, it never exploded. Regrettably, another artillery round did explode, this time directly on a Ranger mortar position.¹⁷

SFC Lauder raced to the impact area with medics and his driver. Stopping short because the position was still under attack, the Rangers left their vehicle behind a three-foot concrete wall and traveled the final hundred meters on foot. The explosion had sent an artillery fragment into SPC Jeremy Feldbusch’s face, penetrating the right orbital lobe. When Lauder and his team arrived, Feldbusch was not breathing and his face was turning blue. The medics removed Feldbusch’s blood-covered helmet and suctioned his airway, hoping to avoid a tracheotomy. SPC Feldbusch did, indeed, resume breathing on his own, and the color returned to his face, giving everybody new hope for his survival. The medics bandaged Feldbusch’s face and carried him to the truck, avoiding impacting artillery rounds all the way. Once they were loaded into their truck, Lauder and his team raced to the center of the dam, where Feldbusch would be safe until he could be evacuated for immediate surgical attention.¹⁸

The H1 TOC reacted quickly to the news of casualties on the dam, scrambling the 160th SOAR crews from their beds. In less than forty minutes, the flight of three helicopters departed H1 for the dam: an MH-47E Chinook, and two MH-60L Defensive Armed Penetrator Black Hawks. Flying in broad daylight, the flight arrived at the dam less than an hour after Feldbusch went down. The Chi-

1st Platoon established and maintained a blocking position south of the dam. While clearing the area, 1st Platoon Rangers discovered training materials for the anti-aircraft artillery school.





The fifteen-story eastern half of the dam complex took two Ranger squads two hours to search. Once the buildings was cleared, 3rd Platoon used its roof as a temporary camp.

nook evacuated Feldbusch during a break in the artillery attack, and doctors began working on him as soon as he was aboard. At H1, medical personnel transferred Feldbusch to a Forward Surgical Team for emergency care.¹⁹ SPC Feldbusch eventually received a Purple Heart for his injuries, and a Bronze Star for valor.²⁰

The artillery attack seemed to be a turning point in the battle for Hadithah Dam. Over the course of the next few days, mortar and artillery fire steadily decreased. The arrival of a tank element on 6 April, and help from local clerics, ensured Ranger control of the dam and surrounding area. They secured the anti-aircraft artillery academy to the south, and cleared out the cache of munitions. With all enemy combatants either under coalition control or having fled, by the end of the week the Rangers turned their attention to helping the newly arrived Civil Affairs team rehabilitate the dam.²¹

The Rangers' seizure of Hadithah Dam was crucial in the early stages of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. The raid prevented a potential humanitarian and environmental disaster along the Euphrates River, and mitigated the risk to coalition forces rapidly advancing toward Baghdad. The dam's capture also prevented any further use of the facility as a river crossing by foreign terrorists, while ensuring its availability to coalition forces. Finally, the Rangers demonstrated the value that a flexible, cohesive, and highly trained assault force can bring to the modern battlefield. 📌

Endnotes

1 Captain David Doyle, B Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, interview by David Jenkins, 23 October 2003, Fort Benning, GA, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.

- 2 Ibid.
- 3 First Lieutenant Graham White, B Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Robert W. Jones, Jr., 23 October 2003, Fort Benning, GA, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Staff Sergeant James Narrow (pseudonym), B Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 23 October 2003, Fort Benning, GA, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 6 Narrow and White interviews.
- 7 White interview.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Narrow interview.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Narrow and Doyle interviews.
- 12 Captain Brad Thompson, C Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 23 October 2003, Fort Benning, GA, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Sergeant First Class James Lauder (pseudonym), B Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, interview by David Jenkins, 23 October 2003, Fort Benning, GA, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 15 Doyle interview.
- 16 Thompson interview.
- 17 Doyle interview.
- 18 Lauder interview.
- 19 Captain Timothy Donald (pseudonym), A Company, 2nd Battalion, 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, interview by Dr. Charles H. Briscoe, 12 September 2003, Fort Campbell, KY, tape recording, USASOC History Office Classified Files, Fort Bragg, NC.
- 20 Joyce Shannon, "Neighbors seek to help soldier injured in combat in Iraq," *Tribune-Review*, 26 May 2003.
- 21 Doyle interview.

B Company, 3rd Battalion, 75th Ranger Regiment, secured Hadithah Dam after a week-long battle with Iraqi guards. The Rangers' triumph guaranteed that the dam would not be destroyed and release floodwaters into the plains to the southeast, and assured friendly forces and local inhabitants a safe place to cross the Euphrates River.

