



2011-028

Dick Camp, *Battle for the City of the Dead: In the Shadow of the Golden Dome, Najaf, August 2004*. Minneapolis: Zenith Press, 2011. Pp. 312. ISBN 978-0-7603-4006-6.

Review by Eyal Ben-Ari, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem (feba@netvision.net.il).

What does contemporary urban combat against insurgents look and feel like? In this rich and evocative volume, Dick (Richard D.) Camp portrays the month-long battle that US forces waged against the Shiite Mahdi Militia of Muqtada Al-Sadr in August 2004. The background to this battle in Iraq was rampant sectarian violence, the dissolution of Saddam Hussein's army (and consequent dispersal of many young ex-soldiers around country), and the establishment of an Iraqi interim government after control was ceded to it by the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, Paul Bremer. Some of Saddam Hussein's former troops found spiritual solace (and perhaps material support) in the thousands-strong militia that fought both the occupying Americans and their own Sunni sectarian opponents.¹

The actual battle for control of Najaf began on 31 July and ended with a ceasefire brokered by another Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, on 27 August. The city and its surroundings included the largest Muslim cemetery in the world and the Imam Ali Mosque, revered by 200 million Shiites worldwide. The fighting itself took place in oppressive summer heat and a very complex urban environment comprising graves and burial chambers, schools and hotels, berms and junkyards, police stations and government offices, apartment blocks and other dwellings, and both wide plazas and narrow alleys and streets. The existence of the cemetery and mosque made the battle especially difficult. The Americans time and again limited their firepower and attack lines, carefully negotiating with civilian and religious functionaries. The cemetery exclusion zone gradually shrank because of militia attacks from within it; the mosque area was respected throughout. Such conditions imposed strict rules of engagement on US forces.

Battle for the City of the Dead contains, besides a prologue and epilogue, thirteen chapters arranged chronologically according to the stages of the battle. We get detailed pictures of the area and its background, the ceasefires that punctuated the battle, and the troops of the Marine battalion (1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment) that began the fight and the two Army battalions (1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment; 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment) that joined it later. The book vividly captures the battlefield conditions (heat, fatigue, exhilaration, for instance) and the rigors of urban operations. Camp very effectively conveys the viewpoints of participating actors, including not only infantrymen but snipers, air crews, and armored teams, as well.

Dick Camp is a retired Marine colonel with twenty-six years of service and the author of previous books—combat histories of Marine operations at Belleau Wood (1918), Peleliu (1944), and Iwo Jima (1944), and a tome about soldierly legends. He is currently vice-president for museum operations at the Marine Corps Heritage Foundation, overseeing the National Museum of the Marine Corps in Triangle, Virginia.

This volume draws on in-depth interviews with (overwhelmingly American) participants in the battle. Indeed, Camp talked with dozens of soldiers and Marines, from privates to NCOs and commissioned officers. He also draws on material by reporters who were near or in Najaf. Important enhancements are a plethora of color photographs, diagrams, and tactical maps. Many boxed inserts helpfully elucidate such diverse topics as citations and medals awarded for battlefield action, the political and social background of the conflict, Iraqi and insurgent reports during the battle (adding their perspective), and technical matters of weaponry, vehicles, and aircraft.

To give some sense of the tenor of the volume, I will offer excerpts that express the intense emotions and difficulties experienced in urban combat. The unadorned language of Marine battalion commander Col.

1. Saddam Hussein's policies exacerbated the Shiia-Sunni divide in Iraq.

John Mayer illustrates the determination of commanding officers: “We damn well were not going to let the militia run around ‘our town’ violating the law and openly brandishing weapons. So whether we started the fight or not, there was no way Najaf was big enough for the Mahdi Militia and the US Marines.... [A] fight was inevitable” (69).

The next passage evokes the complexity of fighting in a city, where structures and installations “consume” many troops who must fight on roofs and in basements and internal rooms out of contact with their superiors:

The objective Charlie Company had been assigned was more than it could chew. “The company was looking at having to clear out probably five or six multistory buildings in the face of massed enemy fire. It was a daunting task...” [the battalion executive officer] admitted. In the cold light of day, the battalion may have overestimated what the reinforced company could accomplish. “It was a funny phenomenon that when you looked at the map,” [he] explained, “You don’t really get a feel for the three-dimensional aspect of the battle-field. It’s a perspective problem. What looks like [it] may be a company objective on a map is actually a battalion objective” (126).

In the following extract, Mayer’s troops are shooting inside a police station that insurgents have taken over, when a platoon commander “pulled up his ballistic glasses, just as the window over his head blew out, spraying him with glass fragments. ‘I have this dirt and glass fragments in my face, and I can’t see. I sat there thinking “God, I’m out of the fight.” Everything is going on around me—shooting, my radio operator shoving a handset in face, yelling that captain wants me—just like the scene out of the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, when everyone wants him and he freezes for a few seconds...” (197). After throwing a grenade at a low angle into a next-door room, the platoon commander

scrambled for cover behind a cinder-block wall and waited for the explosion. “The five seconds were the longest in my life.” There was a huge blast. “The concussion picked me up off the floor and knocked me around.... I heard screaming from the room. My men were trained to assault immediately after a grenade, but they hesitated and the survivors began firing again.” [He] and another man threw in two more grenades, “and the room went up like a torch.” Flames quickly engulfed the entire police station (ibid.)

In current-day conflicts, the presence of civilians (especially in urban areas) muddles things even more. A Marine recalls entering a hospital:

[It was] kind of weird because we expected to be shooting and instead a bunch of civilians step out of the hallway with arms up. We’re like “What’s going on? There are supposed to be bad guys in here....” After the initial encounter, about forty people were gathered and placed in a single room while the platoon finished clearing the facility.

“We started kicking down doors, which were all steel and locked,” [his platoon commander] explained. “After twenty minutes, a janitor appeared with the keys, just as people started coming out of one room. I’m like ‘Where are you coming from?’”

“The babies,” one replied.

“I said, ‘what do you mean babies?’”

It turned out the room was filled with newborns. [He] was shocked and remembered thinking, “Thank God no one took a shot at us because we would have fraged the room before entering it!” (186).

Perhaps because I am an external observer not based in the United States, I find the overall tone of the book too celebratory. I do not say this to belittle the bravery of US troops or the dangers and difficulties they overcame. Clearly the Najaf battle was a serious military undertaking, but American troops were facing militiamen, not regular military personnel. This was far from the “full spectrum battle” (217) that one army captain overenthusiastically called it. Yes, the insurgents had a variety of weapons (rifles, machine guns, and the terrifying mortars) but they were at a huge disadvantage in terms of firepower; yes, there were former regulars among the insurgents, but, as interviewees often attested, many amateurs confronted the Marines and soldiers as well. That is, the US military action at Najaf was both complicated and conducted against a vastly inferior force (like those the Israel Defence Forces have faced over the past decade). The

great contribution of Dick Camp's vivid account, however, lies precisely in its stress on the distinctive circumstances of contemporary urban combat that often confer a considerable advantage on defenders. In that sense, its message has relevance well beyond the battle for Najaf.