

BATTLE OF 73 EASTING

BY CAPTAIN H.R. MCMASTER
Eagle Troop, Second Squadron, Second Armored
Cavalry Regiment
(During the war with Iraq on February 26, 1991)

DONOVAN RESEARCH LIBRARY
8150 MARNE ROAD, BLDG 9230
FORT BENNING, GA 31905

DONOVAN RESEARCH LIBRARY
FORT BENNING, GA 31905
706-545-5661

EAGLE TROOP

During the war with Iraq, I had the privilege of commanding the fine soldiers of Eagle Troop, Second Squadron, Second Armored Cavalry Regiment. Before engaging in combat, I often wondered what an armored battle would be like so I could better prepare our troopers. There is not much written, however, about pitched armored combat at the small unit level. I drafted this account immediately after the temporary cease-fire in hope that I could relate the Troop's experience to the American people whose support we felt in a very direct manner. After the war, I had the opportunity to return to the battlefield, discuss the battle with other Eagle Troopers, and examine the Troop log. As a result, I made several corrections and additions to the original text. The following recounts the Troop's experience during the war and focuses on a portion of the battle which raged along the Second Squadron, Second Armored Cavalry Regiment front during the afternoon and evening of February 26th, 1991. This account is meant to give the reader an appreciation for the battles fought across the theater and is not aimed at promoting one unit's action at the expense of others. Many similar formations fought as hard and had like experiences.

An armored cavalry troop consists of approximately one hundred forty soldiers of different specialties. The soldiers are equipped with nine M1A1 tanks, twelve M3A2 Bradley fighting vehicles, two 4.2 inch mortar carriers, an artillery fire support vehicle (FIST-V), several armored personnel carriers,

a command post vehicle, and a maintenance recovery vehicle.

The troop's Bradley-mounted scouts are divided into two platoons (six Bradleys, 30 soldiers each) and focus their efforts on finding the enemy, calling for artillery fire, and protecting the flanks. The two tank platoons (four tanks, sixteen soldiers each) comprise the force that closes with and destroys the enemy. The troop commander is also mounted in an M1A1 tank. The mortarmen suppress the enemy with high explosive, high angle fire. The command post keeps the squadron¹ headquarters informed about the tactical situation. The troop executive officer operates out of the command post vehicle which is configured with a large map board and several radios. The troop fire support team is mounted in the FIST-V and arranges for artillery fires in support of the troop. The maintenance and communications troopers sustain the force by servicing and repairing all of the troop's equipment.

Eagle Troop, Second Squadron, Second Armored Cavalry Regiment deployed from Bamberg, Germany and arrived in Saudi Arabia on December 4th, 1990. Its troops were among the first to deploy to the theater from Europe. The Troop had always been a cohesive team and had performed well during training in Germany. After months of living and training together in the barren desert, the troopers really grew together as a family. They refined their combat skills and adapted their tactics to the new environment.

On February 23rd, 1991, spirits were high as the Troop staged on the south side of the Iraqi - Saudi Arabian border.

The Troop was reinforced with an engineer platoon and an armored earthmover (ACE) to bust through two large dirt berms which delineate the border.

At 1:30 P.M., the Troop crept to within sight of the twelve feet high earthen mounds as the artillery dropped a thunderous barrage on suspected enemy observation posts in Iraq. The first platoon scouts and the engineers bolted forward across the flat and rocky ground to effect the breach. The engineers quickly reduced the obstacle and the tanks sped forward in a large column. My tank went through first and, once through the gap, the others emerged through the dust to take up positions in a large wedge formation. We were elated. We were finally in enemy territory. The flank scouts came through next. Finally, the scouts who had gone forward to secure the obstacle poured through and raced to resume the lead of the Troop's formation. My tank and others used our machine guns to fire into anything that looked like an enemy position.

The air cavalry's OH-58 scout and Cobra gunship helicopters flew low overhead and cleared the path to the first day's objective. The Troop halted twenty kilometers into Iraq and established defensive positions. Now that the border area was secure, the remainder of the 7th (U.S.) Corps would move forward. The weather had been unpredictable and heavy rains made rest difficult.

Shortly after dawn on the 24th, the Troop moved north another twenty kilometers. We wanted to keep moving but other

coalition forces and the Marine Amphibious Group were attacking to the east to set the stage for the strategic encirclement of which the Second Armored Cavalry Regiment was the spearhead. I ordered the test-fire of all weapons.

The executive officer, First Lieutenant John Gifford (Giff), and I listened to BBC news on the CP's high frequency radio. John was the ideal officer to man the command post and relay reports to the squadron headquarters. He was older than most lieutenants and more widely experienced. Giff remains calm in situations which would agitate most of us. A native of the small town of Scotia, New York, John enlisted in the army as a cavalry scout after a year at Clarkson College. While in the army, he was selected to attend the United States Military Academy Preparatory School. He went on to West Point and was commissioned a second lieutenant in 1987. Giff and I were excited by news reports which indicated that the offensive in the east was ahead of schedule. This was later confirmed on our own operations radio. We would continue the offensive earlier than planned.

At noon, the Troop continued its move to the north. Enroute to our new objective, Captain Tom Sprowls' Fox Troop called "contact" over the radio. Their lead scout platoon, led by Lieutenant T.J. Linzy had received fire and killed two of the enemy. The rest surrendered. The squadron continued its move. The intelligence officer, Captain Rhett Scott, estimated that Fox Troop had encountered the scouts or security forces of an Iraqi infantry division protecting their army's

western flank. The Troop halted and re-supplied after covering sixty kilometers. We were ordered to remain for the night. We set up a hasty troop defensive position.

Just as the sun set, SSG James Lawrence, a scout from first platoon, detected an enemy defensive position consisting of three distinct squad trenches and bunkers. Lawrence and I had served together at Fort Hood, Texas. The native of Salem, Illinois was a veteran of thirteen years and an exceptionally good scout. I went forward to investigate along with the first platoon leader, Lieutenant Michael Petschek. Mike Petschek had more pressure on him than any of the platoon leaders. He led the Troop and was certain to hit the enemy first. He had to navigate for us while keeping watch for enemy positions and minefields. Competent, confident, and even tempered, the Georgetown University graduate was the ideal man for the job. He had been a scout platoon leader for well over a year and his soldiers and I had great faith in him.

Petschek and I could see enemy soldiers milling about the trenchline from two kilometers away through the Bradley and tank thermal sights. The enemy soldiers had no idea that they were under observation. I ordered a scout section (two Bradleys) around the left flank of the enemy position while my tank and Mike's Bradley covered their move. At a range outside that of the enemy's rocket propelled grenades (RPG's), Staff Sergeants Lawrence and Cowart Magee's Bradleys opened up with high explosive rounds from their 25 millimeter chain

guns. The muzzle flashes from their gun barrels and the streak of their tracers arcing toward the enemy were followed by innumerable explosions along the enemy positions. My tank then fired a 120 millimeter high explosive (HEAT) round into an enemy bunker. The fireball from the tank's gun illuminated the area between our combat vehicles and the enemy position. Almost immediately, a violent explosion erupted at the center of the enemy position. The scouts reported ten enemy soldiers running to the north. I decided not to pursue those retreating. The real mission was that of security and preparing to continue the attack the next day. I was convinced that the enemy would no longer be interested in sending a patrol against us. The scouts returned to their observation posts. Fox and Ghost Troops, who had halted very close to some enemy positions reported taking many prisoners and we observed sporadic exchanges of machine gun fire in their areas.

Platoon Sergeant Robert Patterson was Petschek's right hand man in first platoon. Later that night, the veteran of sixteen years from Duryea, Pennsylvania reported contact with an enemy position far to his front. The Troop's mortars eliminated the enemy position with high angle fire.

The scouts and mortars were not the only soldiers busy that night. The mechanics and First Sergeant William Virrill worked to repair a coolant leak on Sergeant Willie Digbie's Bradley. Virrill, powerfully built and energetic, was young for a First Sergeant. The 31 year old was responsible for ensuring that the Troop had all the fuel, ammunition, food,

and maintenance support it required. Soldiers worked through the night and, as a result of their efforts, the Troop remained at full combat strength.

The next morning (February 25th), the Troop collapsed the defense, reformed, and began moving north again. Soldiers were faced for the first time with the gruesome sight of enemy dead. As we moved out of the area, we encountered countless groups of enemy soldiers who had thrown down their weapons and were walking south in groups of three to fifteen. They were ragged, wearied, mustachioed, dark haired men with nothing but their solid green uniforms and boots. The squadron's armored vehicles moving in formation is an imposing sight and the enemy were anxious to communicate their peaceful intentions. Many of the enemy greeted us with thumbs up signs and all waved to us wildly. Some seemed to actually cheer us on. To keep our forward speed, scouts quickly searched them for concealed weapons, gave them food and water of which they were in desperate need, and moved on. A unit behind us would pick them up. One wondered from where the surrendering enemy had come. They carried no equipment, water, or food. Yet, they walked south in the barren, featureless desert with no enemy positions in sight. They must have walked a great distance.

The Troop halted for refuel after covering sixty kilometers in less than four hours. We were ordered into another hasty defense so the heavy divisions could close. As we moved slightly forward into position, Captain Joe Sartiano's Ghost Troop

reported "contact." They destroyed two Soviet-made armored personnel carriers (MTLB's) after receiving machine gun fire. The rest of the enemy surrendered. Ghost captured several of these MTLB's intact.

After the Troop was set in its new position, I left for the squadron command post for a meeting in hope of gleaning more information about continuing the attack. The other troop commanders and I examined captured enemy equipment, maps, and documents as well as the MTLB's. The equipment and weapons were in vintage condition and apparently belonged to a Republican Guard division. I drove an MTLB. It was cramped and I found it difficult to work my way through its eight gear manual transmission. It was very thinly armored and, loaded with ammunition, it looked like a death trap.

Inside the command post, we were disappointed by rumors that the Regiment would press the attack no farther and become the Corps reserve. We would receive specific orders over the radio later that night. The sun had set and the weather changed as if to become consistent with my mood. I returned to the Troop command post in absolute darkness and driving rain. A captured Iraqi poncho provided only meager protection from the downpour.

I was happy to climb into the dry command post vehicle where I relayed the little information I had to the platoon leaders. I had gotten only a few hours sleep in the last three days and felt very tired. Still wearing my drenched chemical suit, I lay down on the narrow wooden shelf under

the radios. The chemical suit had become heavy and the dampness was chilling. The shelf, however, seemed as comfortable as any bed and I soon fell into a deep sleep.

Lieutenant Gifford awakened me a few hours later. Squadron headquarters was sending us the new order. I tried to rationalize sleeping through the orders but John was persistent and I got up. My fears had been justified. We were simply to change the orientation of our defense to the east with Fox Troop protecting our northern flank and Ghost Troop to our south. I was afraid that we would be cheated of the opportunity to meet the enemy. I relayed our orders to the platoon leaders and told them to remain prepared to continue the attack with only a moment's notice.

On the morning of the 26th, the Troop re-positioned to the new defensive sector. Lieutenant Petschek's scout platoon (six Bradleys, 30 soldiers) was most forward and Lieutenant Timothy Gauthier's third platoon scouts connected the Troop with Fox on our northern flank. Lieutenants Michael Hamilton's and Jeffrey DeStefano's tank platoons were positioned in depth to support the scouts or to react forward.

I had finished checking the forward scout positions and was talking to the mortarmen about their fire plan when Staff Sergeant Patterson's section reported "contact east, three MTLB's." I jumped into my tank and the M1A1's turbine engine started with its characteristic high pitched whine. As Private First Class Christopher Hedenskog (Skog) of North Glenn, Colorado drove the tank close to the scouts' screen line, the point

of contact was easily visible. Three MTLB's had been attempting to scout our positions. Ghost Troop's scouts had already destroyed two with their 25 millimeter cannons and the third was taking evasive action. It was important that we stop the last vehicle to prevent it from reporting to its headquarters. I called Patterson on the radio; "Red 4 this is Black 6. Does that MTLB have my name on it?" He replied, "Roger, your name's written all over it." My gunner, Staff Sergeant Craig Koch of Williamsport, Pennsylvania, laid the tank's sight on the center of the target. He engaged the laser rangefinder and the digital display showed that the enemy vehicle was over two thousand meters away. The tank's computer allowed for the range, crosswind, and the speed of the target. A HEAT round was already in the breach of the 120 millimeter main gun. Private Jeffrey Taylor, the loader, said "up" indicating that the gun was ready and that he was away from its recoil path. I yelled "fire!" A split second later, Koch screamed "on the way!" The gun thundered backward as he squeezed the trigger. The tank's turret filled with the smell of gunpowder as the breech fell open and spit out the small aluminum cap which is all that remains after the round is fired. A second later, the MTLB exploded into flames. The tank platoon leaders chided me for not allowing them to come forward and fire. Everyone was hungry for action.

At about 1000 A.M. the Troop's mission changed slightly. We were to move south of Ghost Troop and tie-in with the Third Squadron. The night's rain had yielded to a thick fog and

low clouds. After a difficult move during which our navigation devices temporarily malfunctioned, the Troop made contact with its new flank unit, Iron Troop. I felt that Major Douglas MacGregor, the squadron operations officer, had moved us south for a reason. The Troop had wanted to lead the squadron into Iraq but the mission had fallen to Fox Troop; a task which they performed admirably. MacGregor had promised me that, when contact with the Republican Guard was imminent, he would put Eagle Troop in the lead. We were positioned along the 50 easting² and received orders to move east ten more kilometers to the 60 easting at 12:00. Major MacGregor directed that the squadron base its movement on Eagle.

It felt great to be moving again but our hopes of continuing to press the attack were soon dashed. At 1:00 P.M. we were ordered to once again establish a defense and engineers were actually coming to the Troop to dig us in. The start and stop character of the operation was causing anxiety in the Troop. We were confident in ourselves and in each other and wanted to get on with the attack. The Troop made use of this latest stop to refuel. The fog cleared but gave way to high winds and blowing sand.

At 3:25, the Troop once again received orders to attack. I gave an order full of enthusiasm. I told the Troop, "we attack in five minutes to the 70 easting. This is the moment we have all awaited." Although we knew the general locations of large enemy units, we had not received detailed intelligence about the enemy we were to encounter. I had a feeling, however,

that this time we would meet the enemy. Lieutenant Gauthier, known for his deadpan sense of humor, asked on the radio, "what kind of contact can we expect?" I replied, "enemy contact." He said "Roger, that's the best kind" and the Troop rolled forward through the blowing sand.

Tim Gauthier, a native of West Hartford, Connecticut and a Distinguished Military Graduate from Arizona State University had responsibility for keeping contact with Iron Troop to the south and protecting our Troop's flank. As we began moving, Gauthier wished that his platoon, like Petschek's, had fought a smaller battle before today. He had no doubt that his men would perform well but was concerned that a momentary hesitation could prove costly.

The sun fought its way through the clouds but the sandstorm continued to preclude long range observation. As the Troop crested a slight rise, air burst artillery fell on Lieutenant Petschek's lead scout platoon and the mortar section. The first rounds exploded just forward of David Lawrence's Bradley. Lawrence yelled, "turn right damn it" to his driver, Private First Class David Pronti, 22, of Brooklyn, New York. Lawrence, closing his hatch as he ducked down inside the vehicle, looked across the turret and grinned at his gunner, Sergeant Bradley Feltman. Feltman began to laugh until another round landed close by. The Troop did not break stride. Soldiers closed their hatches and swung to the south around the impact area. I remember feeling proud of how the Troop reacted. Falling artillery is something difficult to replicate in training

but the troopers reacted exactly as we had practiced.

Private First Class Robert M. Lee of Tomball, Texas was driving the lead vehicle in third platoon. He had been fueling his Bradley when he got the word that we were attacking. First Sergeant Virrill had hit him in the shoulder and yelled, "get 'em Lee." As the Troop attacked, Lee's squad leader, Sergeant Maurice Harris of Madison, Virginia, briefed his crew on the intercom. Lee was experiencing several emotions at once - fear, relief, anxiety, curiosity, and exhilaration. He kept telling himself, "suck it up, just do it, make 'em pay."

At 3:56 P.M., Staff Sergeant Jon McReynolds of third platoon reported four enemy soldiers surrendering in a bunker complex just north of the Troop's southern boundary. Without hesitation, McReynolds and his two scout observers, Sergeant Wallace and Private First Class Robert Sanchez, dismounted, searched the enemy prisoners, loaded them on the front of the Bradley, and sped toward the First Sergeant's track. As McReynolds was departing, Sergeant Harris' Bradley came under heavy machine gun fire from a village east of the bunker complex. Lee had been laughing at how McReynolds threw the prisoners on top of the Bradley. Now he was screaming, "small arms fire, one o'clock." Any fear Lee had felt was replaced by excitement and anger. He was ready for battle. Sergeant Harris reported the contact to Lieutenant Gauthier. Gauthier responded with, "well (expletive deleted) kill them" and proceeded to bring more third platoon Bradleys forward to

support.

I decided to hit the enemy position hard and bypass it to the north. We could see gun barrels protruding from windows in the gray cinderblock buildings. Several enemy vehicles with machine guns mounted were parked in the narrow streets. Scouts from first and third platoons fired 25 millimeter chain gun high explosive ammunition into the buildings and across the wall of dirt that the enemy had constructed around the village. I brought all nine tanks on line and gave them a fire command which resulted in the near-simultaneous firing of nine 120 millimeter HEAT rounds into the buildings. Rounds impacted into each of the buildings, blew gaping holes in them, and collapsed several roofs. Subsequently, fires started and the blowing smoke obscured the Troop from the enemy. We would take no more fire from the village.

The Troop resumed movement eastward. Mike Petschek's first platoon was moving tentatively and, unknown to me, had just sighted an enemy armored vehicle to the east. I decided to switch the formation to tanks in the lead and instructed the tank platoons to "follow my move." Magee and Lawrence, on higher ground to the north, had been looking east while the majority of the Troop fired on the village. Sergeant Roland Moody, a father of two from Cleveland, Ohio, detected two enemy tanks and began firing on them with TOW missiles. Magee yelled, "tank, we hit a tank" on the platoon radio net. I had taken the point and the tanks were passing through the scouts in a nine tank wedge. Lieutenant Mike Hamilton's Second

platoon (four M1A1's) was coming up on my left and Lieutenant Jeffrey DeStefano's fourth platoon was on my right. Hamilton, a dual U.S. - Canadian citizen from Burlington, Ontario was relatively new to the Troop. His wife, Susan, had arrived in Europe just prior to our deployment. A natural leader, the Norwich University graduate had quickly gained the confidence of his soldiers during training in the desert. Fourth platoon also had great confidence in their leader. Jeff, a 1989 West Point graduate had been with the Troop almost one year. He was experienced and effective.

It was 4:18 P.M. The sandstorm had not let up. I was issuing final instructions to the Troop when my tank crested another, almost imperceptible rise. As we came over the top, Staff Sergeant Koch yelled "tanks direct front." I then saw more of the enemy position at which Moody was firing. In an instant, I counted eight tanks in dugin fighting positions. Large mounds of loose dirt were pushed up in front of the vehicles and they were easily discernible to the naked eye. They had cleverly established their position on the back slope of the ridge (reverse slope defense) so they could surprise us as we came over the rise. We, however, had surprised them. We had destroyed their scouts earlier in the day and, because of the sandstorm, they had neither seen nor heard us.

They were close! Koch hit the button on the laser range finder and the display under the gun sight showed 1420 meters. I yelled, "fire, fire SABOT." A HEAT round was loaded but Taylor would load a high velocity kinetic energy round next;

a tank defeating depleted uranium dart which travels at about one mile per second. As Koch depressed the trigger, the gun breach recoiled and the HEAT round flew toward the enemy tank. We were still moving forward but the tank's stabilization system kept the gun right on target. The enemy tank exploded in a huge fireball as Koch swung onto another tank. This tank was much closer and was positioned forward of the main defense. It was swinging its turret toward our tank. Taylor actuated the ammunition door. As the door slid open, he grabbed a SABOT round, slammed it in the breach, and screamed, "up." Only three seconds had elapsed since we destroyed the first tank. I was talking on the radio as Koch let the round go. The enemy tank's turret separated from its hull in a hail of sparks. The tank hull burst into flames as the penetrator ignited the fuel and ammunition compartments.

Private First Class Hedenskog, slowed the tank down to about twenty kilometers per hour. He spotted an enemy minefield and was weaving between the mines while trying to keep the tank's thick frontal armor toward the most dangerous enemy tank. Hedenskog knew he was setting the course for the Troop. He guided the tank to the right so both tank platoons would hit the enemy position. Two T-72's fired on us but their rounds fell short on either side of the tank. Taylor threw in another SABOT round. As Koch destroyed another T-72, Mike Hamilton's and Jeff DeStefano's tank platoons (eight M1A1's) crested the ridge. The seconds of solo fighting had seemed an eternity. All of the troop's tanks were now in the fight.

Eight more T-72's erupted into flames as the tanks fired their first rounds. Two more enemy tank rounds fell short of Lieutenant DeStefano's and Staff Sergeant Henry Webster's tanks. Our tanks, however, were not missing and were closing rapidly on the enemy's front line of defense. Enemy anti-personnel mines popped harmlessly under the tracks of the advancing tanks. An anti-tank mine exploded loudly under Major MacGregor's tank but inflicted only minor damage. The enemy was now in a panic. The few seconds of surprise was all we had needed. Enemy tanks and BMP's (Soviet-made armored personnel carriers) erupted in innumerable fire balls. The Troop was cutting a five kilometer wide swath of destruction through the enemy's defense.

Radio traffic was relatively calm during the battle. I directed the tanks to keep formation and assault through the enemy position. Third platoon's Bradleys were arrayed in depth behind fourth platoon's tanks and protected the Troop's right flank. They continued to fire into the village and beyond it to the south. Their job was particularly critical because Third Squadron, unaware of our contact with the enemy, had halted Iron Troop and the flank was open.

Private First Class Lee had thought that the fighting was over when our tanks fired on the village. As he drove north of the village, he saw the burning T-72's. Sergeant Harris spotted a BMP to the south and his gunner, Corporal Brent Hensley, destroyed it. Lee was alternately cheering on the tanks and whispering a prayer.

First platoon moved behind the tanks to "scratch their backs" with machine gun fire and clear pockets of enemy dismounted resistance. The enemy had prepared deep bunkers and waist-deep trenches just forward of the tank and BMP positions. The scouts were firing 25 millimeter high explosive and armor piercing ammunition into enemy personnel carriers and these bunkers.

We continued to attack east in this configuration. The enemy had made the town an infantry strongpoint and anticipated that we would bypass it to the north or south. An enemy defense consisting of thirty tanks, fourteen BMP's, and several hundred infantry had awaited us on the east side of the village along the 70 easting. We had done what the enemy anticipated. The surprise we gained and the speed and ferocity of our attack, however, was compensating for the enemy's greater numbers and the inherent advantages of their defense.

It was 4:22 P.M. Our tanks were now even with the enemy's first line of defense. All of their tanks that were directly forward of the Troop were in flames. The enemy's defense, however, extended farther to the south and DeStefano's tanks and Gauthier's Bradleys were heavily engaged on our right flank. At one point, third platoon took effective fire from a bunker which housed an enemy 23 millimeter anti-aircraft gun (ZSU 23-4). The platoon launched two TOW missiles simultaneously. The first collapsed the bunker and the second destroyed the ZSU. In a particularly tense moment, Lieutenant Gauthier's gunner, Sergeant Timothy Hovermale of Marion, Indiana,

swung his Bradley turret onto a T-72 tank just as it fired on him. The enemy tank missed and its explosive round threw dirt into the air. Hovermale returned fire with a TOW missile and destroyed the enemy tank as it was attempting to re-load. Sergeant Willie Digbie's Bradley was also engaging enemy vehicles along the Troop's southern flank. His gunner, Sergeant Wesley Cooper, expended both TOW missiles in the launcher and Digbie excitedly yelled over the intercom to Private First Class Bertubin and Specialist Frazier to re-load. The two soldiers in the back of the Bradley couldn't get the hatch open to gain access to the launcher. Bertubin, a college graduate and intercollegiate wrestler from Fort Walton Beach, Florida, frantically kicked at the hatch release and broke it. Frazier, age 22 from Sacramento, California, tossed off his crewman's helmet and jumped out of the Bradley despite heavy small arms fire. Bertubin handed Frazier two missiles then climbed on top of the Bradley to slam them into the launcher. Bertubin startled Sergeant Digbie when he tapped him on the shoulder to tell him that the TOW's were loaded.

As our tanks drove around the destroyed enemy vehicles, secondary explosions threw flames and hunks of metal over our heads. Perhaps to avenge the fate of their comrades in the armored vehicles, enemy infantry fired their assault rifles and machine guns at us. The bullets, of course, had no effect on our tanks and Bradleys. We cut the infantry down with machine gun fire. Some of the enemy tried to lay in their bunkers or play dead then jump up behind the tanks with their

rifles and rocket propelled grenades (RPG's). They fell prey to the Bradleys' 25 millimeter and coaxial machine guns. Lieutenant Hamilton decided to leave unmolested an enemy squad of infantry who were not firing on him. He called back to Lieutenant Petschek to keep his eyes on them. After Hamilton's tank passed, the enemy raked it with machine gun fire while others prepared to fire a rocket propelled grenade. Petschek's and Patterson's Bradleys dropped them with their machine guns and cannons.

The Troop's fire support officer, 1LT Dan Davis, called in artillery forward of the Troop's advance. The Texas Tech graduate kept his vulnerable FIST-V right behind the tanks so he could be in position to adjust the artillery. We were closing on the enemy fast and, moments later, I told Davis to cancel the mission. I didn't want to risk running into our own fires.

Lieutenant Gifford called me from the command post to remind me that the 70 easting was the limit of advance. We were already beyond it. I told him, "I can't stop. We're still in contact. Tell them I'm sorry." Gifford explained the situation to the squadron headquarters on the radio. Major MacGregor was forward with our tanks and fully understood the situation. If we had stopped, we would have forfeited the shock effect we had inflicted on the enemy. Had we halted, we would have given the enemy farther to the east an opportunity to organize an effort against us while we presented them with stationary targets. We had the advantage and had to finish

the battle rapidly. We would press the attack until all of the enemy were destroyed or until they surrendered.

As we drove through the smoke, we detected more tanks and armored vehicles behind the most forward enemy positions. The enemy had positioned some tanks and BMP's in depth and a reserve of seventeen T-72's were parked in a coil two kilometers further to the east. Our assault through the enemy's front line of defense had taken us to our southern limit so I began to steer the Troop northeast toward the enemy reserve position. We were using a Global Positioning System (GPS) on top of the tank to keep us properly oriented.³ The left side of the Troop (my tank, Hamilton's second, and Petschek's first platoons) was hitting the enemy's reserve while Gauthier's third and DeStefano's fourth platoons were still heavily engaged to the south. The reserve tanks were positioned on a subtle ridge. My tank and second platoon were firing uphill and, as we gained elevation, more of the enemy came into view. We drove our tanks into the center of the position and destroyed many of the enemy vehicles from the rear.

Platoon Sergeant David Caudill's Bradley was the trail vehicle in third platoon. His observers, Private First Class Michael Rhodes and Specialist Scott Camp, rode in the back and had only a narrow view of the battlefield through their periscopes. Rhodes was peering out and hoping that an Iraqi infantryman wouldn't pop out of a bunker and shoot his track with an RPG. Rhodes' senses were amplified. He could hear and smell everything that was going on around him. He spotted

a Chinese box mine on the ground behind his Bradley and wondered how many buried mines were out there. Rhodes watched the enemy tanks and BMP's burning on all sides as his Bradley continued east.

At 4:40 P.M. I finally found a place where I could halt the Troop. It was just short of the 74 easting centered slightly south of where the enemy reserve position had been. Second platoon halted just east of the burning T-72's that never had the opportunity to deploy out of their assembly area. Dominant terrain is difficult to discern in a relatively featureless desert but this was it. The small ridge allowed observation out to several kilometers in all directions. It was apparently the end of the enemy's defense.

As we halted, I anxiously called each platoon to ensure that all had made it through. I could not see most of the Troop because of the blowing sand. I was greatly relieved and thanked God when the platoon leaders and the first sergeant reported that they had taken no casualties. The Troop had assaulted through four kilometers of heavily defended ground. In twenty-three minutes, Eagle Troop had reduced the enemy position to a spectacular array of burning vehicles.

The Troop consolidated with the two tank platoons in the center and the two scout platoons protecting our flanks and rear. I was concerned that we may have bypassed some infantry who could sneak up behind us. Sergeant Robert Wood and Specialist Ernest Davis were among the scouts who dismounted to clear enemy bunkers in the Troop's immediate area. The

scouts tossed hand grenades into the bunkers and followed the explosions with several bursts from their M-16 rifles. One bunker next to the enemy tank reserve position appeared particularly elaborate. It was larger than most and the walls and floor were covered with rugs. Pillows were neatly arranged on the floor. Next to the bunker were sandbags stacked in a semicircular pattern. This "showpiece" observation post looked west from the ridge over the Iraqi front line defense toward the direction from where we had come. This must have been the Iraqi commander's bunker. Perhaps the enemy commander had watched our advance from that very spot. I wonder what he had thought and felt as he watched us assault his position. The bunker was now vacant. Its occupants had apparently fled to the east - away from our advancing tanks and Bradleys.

Gauthier's scout platoon attempted to regain contact with Iron Troop who was over five kilometers behind and had just received instructions to advance. We talked to Iron Troop on their radio net to ensure that they did not mistake us for the enemy.

The Troop maintenance section, the medics, and the command post halted in a small depression west of the ridge that the Troop's combat vehicles occupied. Also obscured by the ridge, the mortar section halted just forward of the command post.

I jumped on top of my tank to give the crew room to cross-load ammunition while I monitored the radio. I surveyed the fires which surrounded the Troop. It seemed as if the action had only lasted seconds. I had felt no significant

emotion during the battle. I think I had simply been too busy. I realized that I had not eaten all day. I tore into an MRE (meal, ready to eat) package and devoured a dinner of cold potatoes and ham. I gulped down some water and the quick infusion seemed to slow the flow of adrenaline.

The Troop's medics began treating and evacuating enemy wounded. In the back of his tracked ambulance, Sergeant George Piwetz was treating an enemy soldier with a bullet wound in his leg. As Piwetz reached for an IV bag, the prisoner attempted to stab him with some loose needles. The medic knocked the prisoner unconscious and continued to treat his wounds.

Tanks fired main guns and Bradleys fired TOW missiles at enemy tanks, personnel carriers and trucks forward of the 74 grid line. Violent explosions followed the impact of the perfectly aimed and guided fires. All vehicles were suppressing enemy infantry to the front who persisted in firing machine guns and rifles at us. Enemy soldiers were scurrying back and forth between the endless sea of dirt mounds which comprised the enemy position. Staff Sergeant Taylor's mortar section was well into the action now; firing high explosive variable timed rounds which explode in air and rain shrapnel down on the enemy. We could see through the thermal sights that the mortars were exacting a heavy toll.

I ordered a scout section from first platoon north to make contact with Ghost Troop. Ghost had come into heavy contact in the northern portion of their zone after halting at the 73 easting. Their scouts in the south had been delayed

by a minefield and a gap existed between us. We had covered the area between us with observation and fire but we had not physically met. Lieutenant Petschek and Staff Sergeant Lawrence's section moved north out of the Troop's defense. Our scouts were guiding the Ghost scouts to a position which would ensure overlapping observation between us when they encountered three enemy T-72's. My heart sank. Before I could order Lieutenant Hamilton's tanks north to support, Lieutenant Petschek reported that the Eagle and Ghost scouts had destroyed the enemy tanks at close range with TOW missiles. The Troop's northern flank was secure.

The enemy attempted a futile counterattack just before dark. It was 6:00 P.M. Tanks and BMP's weaved between the endless sea of dirt mounds which comprised the enemy position. The sandstorm continued to severely limit observation. Tanks and Bradleys to the flanks, however, had relatively clear shots and the enemy effort was soon thwarted as, one by one, the enemy vehicles erupted into flames.

Lieutenant Gauthier continued to coordinate with Iron Troop to the south. We were still over three kilometers forward of them so it was important that they not mistake us for the enemy. Lieutenant Gauthier advised our Troop not to fire south of a one hundred twenty degree magnetic azimuth to prevent fires from impacting on our neighbor. The Iron Troop commander and I had been roommates at West Point and, as his Troop consolidated, we conducted final coordination of our positions on the radio.

The sun had set. Continuous machine gun, 25 millimeter, and mortar fire kept the enemy at bay. Enemy vehicles and bunkers continued to burn. The fires reflected off the heavy, low clouds and engulfed the Troop in an eerie reddish glow. Occasionally, an enemy vehicle's ammunition or fuel compartment erupted in a secondary, violent explosion.

TOW missiles pursued and caught truck loads of enemy soldiers fleeing to the east. At 6:30 P.M., scouts reported two MTLB's coming toward us. They had no chance at night. Sergeant Hovermale picked them up through his thermal sight and destroyed them with 25 millimeter fire. Moments later, he detected an Iraqi attempting to start one of the vehicles. A TOW missile put a stop to that.

At 6:55 P.M., an enemy truck full of soldiers, apparently unaware of their proximity to the Troop's position, approached to within two hundred meters of Staff Sergeant Henry Foy's tank. The Troop demonstrated great compassion and discipline as I ordered all to hold fire until the enemy's intentions were known. Upon detecting the Troop's perimeter, the truck halted and the Iraqis jumped from the truck brandishing assault rifles and RPG's. Foy's machine gun opened up, setting the truck's engine on fire and wounding one enemy soldier. The others quickly dropped their weapons and surrendered. Scouts searched the enemy soldiers, treated the wounded one, and moved them to a collection point.

It was 7:30 P.M. Other than two armored vehicles that fourth platoon destroyed, the Troop was only receiving sporadic

machine gun and rifle fire. First Sergeant Virrill had made his way through friendly units to the rear and brought forward fuel and ammunition trucks. Several vehicles at a time moved back to the re-supply point while others maintained security.

The enemy appeared broken. I met Major MacGregor behind his tank and he decided to bring forward the HUMVEE mounted psychological operations loudspeaker team. At 8:30 P.M., the Kuwaiti interpreter blasted his first surrender appeal forward of the Troop's position. What seemed to be countless enemy soldiers came toward us as the Kuwaiti sergeant gave them instructions in Arabic. We could see them silhouetted in the glow of the still burning fires. The lead enemy soldier carried a white bag affixed to a wooden staff. The prisoners fell into single file with their hands up. It was strange watching those who had fired at us come humbly forward. A scout squad guarded the enemy with M16 rifles and began searching them. Every inch of their bodies was investigated to include the insides of boots and wallets. The scouts had rehearsed POW procedures and did a fine job. After the search we directed them to sit in rows. The Troop's medics bandaged their wounds. We returned to them all personal items and provided them food and water. There were forty-two in the first batch and over two hundred more would surrender that night and the next morning.

The surprise with which the enemy regarded their humane treatment was obvious. They had been told that Americans would shoot them. Many of the prisoners wept and some tried to kiss our soldiers' feet to express their gratitude.

Staff Sergeant Willie Burns had dismounted from the squadron's forward command post Bradley and was assisting with the prisoners. He asked if any of them spoke English. An officer who identified himself as Major Muhammad came forward. Burns had him relay instructions to the others and reassured the enemy prisoners that they would not be harmed. Apparently relieved that his men were safe, Muhammad began to talk to Burns. The Major said that he commanded a nine hundred man infantry battalion reinforced with thirty-nine tanks. He said that the forty-one prisoners with him were all who remained alive. He said that more of the enemy lie wounded by our mortar fire over one kilometer to our east. He asked that we send a party forward to recover them. The Troop was sitting on the line beyond which no artillery or air strikes had to be coordinated. We had to deny the Major's request. It was far too risky. I wondered why the forty-two able bodied prisoners had not carried out some of their wounded comrades.

At 9:00 P.M., we received an order that, at 10:30 P.M., First Infantry Division would pass us to the south to continue the attack east. Lieutenant Davis called an artillery strike along the 76 easting; the area from which the enemy counter-attacks and probes had come. Secondary explosions were all the encouragement the artillerymen needed. A massive strike ensued. Artillery rounds and rockets burst in the air and sprinkled armor and infantry defeating bomblets across the ground. The visual effect was that of a large sprarkler spread across several kilometers. Burns was still with Major

Muhammad. As the Major watched the artillery strike go in, he looked at Burns and muttered, "now they are all dead." The numerous explosions devastated enemy supply bases and a large command post.

It was nearing midnight. The Troop's battle was almost over. We could hear the whine of the First Infantry Division tank engines and the rattle of their tracks as they moved forward of us. The rest of the night was relatively quiet with only occasional machine gun fire in both directions.

As the sun rose the next morning, the true extent of the damage inflicted on the enemy became apparent. Countless enemy tanks, personnel carriers, trucks, and bunkers were still smoking or in flames. Our Bradleys and tanks destroyed over thirty enemy tanks, approximately twenty personnel carriers and other armored vehicles, and about thirty trucks. The artillery strike had destroyed another thirty-five enemy trucks, large stocks of fuel, ammunition, and other supplies, and several armored vehicles. Enemy dead littered the battlefield.

The next day involved taking more prisoners and collecting and treating more enemy wounded. First Sergeant Virrill led a small party to clear the bunkers we had passed by during the attack. After he pumped rounds from his .50 caliber machinegun into the bunker entrance, the enemy soldiers emerged with their hands up. Scouts escorted small parties of enemy prisoners to identify their fallen comrades. Some simply said prayers over the bodies. Others wrote a message on a piece of paper, placed the paper on the chest, and covered

the body with dirt. The enemy was grateful for the opportunity to do this.

At 8:00 A.M. Lieutenant Petschek and several soldiers from first platoon were pinned down by enemy machine gun fire. The troopers had been searching the latest batch of enemy prisoners when some more resilient enemy soldiers opened up on them from one of the mounds of dirt to the east. I was at the command post and some of the rounds impacted around the center of the POW holding area and the maintenance vehicles. I was angered that the enemy would dare take us under fire. To lose a soldier now after emerging unscathed from the previous day's battle was unthinkable. I decided to maneuver my tank toward the enemy. At the sight of the M1A1 coming toward them, four Iraqis came out from behind the dirt mound with their hands up. I motioned for them to walk in front of my tank and shepherded them back to first platoon's position. Moments later, approximately thirty more enemy soldiers came forward.

As a result of coming under fire, I decided to relocate the Troop slightly to the west. The only problem was the transport of the prisoners. We were, by this time, relatively assured of their passivity so we loaded them on top of Bradleys and the FIST-V. The vehicles were indistinguishable under the mass of prisoners standing on top of them. It was a curious sight. I do believe the prisoners enjoyed their ride.

I approached the prisoners with John Gifford and Major MacGregor to have a look at them. Those front line soldiers

who we first captured looked like thugs. They looked fit and contrasted sharply with the forlorn enemy with which we had come in contact days prior. I told Major Muhammad that if he or his fellow prisoners were in need of anything to let me know. I don't know why I did it but I shook his hand. Perhaps its something I felt I should do in the interest of military courtesy or tradition. I felt no remorse or great pity for these men. I knew what they had done to defenseless civilians. I was glad that we had defeated them so decisively.

Lieutenant Davis took the opportunity to interview Major Muhammad at some length. The Major said that he had heard the Troop fire at the village but had thought it was another air strike. He indicated that air strikes had been frequent but had not greatly diminished his combat strength. Only three of his tanks had incurred minor damage and he said that he was well supplied. I could see, however, that the air strikes had a great psychological effect on the enemy. Many prisoners made hand motions replicating aircraft dropping bombs. Major Muhammad went on to tell Davis that his intelligence officer had told him that an airborne company had dropped in to the west. He was expecting to defend against infantry. Our tanks surprised him.

I suddenly became aware of how filthy I was. I had not bathed in six days. The charcoal lining of the still damp chemical suit had coated my skin. I stood naked on the back deck of my tank and took a crude and largely ineffective bath with a wash cloth. The prisoners, from a culture which imbues

them with physical modesty, were visibly shocked at my behavior.

I remember falling asleep in the command post and awakening to orders to move slightly to the south and east and await a new mission as part of the Corps reserve. The Troop's route took us along the first line of enemy defense through which we had assaulted the previous afternoon. The enemy tanks and BMP's were devastated. Tank and BMP turrets lay separate from their hulls. Dead enemy soldiers lay next to the unrecognizable hulks of twisted steel.

In our new area, the Troop established security, serviced our vehicles and weapons, and rested. The news that we would soon be at a cease-fire reached us on the night of the 27th. We knew then that our role in the war was over. Eagle Troop had taken no casualties. I and other soldiers offered prayers of thanks to God. We did not gloat over our victory. We had simply done our part in liberating Kuwait from the treachery and inhumanity of Saddam Hussein and his Republican Guard henchmen.

We surprised the enemy on the 26th of February. That surprise and the bold action and teamwork of the Troop's soldiers contributed the rout that is now known as the Battle of 73 Easting. In general, the Iraqis were unprepared for the United States Army. Americans are better trained and equipped. The true decisive factor, however, was the American soldier. He is the best at what he does and absolutely dedicated to serving his country. Our soldiers were aggressive in battle

yet demonstrated great discipline and compassion for their enemy. I am grateful that I had the opportunity to serve with them in this action.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read "H.R. McMaster".

CAPTAIN H.R. McMASTER
E Troop 2/2 ACR Box 15732

ENDNOTES

(1) An armored cavalry squadron is the next higher headquarters for a troop and is commanded by a lieutenant colonel. Second Squadron consists of three cavalry troops (Eagle, Fox, and Ghost), a tank company (14 tanks), a howitzer battery (eight artillery guns), and a headquarters troop (squadron staff, mechanics, medics, and fuel and ammunition supply).

(2) An "easting" is a north to south running grid line on a military map.

(3) The Global positioning system proved invaluable for navigating in the featureless desert. The device uses satellite signals to triangulate one's exact position. It may also be used to navigate between two points. The troop had four GPS's at the time of the battle (one per scout platoon, one each with the commander and fire support officer).