



# The Battle for Debecka Crossroads

by Nathan S. Lowrey

ON 24 March 2003, 2nd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group (FOB 102), occupied the western half of Joint Special Operations Task Force (JSOTF)-North's area of responsibility. Situated along the Green Line, the tentative demarcation boundary between the Kurdish Autonomous Zone and Iraq to the south, 2nd Battalion faced four dug-in and well-equipped divisions of the Iraqi 5<sup>th</sup> Corps. Covering a two-hundred-kilometer front with little more than light antitank weapons, limited close air support (CAS), and assistance from their *Peshmerga* allies, FOB 102's dual mission was to defend the north, and to keep as many Iraqi troops as possible focused on them and not on Baghdad.<sup>1</sup>

Second Battalion accomplished the mission by dividing the front into three company sectors: Advanced Operating Base (AOB) 050 to the west in Dihuk, AOB 370 in Aqrah, and AOB 040 to the east in Irbil. Within these sectors, the companies observed seven targeted areas of interest covering the main

avenues to the south. During an initial defensive phase, which lasted approximately a week, FOB 102 watched the Iraqi positions from its observation posts and called in CAS to degrade the enemy threat.<sup>2</sup>

During the first few days of April 2003, FOB 102 and their *Peshmerga* counterparts took the offensive.

*On 6 April 2003, Peshmerga soldiers and ODAs from 10th and 3rd SFGs began their assault on Iraqi forces arrayed along the ridge north of Debecka.*



While advancing south, they liberated numerous villages and steadily drove the enemy toward the urban centers of Kirkuk and Mosul. In some cases, progress was unopposed and rapid, the enemy having abandoned his positions following the devastation wrought by successive air attacks. In others, they encountered a determined enemy who

not only fought to retain terrain, but also launched multiple counterattacks to reclaim what had been lost. Perhaps the most intense resistance faced by FOB 102 was in Debecka, on 6 April 2003.<sup>3</sup>

The town of Debecka, located forty kilometers south-southwest of Irbil, sits to the southeast of a four-way intersection where the roughly northeast-southwest

road from Irbil to Al Qayyarah meets the northwest-southeast road from Kirkuk to Mosul. Approximately three kilometers northeast of the main intersection, a bypass road leads off the Irbil-Qayyarah road back into the northwestern section of the town, which sits on the Kirkuk-Mosul road. Still further to the northeast, approximately five kilometers from the crossroads, is Zurqah Ziraw Dagh Ridge. Referred to by Americans as "Dog Ridge," it is 110 kilometers long and 400 meters high, and is bisected by the Irbil-Qayyarah road. On the northeast side of the ridge, twenty kilometers from the crossroads, is a small village named Pir Da'ud, where Operational Detachment Alpha (ODA) 044 established an observation post during the initial stages of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM.<sup>4</sup>

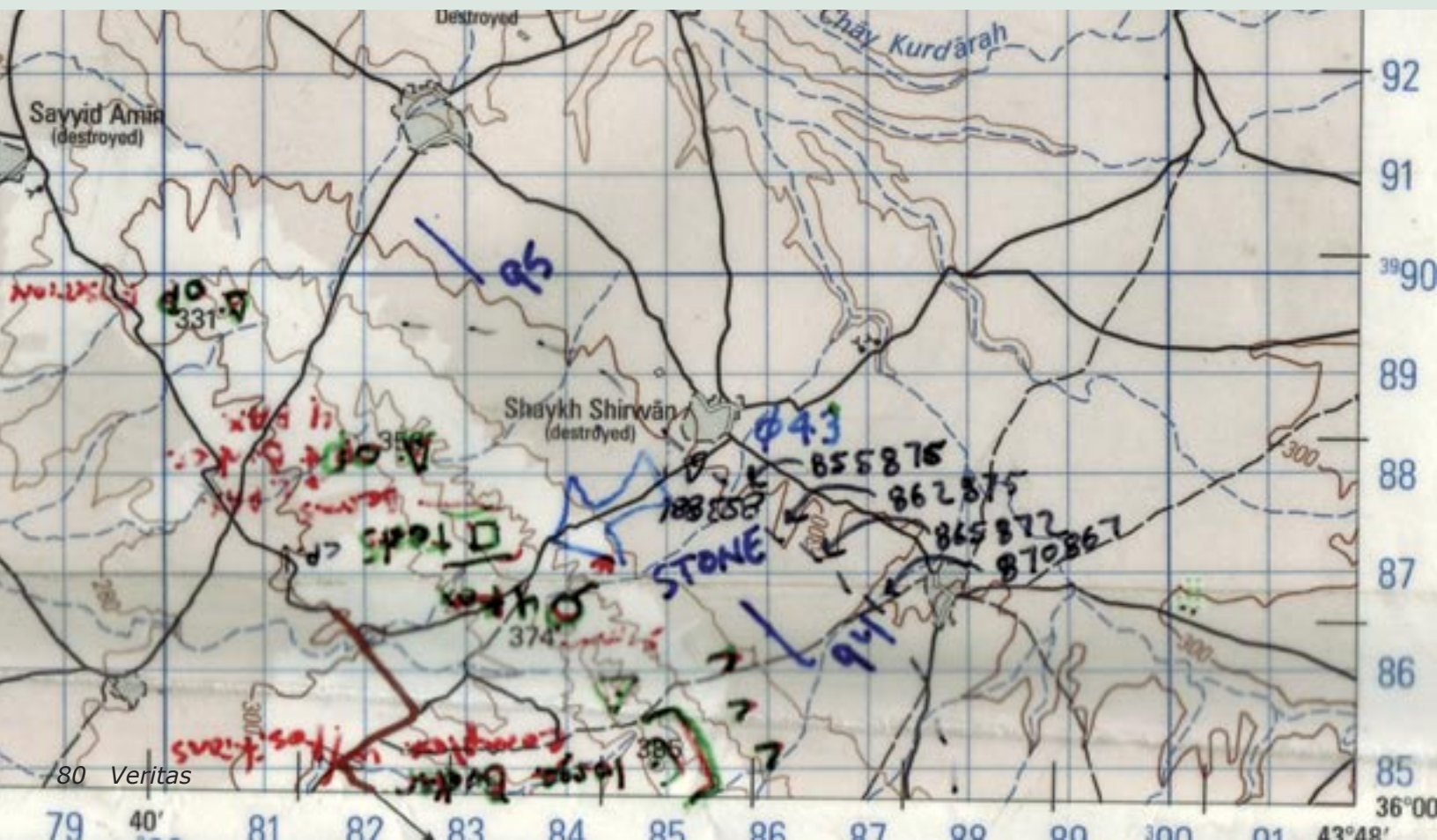
According to intelligence reports, Iraqi forces had occupied positions along the northern base of Dog Ridge as recently as two days before ODA 044's arrival, when the enemy displaced to the crest of the hill. During the days preceding the attack on Debecka Crossroads, ODA 044 was able to observe Iraqi soldiers manning mortar, heavy machine gun, and anti-aircraft artillery positions. Although the team's

exposed position was subject to enemy artillery and rocket fire, it retaliated by calling in CAS and drove the Iraqis back to the southwestern face of the ridge.<sup>5</sup>

On 5 April 2003, as the threat lessened and the likelihood of a successful assault increased, the local *Peshmerga* commander announced that he was going to attack the ridge and had already sent engineers to clear the road of mines. Shortly thereafter, the Special Forces (SF) soldiers heard the sound of small arms fire and exploding artillery rounds near the ridge. The *Peshmerga* were compelled to abandon their assault, and for the next three hours, the Iraqis shelled several local villages in retaliation. Later that evening, Major (MAJ) Eric Howard, AOB 040's commanding officer, met with General Mustafa, the Kurdish Democratic Party commander of the Western Military District. They discussed the necessity of seizing the ridge and agreed that a coordinated coalition attack would commence the next day.<sup>6</sup>

The assault force assembled in Pir Da'ud that night to prepare for the attack. In addition to ODAs 043 and 044, four ODAs from FOB 33 had also arrived to support the attack with gun-mounted Ground Mobility Vehicles

*The Battle of Debecka Crossroads was a three-prong assault against Iraqi forces over Zurqah Ziraw Dagh ("Dog") Ridge. Objective Stone was the westernmost objective, and required considerable CAS before it could be secured.*





(GMVs). The plan was to soften the ridgeline with close air support that evening, cross the line of departure at sunrise, and launch four simultaneous assaults against the ridgeline. To the southeast, Sergeant First Class (SFC) Thomas Sandoval's half of ODA 044 (044B) and 150 *Peshmerga* would attack the 'T' intersection formed by the bypass to Debecka and the Irbil–Qayyarah road north of Debecka—Objective Rock. ODA 391, led by Captain (CPT) Eric Wright, and ODA 392, led by CPT Matthew Saunders, would support the dismounted infantry with heavy machine gun fire. In the center, near Hills 419 and 429, two 250-man *Peshmerga* columns were to attack independently. To the northwest, CPT David Fowels' ODA 043

and 150 *Peshmerga* would attack Hill 374, which was designated Objective Stone. To the north, ODA 394, led by CPT James Spivey, and ODA 395, led by CPT Eric Stanton, would support the northwest assault by fire. Although aerial reconnaissance suggested that the ridge was lightly defended, prior contact with brigades from the Iraqi 1<sup>st</sup> Mechanized Infantry Division made the outcome of the attack far from certain. After the meeting, several ODA splits rolled south to watch for enemy activity, but only the sound of friendly CAS missions against the objective disturbed the evening.<sup>7</sup>

On 6 April, the coalition forces marshaled in the assembly area at 0600 local time. Although they did not cross the line of departure until 0700, an hour later than planned, progress was swift and the assault forces quickly reached their attack positions at the base of the ridge. The two independent *Peshmerga* columns met only limited opposition, and reaching their objective first, swarmed across the central portion of the ridgeline. However, the two flank columns faced much greater resistance and the assault became a battle.<sup>8</sup>

To the northwest, ODAs 394 and 395 waited in their GMVs for the CAS to do its job before moving into their designated support-by-fire positions. When the CAS arrived, only one of four bombs dropped hit the target. The teams then closed to within seventeen hundred meters and began to engage the enemy with MK19

40mm automatic grenade launchers and M2 .50 caliber machine guns. Before long, the Iraqis responded with their own heavy machine guns and mortars. Although the ODAs suppressed the objective for more than thirty minutes, expending approximately half of their ammunition, the *Peshmerga* refused to assault without additional CAS.<sup>9</sup>

Now in contact with the enemy, ODA 043 was able to

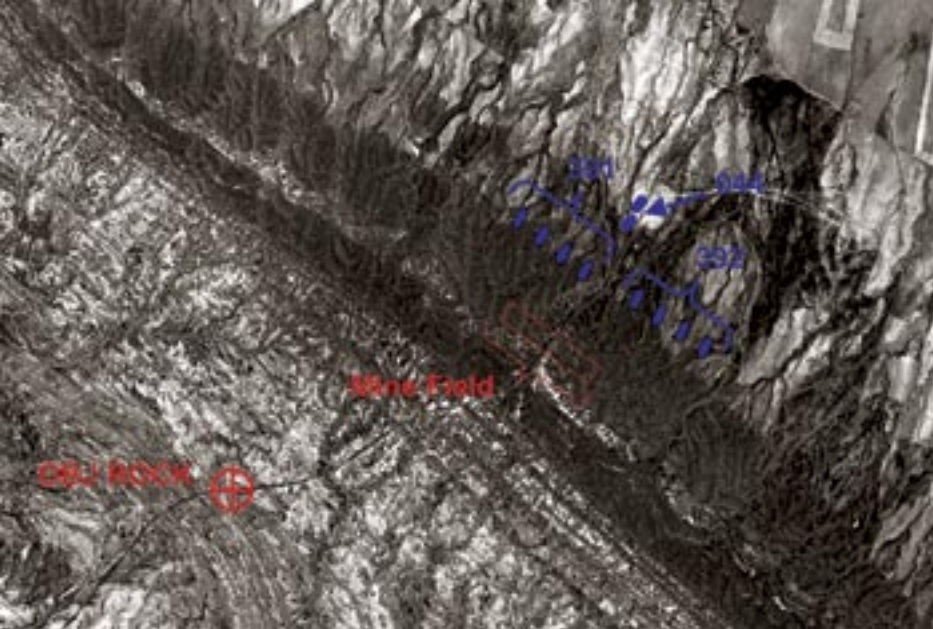
get support from both U.S. Air Force B-52s and U.S. Navy F-18s. While ODA 043 coordinated the CAS missions, ODAs 394 and 395 used the distraction to disengage and withdraw four kilometers to the rear. Because they continued to receive 120mm mortar fire, they withdrew a second time and used the opportunity to refresh their ammunition supply. The teams then returned to the wadi where CPT Fowels and the *Peshmerga* prepared to assault the ridge.

Although ODAs 394 and 395 moved to resume their support-by-fire positions, rough terrain precluded swift vehicular movement and the assault force crested Hill 374 before the teams could bring their guns to bear. The *Peshmerga* quickly disposed of the Iraqi defenders, capturing several prisoners, mortars, and heavy machine guns.<sup>10</sup>

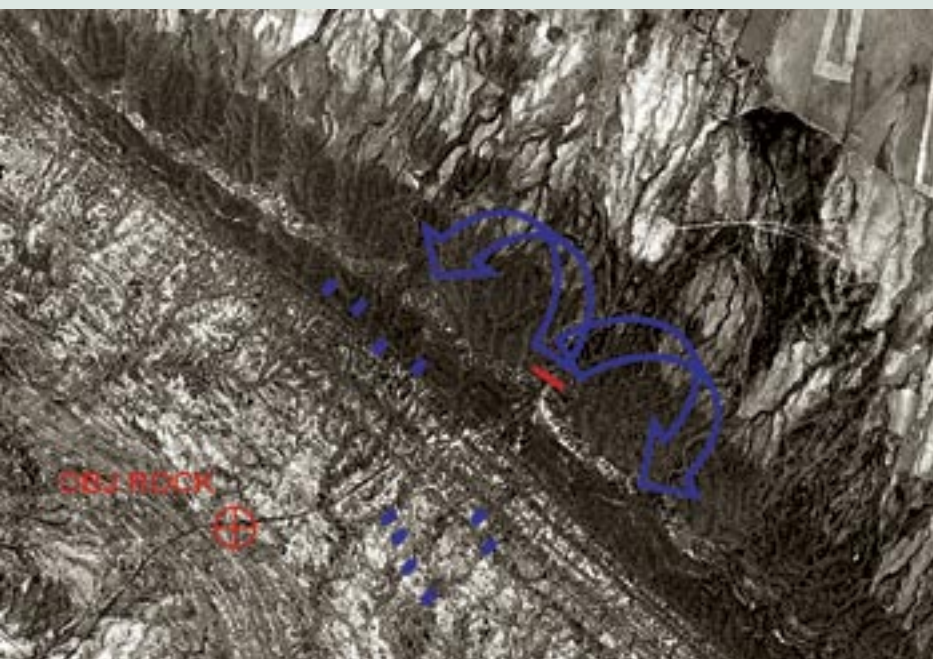
The teams led by SFC Sandoval, who served as the ground force commander for the southernmost objective, rolled together to the attack position at Kas-nazan. This abandoned village was located midway between Pir Da'ud and a pump house at the base of



*Close air support provided by U.S. Air Force and U.S. Navy planes was invaluable to the advance and engagements in the Battle for Debecka Crossroads.*



ODAs 391, 392, and 044B accompanied Peshmerga soldiers as they advanced over Dog Ridge toward Objective Rock. The Peshmerga cleared a mine field and insisted that the Americans follow the road over the ridge. When the attack force encountered a large dirt roadblock just below the ridge that could not be breached quickly, the teams bypassed the obstacle by abandoning the road and crossing the ridge elsewhere.



Dog Ridge. As they continued on, using the road as a control feature, ODA 391 traveled along the northwestern flank, ODA 392 took the southeastern parallel, and ODA 044B and the *Peshmerga* took the middle. The mounted heavy gun teams operated in two vehicle sections, each armed with MK19s and M2 .50 caliber heavy machine guns. Each of the maneuver elements possessed its own forward air controller and, because he expected ODA 044B to meet the stiffest resistance, MAJ Howard granted it priority of fires.<sup>11</sup>

Although the original plan had been to return to the paved road once they had reached the base of the hill, the Iraqis had blocked the road with a large mound of earth and numerous land mines.

After waiting fifteen minutes while the *Peshmerga* attempted to clear the obstacle, the ODAs decided to continue the advance cross-country. The teams forged ahead on goat trails that wound toward the top of the ridge, with ODAs 044 and 392 to the east, and ODA 391 to the west of the road.<sup>12</sup>

Although the assault force initially met only limited Iraqi resistance, once it reached the reverse slope on the southeast side of the road it encountered dug-in troops supported by heavy weapons. During a brief skirmish, SF and *Peshmerga* soldiers captured approximately thirty enemy prisoners, including several officers and two Republican Guardsmen. One Iraqi lieutenant colonel confirmed that the aerial bombardments had demoralized his soldiers, although not as much as being abandoned by their own armor and artillery units the previous day. In the end, the Iraqis on the ridge welcomed the opportunity to surrender.<sup>13</sup>

After the ridge was secure, the *Peshmerga* force continued toward the crossroads. Unable to overcome the Iraqis independently, the *Peshmerga* requested support from ODA 044B. Although directed to halt at the objective, SFC Sandoval realized that coalition forces were in direct contact, that thick fog impaired his ability to control the battle from Objective Rock, and that the level ground was essentially indefensible. Blocked by the ridgeline from communicating with MAJ Howard and the company's B-Team for further guidance, Sandoval decided to press the attack and directed all but a few SF to proceed to the crossroads.<sup>14</sup>

Upon reaching the crossroads, the SF teams quickly gained the upper hand and established control over the area. Split teams from ODA 391 took up positions to the northwest and southeast, to cover the flanks, while another split from ODA 392 overwatched the intersection from three hundred meters to the north. Then, having spotted two enemy mortar tubes between the town and the crossroads, ODA 392 regrouped and moved off in pursuit. Meanwhile, ODA 391 engaged several trucks and nontactical vehicles (identified as Iraqi



by the *Peshmerga*) moving to and from Debecka with Javelin missiles and heavy machine guns. The teams maintained dominance for approximately forty-five minutes, before the battle heated up again.<sup>15</sup>

Once in full control, the SF teams found the situation quickly deteriorating. First, ODA 391 spotted a suspicious vehicle parked two kilometers south of the intersection. SF soldiers destroyed another vehicle that attempted to elude the blocking position and refused to heed warning shots. The group then began to receive mortar and artillery fire. Finally, as the element leaders conferred with one another, they noticed that the suspicious vehicle and several troop carriers were moving again and were only four hundred meters away. The SF teams paused to determine the vehicle's intent; it was flashing its lights (a prearranged surrender signal), but the SF soldiers also thought they saw muzzle flashes.<sup>16</sup>

The vehicle's intent became more than clear when several tanks suddenly materialized on either side of the road behind the vehicle, and another tank and several armored personnel carriers appeared to the west. The ODAs began to receive direct fire from the tanks and quickly withdrew to an intermediate ridgeline halfway between the cross-

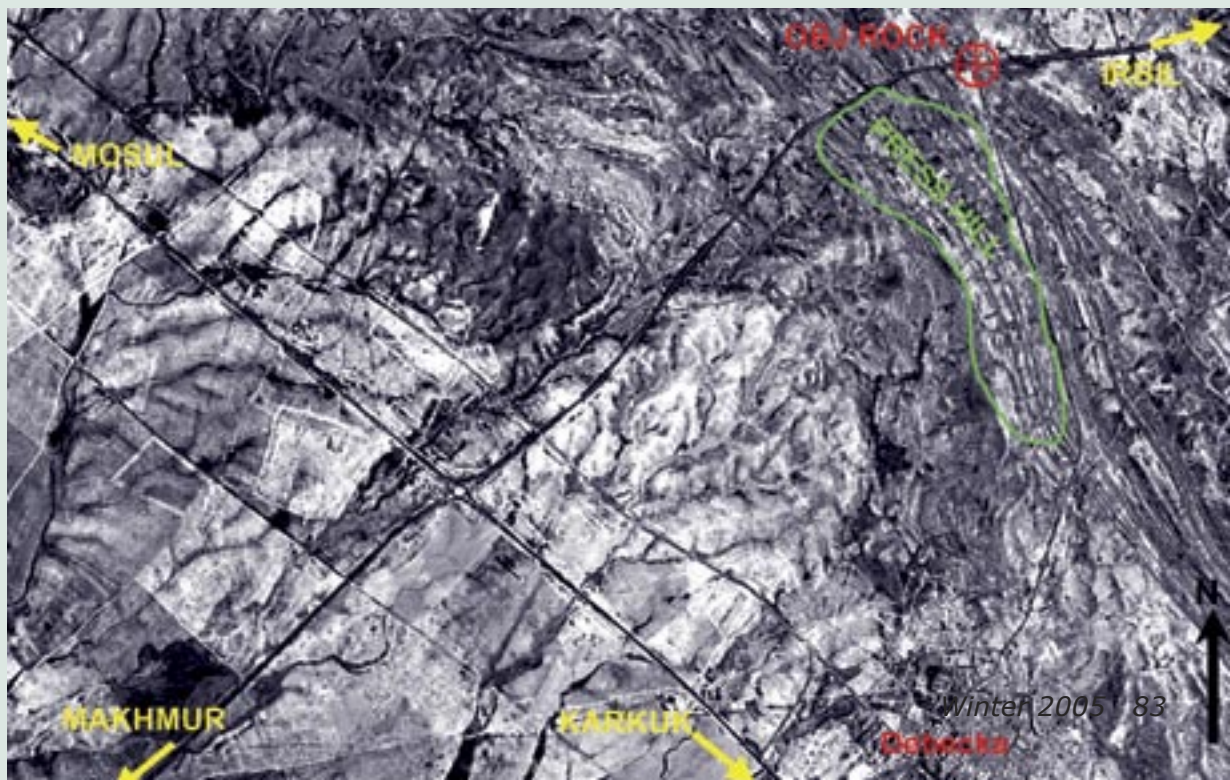
roads and Objective Rock. Before departing the crossroads, ODAs 391 and 392 each attempted to engage an armored personnel carrier with Javelin antitank missiles, but the weapon's tracker took too long to warm up and they left without firing.<sup>17</sup>

ODAs 391, 392, and 044B established a hasty linear defense at the intermittent ridge, with the mounted heavy gun teams situated on the eastern and western sides of the road. As they continued to receive tank, mortar, and heavy machine gun fire, at least five Iraqi tanks, four armored personnel carriers, two troop trucks, several command vehicles, and a company of infantry approached the intersection. The ODAs anxiously returned fire with Javelin missiles and heavy machine guns, forcing the enemy tanks to halt behind an embankment paralleling the south side of the east-west road. Dismounted infantry from the armored personnel carriers sought cover in an abandoned hamlet. The success of the stopping action caused the SF teams to choose to defend the ridge, rather than merely delay the counterattack.<sup>18</sup>

As the battle continued, MAJ Howard and the B-Team from AOB 040 had pushed forward to Objective Rock to better control the situation. Also gathering at this location were numerous *Peshmerga* fighters, Kurdish officials, and members of the media. Unfortunately, an incoming F-14 dropped a two thousand pound bomb in the midst of the group at Objective Rock for the enemy soldiers at the Debecka Crossroads and dropped a two thousand-pound bomb in their midst. The blast killed or wounded ten to fifteen *Peshmerga*, including Kurdish president Barzani's son, and destroyed approximately five vehicles. Although MAJ Howard was among the wounded, struck by shrapnel in the leg, he refused to leave the battlefield.<sup>19</sup>

CPT Wright's half of ODA 391 arrived at the site of the blast within minutes. Sergeant Mike Ray, the only SF medic on scene, took control of the situation and began coordinating the treat-

*Named for the town of Debecka slightly to the southeast, Debecka Crossroads is a four-way intersection where the roughly northeast-southwest road from Irbil to Al Qayyarah meets the northwest-southeast road from Kirkuk to Mosul.*



ment and evacuation of the mass casualties. Although Wright had immediately called the other 391 split for assistance, they remained in heavy contact with the enemy and could not disengage. Approximately ten minutes later, after running several CAS missions against the crossroads, soldiers at Objective Rock again called forward to emphasize that they needed all available medics as soon as possible.<sup>20</sup>

As the Iraqis began to hit the intermediate ridge with smoke, the ODAs realized that the enemy had ranged their positions and the teams decided to pull back to the second ridge, which was quickly dubbed “Press Ridge” in reference to the gathering media. The team medics, who had until then been manning Javelins, immediately began to assist with the casualty evacuation. Shortly thereafter, CPT Berg’s split of ODA 044 arrived from Objective Stone, and MAJ Hubbard’s B-Team from AOB 390 arrived with additional ammunition.<sup>21</sup>

By now, the Iraqis were reeling from the combined air-ground onslaught, and the second counterattack faltered badly. Several enemy soldiers actually appeared to be heading north with their hands clasped behind their heads, presumably to surrender, but an Iraqi sport utility vehicle approaching from the south stopped and its occupants started shooting the men. Although the incident took place at maximum effective range, the atrocity committed against fellow soldiers outraged the ODAs, who immediately engaged what they believed to be a Saddam Fedayeen vehicle.<sup>22</sup>

More Iraqi trucks soon appeared and began to dismount troops a kilometer south of the crossroads for a third counterattack, which the ODAs disrupted with heavy machine guns. Although the teams discussed retaking the crossroads that evening, more CAS was on its way to hit the intersection and they did not want to risk another errant bomb in the falling darkness. MAJ Hubbard assumed tactical control of the FOB 33 detachments and directed them to establish a defensive perimeter near Objective Rock. ODA 391 set up on a hilltop to the west, ODA 392 bracketed the road with their vehicles, and ODA 374 (a recent arrival) established a blocking position along the bypass to Debecka.<sup>23</sup>

By the end of the first day, SFC Sandoval’s force had driven the enemy from Zurqah Ziraw Dagh Ridge, repelled three successive armored counterattacks, and broken the critical line of communication at Debecka. The intense battle for the crossroads had itself lasted for two and a half hours, and when it was over, the small force of SF and *Peshmerga* fighters had destroyed five T-

55 tanks, three armored personnel carriers, eight cargo vehicles, and had neutralized ninety enemy troops.<sup>24</sup>

The teams moved closer to the crossroads the next day, and remained on guard against continued counterattacks for another seventy-two hours. Although the SF teams observed Iraqi forces near the intersection and engaged them from their positions, they were not afforded an opportunity to physically clear the area. The ODAs also received sporadic mortar fire throughout the period, and in one memorable incident, Sergeant Major Joseph Ward responded to the fires by eliminating an Iraqi forward observer’s position with his own 60mm mortars.<sup>25</sup>

In itself a triumph of courage and determination, the battle for Debecka Crossroads also served a larger strategic purpose. Besides safeguarding the city of Irbil and dealing a significant blow against conventional Iraqi forces, the victory facilitated future SF and *Peshmerga* advances toward Mahkmur and Al Qayyarah. Special Forces once again demonstrated its value as leadership and support for the *Peshmerga*, and the combined assault force proved its mettle. 🇮🇶

---

*Nathan Lowrey is a Lieutenant Colonel in the U.S. Marine Corps Reserve. He augmented the U.S. Special Operations Command History Office during the early days of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM, deploying to northern Iraq with Joint Special Operation Task Force-North. He currently serves as the Executive Officer, Field Operations Branch, Marine Corps History and Museums Division.*

---

## Endnotes

- 1 Lieutenant Colonel Robert Waltemeyer, 2nd Battalion, 10th Special Forces Group, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Irbil, Iraq, 29 March 2003; Major Matthew Carran, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Irbil, Iraq, 24 April 2003; Major Frances Beaudette, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Mosul, Iraq, 14 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL.
- 2 Beaudette interview; Waltemeyer interview; Sergeant Major Tim Strong, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Mosul, Iraq, 16 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL; Sergeant Major James Todd, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Mosul, Iraq, 14 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL.
- 3 Carran interview; Beaudette interview.
- 4 Sergeant First Class Tom Sandoval, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Mosul, Iraq, 16 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL.
- 5 Sandoval interview.
- 6 Sandoval interview; Captain Eric Wright and Chief Warrant Officer 2 Martin McKenna, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Irbil, Iraq, 27 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL; Major Eric Howard, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Mosul, Iraq, 16 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL.



- 7 Wright and McKenna interview; Sandoval interview; Captain Mathew Saunders and Master Sergeant Kenneth Thompson, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Irbil, Iraq, 27 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL; Howard interview; Major Curtis Hubbard, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Irbil, Iraq 27 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL; Captain David Fowels, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Mosul, Iraq, 17 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL; Captain James Spivey and Master Sergeant Melvin Carrol, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Irbil, Iraq, 28 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL; Master Sergeant Benjamin Inderbitzen and Sergeant First Class Nathan Rehl, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Irbil, Iraq, 28 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL.
- 8 Saunders and Thompson interview; Sandoval interview; Howard interview; Major Eric Howard, personal communication with Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, 10 May 2003.
- 9 Spivey and Carrol interview; Inderbitzen and Rehl interview.
- 10 Ibid.

- 11 Sandoval interview; Wright and McKenna interview; Saunders and Thompson interview.
- 12 Saunders and Thompson interview; Wright and McKenna interview.
- 13 Sandoval interview; Wright and McKenna interview.
- 14 Sandoval interview.
- 15 Sandoval interview; Saunders and Thompson interview; Wright and McKenna interview.
- 16 Sandoval interview; Wright and McKenna interview.
- 17 Sandoval interview; Wright and McKenna interview; Saunders and Thompson interview.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Howard interview; Saunders and Thompson interview; Sandoval interview; Wright and McKenna interview.
- 20 Wright and McKenna interview.
- 21 Wright and McKenna interview; Sandoval interview; Captain Robert Berg, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Mosul, Iraq, 16 April 2003, tape recording in USSOCOM Classified Files, MacDill AFB, FL; Hubbard interview.
- 22 Wright and McKenna interview; Saunders and Thompson interview; Sandoval interview.
- 23 Saunders and Thompson interview; Hubbard interview.
- 24 FOB 102 SITREP #055, 6 April 2003; Sandoval interview; Howard interview; Wright and McKenna interview.
- 25 Saunders and Thompson interview; Hubbard interview; Wright and McKenna interview; Sergeant Major Joseph Ward, interview by Lieutenant Colonel Nathan Lowrey, Irbil, Iraq, 4 May 2003.

