

from the Battle of 73 Easting

By H.R. McMaster

On Feb. 26, 1991, the three ground squadrons of the U.S. 2nd Armored Cavalry Regiment were part of the Allied effort to retake Kuwait from Iraq. The 2nd ACR's mission was to establish contact with the main Iraqi Republican Guard defenses, determine the enemy's strength, find or create weakness and pull the following Allied heavy divisions into the fight under advantageous conditions. The 2nd Squadron's E Troop—130 soldiers equipped with nine M1A1 Abrams tanks, 12 Bradley fighting vehicles and two 120mm mortars—was the first to make contact with the Republican Guard. I was E Troop's commander.

It had rained very hard during the night; a heavy fog remained in the morning. The fog eventually lifted, only to be replaced by a sandstorm that limited visibility to very short distances. Just after 1600 on the 26th, E Troop received orders to advance to the 67 Easting, a north-south grid line on the map. The troop moved in a formation that placed one scout platoon in the lead with three scout sections of two cavalry fighting vehicles each in a V-formation. The other scout platoon moved along the troop's southern flank, its 25mm chain guns oriented south to cover the gap between E Troop and the 2nd ACR's 3rd Squadron. The troop's mortar section followed the first platoon, and the nine M1A1s moved behind the mortars in a nine-tank wedge, with the commander's tank in the center.

The cavalrymen were unaware they were paralleling a road that ran west to east along their boundary with 3rd Squadron, through a small uninhabited village and into Kuwait. They also did not know they were entering a training ground occupied by a brigade of the Tawakalna Division, one of

Saddam Hussein's best-equipped units. Its mission was to halt the American advance into Kuwait. The Iraqi commander thought it ideal ground from which to defend. Unaware that American units had received global positioning systems, he assumed they would move along roads to avoid becoming lost in the featureless desert, thus he organized his defense along the road by fortifying the village with

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anti-aircraft guns (used in ground mode), machine guns and infantry.

The defense was fundamentally sound. He took advantage of an imperceptible rise in the terrain that ran perpendicular to the road and directly through the village to organize a “reverse slope” defense on the east side of that ridge. He built two engagement areas, or kill sacks, on the east side of the ridge, north and the south of the village, emplaced minefields to disrupt forward movement and dug in approximately 40 tanks and 16 BMPs (infantry fighting vehicles) about 1,000 yards from the ridge. His plan was to engage and destroy U.S. forces piecemeal as they moved across the crest. Hundreds of infantry occupied bun-

kers and trenches between his armored vehicles. He positioned a reserve of 18 T-72s, other armored vehicles and his command post along another subtle ridgeline approximately 3,000 yards farther east.

At 1607 Staff Sgt. John McReynolds' Bradley drove atop an Iraqi bunker serving as an observation post. Two enemy soldiers emerged and surrendered, and McReynolds took them to the rear. The Bradley of McReynolds' wingman, Sergeant Maurice Harris, came under fire. As Harris engaged the enemy with his 25mm, 1st Lt. Tim Gauthier fired a TOW missile into the village so the explosion would orient our tanks. After my gunner, Staff Sgt. Craig Koch, fired a round to mark the target center, all nine tanks fired high explosive rounds into the village to suppress the enemy position.

As 1st Platoon Staff Sgt. David Lawrence's gunner, Sergeant Bradley Feltman, killed a T-72 with a TOW, E Troop received permission to advance two miles to 70 Easting. The troop shifted to a “tanks lead” formation. When my tank crested a rise north of the village, Koch reported, “Tanks direct front.” From my hatch I could see eight T-72s in prepared positions directly to our front. As I sent a contact report to the troop, Koch destroyed two more tanks. Then all nine Abrams engaged together as we advanced. Within about a minute everything in the range of our guns was in flames.

As E Troop advanced through the smoke of burning enemy tanks, it engaged additional armored vehicles and large numbers of infantry. As the troop cleared the western defensive positions, my executive officer, Lieutenant John Gifford, radioed, “I know you don't want to know this right now, but you're at the limit of advance; you're at the 70 Easting.” I responded, “Tell them we can't stop. Tell them we're in contact, and we have to continue this attack. Tell them I'm sorry.”



SSGT. ROBERT REEVE/DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE

E Troop continued toward a ridge-line, the 73 Easting, on which the enemy commander had positioned 18 reserve T-72 tanks and other armored vehicles. My tank and others destroyed the first of the reserve from a range of approximately 1,000 yards beginning at about 1640. We could not see the others until we crested the rise and entered the assembly area. The enemy reserve was attempting to move out, but E Troop tanks destroyed all of them at close range before they could deploy.

As the troop consolidated its position, it received sporadic contact, ranging from machine-gun fire to one company-sized counterattack by T-72s and BMPs. E Troop destroyed those and other enemy vehicles at long range from its dominating position on the ridge the enemy reserve had occupied. The mortar section suppressed enemy infantry farther east, and two artillery strikes devastated enemy logistical bases. First Sgt. Bill Virrill led a team

Screened by fog and dust, Abrams tanks and Bradley armored fighting vehicles move into occupied Kuwait.

to clear bunkers using grenades and satchel charges. Just after 2200 the 1st Infantry Division moved forward through the Allied frontline in Third Squadron's sector to E Troop's south.

The Battle of 73 Easting was a lopsided victory. In just 23 minutes E Troop destroyed approximately 50 T-72s, 25 armored personnel carriers, 40 trucks and numerous other vehicles, without suffering any casualties.

Lessons:

- Prepare for the human and psychological dimension of close combat. Leaders must develop tough, cohesive teams with the confidence to overcome fear and accomplish the mission.
- Lead from the front. Leaders must build well-trained, combat-ready teams and lead by example.

- Train as you expect to fight. Tough, realistic training enables soldiers and units to respond immediately, effectively and cohesively despite the intensity of battle.
- Use airpower and technology. Air supremacy and technological overmatch win battles.
- Shoot first. In armored combat, the first blow can be decisive if fire is accurate, overwhelming and followed up with offensive action.
- Gain and maintain the initiative over the enemy. Do not allow the enemy to recover from initial blows.
- Decentralize tactical decision-making, trust subordinates and encourage initiative in the field.
- Exploit the enemy's tactical weaknesses and low skill levels.
- Read and apply relevant lessons from military history. E Troop based its preparations for desert combat on experiences during the North African campaign in World War II and the Arab-Israeli wars. **MH**

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