

## **“THUNDER RUNS”: PANACEA FOR URBAN OPERATION?**

**By MAJ GOH SI MIEN**

The unprecedented “thunder runs” executed by soldiers of the US Army’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division (Mechanised) on the 5<sup>th</sup> and subsequently on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2003 brought about an early and unexpected end to organised resistance in Baghdad during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF). This dramatic collapse of Baghdad proved contrary to many experts’ premature prediction of a bloody and prolonged urban battle in the sprawling capital of Iraq<sup>1</sup>. Considering the propensity for future urban operations as the world gets increasingly urbanised, the reasons for the American’s success in Baghdad are certainly worthy of detailed examinations by not only the American’s military institution, but military institutions throughout the world. The question that will be asked by every military thinker would be whether this “thunder run” *modus operandi* could be the panacea to the seemingly insurmountable challenge of conducting a swift and decisive urban operation.

The essay will seek to answer this question by considering whether the specific setting of the Battle of Baghdad in OIF is a one-off scenario for the application of “thunder run”; or rather, this success could be replicated easily to other urban conflicts that would be fought elsewhere in the world by both the sheer might of the American war machinery, and also by other respectable militaries. More specifically, the essay will

attempt to address the issue of whether the SAF should incorporate “thunder run” as an integral part of its urban operation repertoire. And if so, what should the SAF do in order to build up this critical capability in its war-fighting orbit.

### **Background of the “Thunder Runs” on Baghdad**

*“We have set the conditions to create the collapse of the Iraqi regime. This is the last big battle tomorrow, gentlemen. They said it would take five divisions to win this war, but there’s no question that we can really do it ourselves tomorrow. We’ve got to seal the deal now.”*

COL David Perkins,  
Comd 2<sup>nd</sup> Bde, 3<sup>rd</sup> Inf Div (M)  
1630hrs, Sunday, 6 April 2003

In one of the boldest gambles in modern military history, just three battalions and fewer than a thousand men launched a violent thrust of tanks and armoured fighting vehicles into the heart of a city of five million people, and in three days of combat brought Baghdad under coalition forces’ control. The concept of the “thunder run” had been developed as a potential solution to capture Baghdad since the end of Operation Desert Storm by the American military. A bloody street-by-street battle as envisaged by the thinking on urban operation in the 90s was deemed unacceptable due to the low tolerance level of the American public for American casualty. This train of thought was

---

<sup>1</sup> The prediction for a bloody urban conflict was so prevalent that the term “Saddamgrad” was coined prior to the final showdown in Baghdad, a reference to costliest urban bloodshed the world had ever witnessed in Stalingrad during World War II.

further reinforced in the aftermath of the American's less-than-successful adventure in Mogadishu during Operation Restore Hope in 1993.

The "thunder run" was thus conceived as an alternative to the laborious street-fighting in Baghdad—a massive raid by tanks and armoured fighting vehicles that would rumble through the streets of the Baghdad, crushing any resistance along the way, and most importantly, to psychologically defeat the enemy by the mere presence of the force in the city. The American of course learnt the lessons from Russian's misadventure in Grozny in 1995. In the initial battle for Grozny, the Russian's version of the "thunder run" was launched by the 131<sup>st</sup> Maikop Brigade. In a matter of days, the brigade lost 20 of its 26 tanks, 102 of its 120 armoured vehicles and nearly 800 of its 1000 soldiers to the fierce Chechen resistance<sup>2</sup>. The American would go into Baghdad with a far superior strategy, better trained soldiers and a completely different class of equipment.

The first "thunder run" was executed by a battalion-sized task force commanded by LTC Rick Schwartz. He was to drive his force directly into the inner precincts of Baghdad, along the west bank of the Tigris, passing government ministries and public parks that venerated Saddam's rule. All these with the intention of convincing Iraqis that Saddam's end was near and further fighting would be futile. The armour thrust began at first light on 5 April 2003, surprising Iraqi defenders still eating their breakfast next to stacked arms. Spearheaded by about 30 Abrams tanks and 15 Bradley AFVs, the force completed its circuit of southwest Baghdad by noon, leaving behind around 2,000 Iraqis

---

<sup>2</sup> David Remnick, "In Stalin's Wake," *The New Yorker*, 24 July 1995, pg 48.

dead<sup>3</sup>. The American lost just one Abrams tank to an inextinguishable fire caused by an RPG hit.

The success of the first “thunder run” reinforced the American’s view that Iraqis’ resistance was crumbling. Despite constant public claims by the Iraqi Information Minister Mohammed Saeed al-Sahef that the regime was repulsing coalition forces on all fronts, the American military leadership was in no doubt that organised resistance in Baghdad would not be as formidable as it was once feared. On 7 April 2003, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade launched a larger, more decisive “thunder run”—not a raid but a bold move to begin the actual seizure of Baghdad. Despite the obstacles put up by the remnants of the Iraqi defenders, it took just an hour for the brigade to reach the grand, open boulevards of the regime district where Saddam had loved to display his military might on parade. The Abrams and Bradley proved impervious to the Iraqis’ rifles, RPGs and vehicular suicide attacks. Soon, they were strategically positioned next to the Republican Palace Complex, Baath Party Headquarter, Fourteen of July Bridge and several other symbolic buildings in the city centre. The American’s presence within the very nerve centre of the Iraqi regime struck a fatal psychological blow to the remnants of the Saddam’s royalists, which started to fade away into oblivion. By dusk, the American secured their supply lines<sup>4</sup> from its field headquarter at the renamed Baghdad International Airport to the heart of the city of

---

<sup>3</sup> Donnelly, Thomas; “Operation Iraqi Freedom: A Strategic Assessment”, pg 80.

<sup>4</sup> The supply lines were secured by the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade. Unlike the two armoured battalions that were despatched for the supposedly tougher fight in downtown Baghdad, the 3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion was a mechanised infantry battalion. This illustrated the emphasis the American had on bringing the heaviest force for the thrust into the city centre.

Baghdad. The successful occupation of the city essentially broke the back of the Iraqi resistance and heralded the beginning of the end of Saddam's regime.

### **Ingredients of the American's Success**

The stunning success of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade in the capture of Baghdad could be attributed to several factors. Of significance are the operational surprise that the American inflicted on the Baghdad defenders; the correct deployment of the armoured forces in Baghdad; the superiority in man and machine of the American over the Iraqi; and the confidence of the American military leadership in allowing its ground units the flexibility and autonomy to fight the fluid urban battles.

The American military leadership had to be credited for having the audacity to conceive such a "blitzkrieg" strategy for the capture of Baghdad. It caught the Iraqi defenders totally off guard, having been conditioned to expect a systematic clearing of Baghdad by inserted paratroopers with armoured forces deployed at the outer perimeter to cordon off the city<sup>5</sup>. The defenders, having learnt the lessons from the Somalia's rebels in 1993, were armed with "technicals" Mogadishu-styled—weapon-mounted civilian jeeps. They were ready to fight with the American infantry, never its armoured forces. The operational surprise achieved by the use of these armoured forces offered the American an overwhelming advantage.

---

<sup>5</sup> Based on anecdotal accounts, even soldiers of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Brigade believed that their primary roles in the capture of Baghdad was one of cordoning off the city perimeter, while the main clearing of the city centre would be done by paratroopers from the 82<sup>nd</sup> and 101<sup>st</sup> Division.

More importantly, the American military leadership had a clear objective for its deployment of the armoured forces. Contrary to popular belief, the American forces did not have much information superiority over the Iraqi in terms of the enemy disposition within Baghdad. The plan was not conceived with the enemy in mind but rather on what the American hoped to achieve. The essence of the “thunder runs” was based purely on the intent to defeat the Baghdad defenders swiftly and decisively from within by dealing a psychological blow so great to the resistance that it would crumble before the battle could disintegrate into a prolonged fight to the advantage of the Iraqis. To do this, the armoured forces would target strategic objectives within Baghdad, instead of conforming to the standard street-to-street fighting recommended in prevailing urban operation doctrines.

The American also knew that they had superior man and machine as compared to the Iraqis, who were mostly disintegrated Republican Guards and Arab mercenaries flooding in from countries like Syria. The American soldiers were generally better led and trained, and their armoured vehicles were overmatching whatever the Iraqis could throw at them. It was precisely this asymmetrical superiority in man and machine that gave the American the option to even entertain the thought of capturing Baghdad with a series of “thunder runs”.

The confidence the American military leadership had on the capability of its ground units was demonstrated by the latitude it gave to its ground commanders in making key operational and strategic decisions in the conduct of the Baghdad Battle.

Learning from the mistake of “over-commanding” by the American generals during the Vietnam War<sup>6</sup>, the campaign commanders in the Battle for Baghdad, despite having more sophisticated means to monitor tactical engagements from afar, resisted the temptation to micro-manage and second-guess the ground commanders. They understood fully that urban operations in Baghdad, more so than conventional ones, consisted of decentralised fighting and fluid engagements; none of these should be directed by generals removed from the tensions at the frontline. Indeed, the critical decision to stay the night in Baghdad on the 7<sup>th</sup> of April was made by COL Perkins after assessing the viability of his supply lines.

### **“Thunder Runs” as an Universal Panacea for Urban Operations?**

The concept of the “thunder run” sounds logical enough. The intent is to thrust a sizeable force into the heart of the enemy’s nerve centre and establish itself there to threaten the physical sanctuary of the enemy’s leaders and psychologically defeat them. So why has it not been done before in previous urban operations?

At first glance, the ingredients for the American’s success in Baghdad seemed to suggest that “thunders runs” could be easily replicated in future urban conflicts by other militaries. In the foreseeable future, the softer lessons learnt in terms of the strategy to achieve operational surprise, the doctrine of proper armour deployment in urban terrains and the culture of allowing autonomy to ground units fighting urban battles could be incorporated into another military keen in possessing this capability. However, the key

---

<sup>6</sup> Van Crevald, Martin; “Command in War”; Chapter 8: “On Helicopter and Computer”.

success factor of having an asymmetrically superior man-machine mix over the adversary is never a guarantee.

The US Army in general had benefited from the huge investment made in nurturing its commanders and training its troopers<sup>7</sup> over the last three decades after the debacle of the Vietnam War. Its arsenal of modern armoured systems<sup>8</sup> within all its mechanised forces dwarfed and overmatched comparable size force in most other militaries. And more importantly, when the US Army sends its troops into battle, they are sent in cohesive units, which had been training with one another, and with the equipment they will be using. This synergy that derived from the familiarity with man and machine could not be underestimated. Contrast that with the haphazard manner in which the Russian forces were assembled prior to the first Chechen War<sup>9</sup>. The Russian also received little in terms of urban warfare training<sup>10</sup>, in comparison with the US Army.

---

<sup>7</sup> One good example is the establishment of the National Training Centre (NTC) for Manoeuvre Training. It costed US\$1bn to construct and a daily recurring cost of US\$1mil to run the place during exercise days.

<sup>8</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Infantry Division's formal "After Action Review" claimed: "...This war was won in large measure because the enemy could not achieve effects against our armoured fighting vehicles...During military operations in urban terrain, no other ground combat system in our arsenal could have delivered similar success without accepting enormous casualties.

<sup>9</sup> An anecdotal indication of the quality of the Russian troop can be found in the *Moscow News*, 17-23 April 1997, pg 5: "Soldiers Sent to Battle after 8 Days' Training". In the report, it gave the example of the 81st Motorized Regiment of the 90th Tank Division. Out of 56 platoon commanders, 49 were yesterday's (civilian college) students. More than 50 percent of the men sent to war had never fired live shells with their tank cannons, and had no idea of how to do so. Military cooks, signallers, and mechanics were appointed to shoot antitank guns and missiles as well as machine guns.

<sup>10</sup> The US Army can boast of facilities like the 26-acre, US\$17.2mil Urban Training Site in Fort Knox.



The American, and possibly other advanced militaries like the Israeli, the British, the German, and to a certain extent the French, could re-enact another “thunder run” in future conflicts due to their relative superiority in man-machine mix. “Thunder run”, it seems, is only for those who has the military might to pull off such an audacious trick. The success of the rest without this man-machine superiority would be a non-starter. In fact, “thunder runs” are double-edged swords in the sense that if an ill-prepared force attempts and fails, the sights of destroyed tanks and other armoured vehicles would serve to rally the morale and confidence of the defenders significantly to the detriment of the proponents of “thunder runs”

### **“Thunder Run” for the SAF?**

Leaving aside the issue of affordability at the moment, the fundamental question for the SAF to ask at this juncture is whether there is significant value-adding to the organisation if we possess the capability to execute “thunder runs”. For me, the answer is a clear and resounding “yes”.

Like the rest of the advanced militaries, the SAF had already understood the importance of urban operations. Its emphasis was manifested in the initiation of the urban operation experimentation during the course of the last workyear. However, what was less than desirable was the lack of emphasis on harnessing the full potential of using armoured forces as a primary strategy during the experimentation. The orientation was still very much street-to-street fighting and infantry-biased. The SAF will need to re-adjust its fixation on using light forces for urban operations and incorporate in its doctrine

the use of advanced armour systems to capture key terrains in urban centres for the enormous benefits cited above.

In order to build up this capability for “thunder runs”, the SAF should consider a two-phased approach. In the first phase, we should learn from the proponents of “thunder runs” in coming up with our doctrine for armoured forces in urban operation. Concurrently, we should also examine the kind of armoured platforms that could facilitate the smooth execution of such missions. The second phase would see the Army raising a trial battalion to experiment with the doctrine and equipment. The formation of this Urban (Mechanised) Battalion will be a significant milestone for the SAF’s transformation into a 3<sup>rd</sup> generation force.

Depending on the validation of the Urban (Mechanised) Battalion, the Army should then consider permeating this capability across the entire Orbat over the longer term. To turn this dream into a reality necessitates huge investment by the SAF over a considerable period of time. But considering its potential payoff in giving the land component a strategic capability, it would be a worthwhile investment.

## **Conclusion**

The American’s “thunder runs” into the heart of Baghdad during OIF validated the potential of using armoured forces in urban operations to achieve strategic victories. However, this stunning success does not come cheap. For those wishing to emulate the

American, there is a huge gap in terms of its man-machine mix as compared to what the American could unleash, as well as, the doctrinal changes required to contemplate such a daring move. For the SAF, the benefit of having such a capability is enormous. The work and commitment towards possessing this capability should start in earnest to maintain our cutting edge over our potential adversaries.

### Bibliography

Boyne, Walter J; "Operation Iraqi Freedom: What Went Right, What Went Wrong, and Why"; Tom Doherty Associates Book 2003.

Codner, Michael; "An Initial Assessment of the Combat Phase in OIF", RUSI 2003, pg 7-27.

Donnelly, Thomas; "Operation Iraqi Freedom: A Strategic Assessment"; The AEI Press 2004.

Elhefnamy, Nader; "Defensive Armor Deployment in Urban Areas"; *Armor*, January-February 2003, pg 14-17.

Geibel, Adams; "Some Russian Tankers' Experience in the Second Chechen War"; *Armor*, July-August 2001, pg 25-28.

Hahn II, Robert F and Jezior, Bonnie; "Urban Warfare and the Urban Warfighter of 2025"; *Parameters*, Summer 1999, pg 74-86.

Hawkins, William R; "Iraq: Heavy Forces and Decisive Warfare"; *Parameters*, Autumn 2003, pg 61-67.

Keegan, John; "The Iraqi War"; Hutchinson London 2004

Klug, J.P; "Armor's Role in Future US MOUT Doctrine"; *Armor*, May-June 2000, pg 7-11.

Ogorkiewicz, Richard M; "Armor and Future Urban Warfare"; *Armor*, March-April 2004, pg 22-25.

Pellerin, Jay D; "Tanks and Shock-and-Awe"; *Armor*, September-October 2003, pg 32-34.

Rouleau, Rich et al; "Armor and Mechanized Infantry in Build-up Areas"; *Armor*, September-October 2002, pg 45-47.

Thomas, Timothy L; "The Battle of Grozny: Deadly Classroom for Urban Combat"; *Parameters*, Summer 1999, pg 87-102.

Van Crevald, Martin; "Command in War"; Cambridge: Harvard University Press 1985.

Zucchini, David; "Thunder Run: The Armoured Strike to Capture Baghdad"; *Atlantic Monthly Press* 2004.