

Artillerymen in Action—

# The 2d ACR at the Battle of 73 Easting

By First Lieutenant Daniel L. Davis



the Iraqi Army—the Republican Guards. Just before contact, the regiment changed its formation to three squadrons abreast: 1st Squadron in the south, 3d Squadron in the middle and 2d Squadron in the north.

The 2d Squadron was in a box formation moving east. G Troop (Ghost) was to the north with F Troop (Fox) behind it, and E Troop (Eagle) was in the south with H Company (Hawk tank company) behind Eagle. The 2d Howitzer Battery was under the operational control of (OPCON) the 2d Squadron's direct support (DS) 6th Battalion, 41st Field Artillery (6-41 FA) and moved just behind the squadron's trail maneuver units.

About 1530 hours on 26 February, Eagle Troop was leading some 800 to 1,000 meters forward (east) of Ghost Troop and 2,000 to 3,000 meters in front of Iron Troop (I Troop of 3d Squadron) on Eagle Troop's right. To make the most of their fire support teams (FISTs), both Eagle and Ghost maneuvered their FISTs well forward. Ghost, which also had the squadron's combat observation lasing team (COLT), positioned its FIST with its right-most scout platoon and the COLT team with its left-most scout platoon. Eagle placed its FIST with the lead Bradley section on the troop's left front, which put its FIST nearest the center of the squadron zone in the attack. As subsequent events showed, having the FISTs well forward in combat is an absolute requirement.

As had been the case since mid-morning, a driving dust storm limited our visibility to no more than 1,000 meters. The wind and dust had also grounded the regiment's OH-58Ds, depriving it of the usual five to 10 kilometers of advanced warning that had become the norm.

## Beginning the Battle

At 1600, Eagle 1st Platoon (Bradley-mounted scouts), using 13X thermal sights, located what appeared to be about 10 revetted positions some 3,500 meters away. Almost simultaneously, Eagle 3d Platoon (scouts) began taking fire from a bunker and building complex on the troop's right front at about 67 Easting.

With the immediate threat, Eagle Troop commander, Captain H. R. McMaster, directed 2d and 4th Platoons

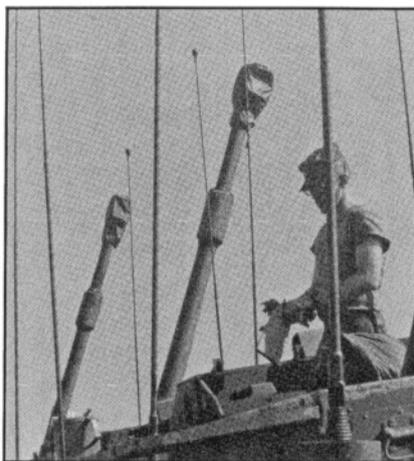
Possibly the most important tenet of AirLand Battle doctrine is the concept of combined arms operation. According to this doctrine, "...we must throw the enemy off balance with a powerful blow from an unexpected direction, follow up rapidly to prevent his recovery and continue operations aggressively to achieve the higher commander's goals. . . ." From the enemy's point of view, these operations must be rapid, unpredictable, violent and disorienting. The pace must be fast enough to prevent him from taking effective countermeasures" (*FM 100-5 Operations*). At the small-unit level, the men of the 2d Squadron, 2d Armored Cavalry Regiment (2-2 ACR) translated those actions from the FM into dramatic success on the battlefield in Operation Desert Storm.

In the Persian Gulf, the 2d ACR was task organized with the most modern equipment in the Army: M1A1 main battle tanks, M3 Bradley fighting vehicles, OH-58D helicopters, Apache attack helicopters, M109 howitzers and the multiple launch rocket system (MLRS). It's generally thought that tankers, scouts, and pilots stay forward "where the action is" and artillerymen stay in the rear area with their howitzers. However, in the truest sense of combined arms operations, the 2d ACR maximizes its total arsenal. Artillerymen play key roles at every level of command and are present at all points on the battlefield—from the lead Bradleys on back.

This article discusses the 2d ACR's combined arms operations at the Battle of 73 Easting, concentrating on the activities of the 2d Squadron's Eagle Troop.

## Before the Battle

On the early afternoon of 26 February 1991, the 2d ACR was leading VII (US) Corps' eastward drive toward the heart of



1LT John Stephenson, 2-2 ACR, performs pre-combat checks in a Saudi Arabian base.



An Eagle Troop FIST-V gets new camouflage—from woodland to desert tan.



A 2-2 ACR soldier contemplates his future as he waits for his bus in Germany to take him to the Nuremberg airport for deployment.

(tanks) to come on-line beside his tank and prepare to place a troop one-round high-explosive anti-tank (HEAT) volley into the complex. To provide cover as the tanks were moving on line, 3d Platoon's Bradleys pumped 25-mm high-explosive incendiary tracer (HE-IT) rounds and tube-launched optically tracked, wire-guided (TOW) missile fire into the complex. This kept the attention of the Iraqi BMP-1s (Soviet-made tracked infantry combat vehicles) and machinegun nests that were returning fire.

Meanwhile, on the troop's left front with 1st Platoon, the Eagle FIST chief realized he didn't have time during the movement-to-contact to stop, align the targeting system and erect the head of his M981 fire support vehicle (FIST-V). So he jumped into the turret of the nearest Bradley, located the enemy using the Bradley's thermals, obtained a direction with his M2 compass and used the Bradley's sight to determine a range. He returned to the FIST-V and, using data from the global positioning system (GPS), input the direction, distance and observer's known location into the FIST digital message device (DMD) and obtained an enemy grid for a fire mission.

At 1611, Eagle FIST contacted the 2d Squadron's fire support officer (FSO)—call sign Cougar 13—and gave a warning order that a mission was being sent and the type of targets to the squadron's front. However, less than 60 seconds later, Captain McMaster, after having destroyed enemy opposition in the complex, ordered the attack to continue forward to 70 Easting, and the fire mission was canceled.

With 1st Platoon leading Eagle Troop east (forward), the Bradley section on the troop's left positively identified an enemy tank in one of the revetments; it stopped and fired a TOW missile. The missile scored a direct hit, creating a tremendous explosion as the warhead apparently hit one of the enemy tank's ammunition ready racks, sending flames and debris soaring through the air.

The months of desert train-up and the years of training in Germany proved their worth. The questions and apprehensions of our soldiers gave way—not to fear, but to *release*. The soldiers finally knew the main enemy force lay just ahead, and the crewmen eagerly manned their weapons. The men of the 2d ACR had a near-rabid thirst for battle.

Since contact with enemy armored vehicles had been confirmed, Captain McMaster (Eagle 6) changed his troop formation to have the tanks lead. The 2d and 4th Platoons formed a wedge with the troop commander's tank at the point. Eagle FIST left the Bradleys and continued forward, taking up a position at the end of the left arm of the tank wedge, still keeping forward enough to see the battlefield. The 3d Platoon provided flank security to the troop's right, and 1st Platoon let the tanks pass through and took up positions behind the wedge to protect the troop's rear as the wedge passed over the enemy positions.

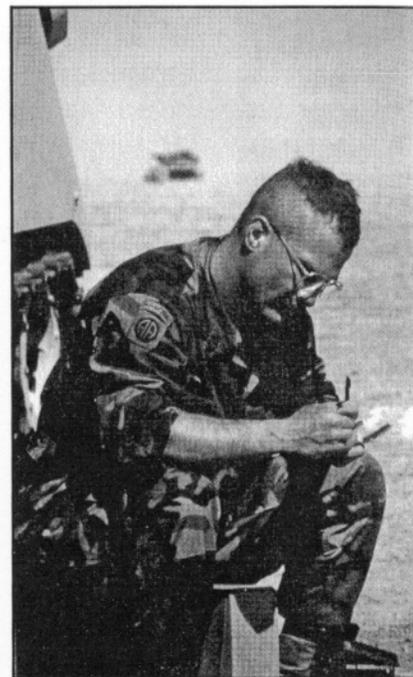
At exactly 1619 hours, Eagle 6's tank crested a nearly imperceptible rise in the terrain at 70 Easting and stared down the gun tubes of eight enemy T-72 tanks, the closest one 450 meters away. In only seven seconds, Eagle 6's tank destroyed the first three enemy tanks. Simultaneously, 2d and 4th Platoons engaged enemy tanks, using fire distribution techniques to near textbook perfection, and within 10 seconds, all eight enemy tanks were burning.

Eagle continued to press the attack into the supporting positions, driving through and sometimes over minefields. Within a span of only seven minutes, the first of two Iraqi armored battalions was laid to waste.

Eagle FIST quickly reported the action to Cougar 13. As all squadron FISTs eavesdrop on the fire support (FS) net, Ghost, Fox and Hawk FISTs along with the 2d Howitzer Battery knew of the contact with the enemy and where. Each troop FSO then quickly alerted his commander, and the necessary actions began taking place all over the squadron. News traveled faster over the FS net than the squadron command net.



Howitzers of 6-41 FA roll toward Iraq.



SSG Steven J. Schulz, Eagle Troop FSNCO, cleans his weapon in Kuwait.



Howitzer Battery, 2-2 ACR in action at the Battle of 73 Easting.



Eagle Troop tanks prepare for further action.

Less than a minute later, Cougar 13, Captain Jack Millar, came back over the net to Eagle 13 and reminded him he could use artillery if he needed it. Eagle FSO (Eagle 13) then got on the troop net and reminded Captain McMaster he could call for the *entire* artillery battalion. As McMaster's focus had been on the direct fire fight, indirect fire was not in the forefront of his mind. By the FSOs' remaining active on the radio, they reminded him of the value of the artillery.

"Roger," McMaster said, "Let's isolate these guys and drop some ICM [improved conventional munitions] deep. Fire at 7303."

Eagle 13 then called on the FS net and, by voice, tried to call for fire from the 6-41 FA battalion fire direction officer (FDO)—Steel 22. but he couldn't reach Steel 22 because Eagle Troop had gone so far forward so fast. As usual, Cougar 13 was eavesdropping on the net and instantly jumped into relay the call for fire. Once again, Eagle Troop advanced too fast, and the fire mission had to be cancelled.

Eagle Troop assaulted through what was intended to be an enemy counterattack with 17 T-72s and many BMP-1s. At the same time, Ghost Troop, to the north and on-line with Eagle, encountered enemy tanks from the northern edge of the counterattack force and from a dug-in motorized company composed of BMPs supported by tanks in front.

Lieutenant General Frederick M. Franks, Jr., VII Corps Commander, had given the 2d ACR the mission of finding and fixing the enemy while not becoming decisively engaged. The squadron was to be prepared to help the 1st Infantry Division (Mechanized)—the "Big Red One"—in a forward passage-of-lines. Therefore, once Eagle and Ghost had made contact with the leading elements

of what was the Iraqi Tawakalna Division, it was the regimental commander Colonel L. D. Holder's intent to fix the enemy force and prepare to pass the 1st Infantry Division through.

But in the confusion of combat, staying within the parameters of the commander's intent isn't as easy as drawing a line on a map. When the troop Executive Officer Lieutenant John Gifford called McMaster on the radio to remind him the limit of advance was 70 Easting, McMaster responded, "We're already past 70 and in contact. Tell them I'm sorry!"

### "73 Easting"

After McMaster had consolidated his unit near 73 Easting, he formed a 360-degree defensive parameter oriented east. He stopped with his nine M1A1 tanks on line facing forward with his 12 Bradleys providing left and right flank security, connecting in the troop's rear to form a full circle. Eagle 13 positioned himself forward, some 50 meters behind the tanks. All combat trains elements consolidated inside the "egg."

Ghost Troop to the north also halted near 73 Easting. Ghost 13 located himself to the right side of the troop front with the lead scout platoon. The COLT was with the left flank scout platoon on the troop's extreme left.

As soon as it became apparent the Dragoon Battle Group (2d ACR) was stopping at 73 Easting, 6-41 FA commander Lieutenant Colonel Lawrence R. Adair called Cougar 13. He instructed Cougar 13 to pick a good spot, coordinate with the battalion S3 and prepare the unit to fire. At 1648, the battalion began emplacing.

At 1654, with the situation to the Eagle's front somewhat stabilized, Eagle 6 instructed the FIST to emplace the

troop's 4.2-inch mortars with two-thirds range forward, using the GPS. At 1705, the FIST-V returned to the front, and the mortars were ready to fire.

Moments later, a hail of machinegun fire began to pepper the troop along a wide front. As visibility began to improve from the lessening of the winds, nightfall took it away. Because of a mechanical failure, the targeting station on the M981 wouldn't erect, making it impossible for the FIST chief to use his thermal sight. Using the thermal eyes of the 4th Platoon leader's tank, he dropped mortar rounds on the trenchline forward of the troop. The area was washed with traversing fire from the two 4.2-inch mortars, using HE rounds with a mixture of point detonating (PD) and variable time (VT) fuses.

The tank platoon leader, White 1, described the action over the troop command net.

"Black 1 (Eagle FIST), this is White 1. I see several Iraqis running around now. It looks like they're trying to get to the . . . Oops. Never mind. I saw two VT flashes just above their heads, and now no one's moving. End of mission."

This type of activity went on for about an hour and a half. Finally, there was no more small-arms fire. Interviews from enemy prisoners of war (EPWs) taken the next day revealed the mortar rounds had had rather devastating effects.

Just after 1700, things were relatively quiet in Ghost's sector. The low-volume fire coming in on the troop's front was annoying, at worst. As the last rays of the sun were setting around 1745, a mobile armored counterattack force began maneuvering on Ghost, attempting to hit the left flank. To Ghost's left was a Bradley platoon and the COLT M981—and nothing else.

"Immediate Suppression!" screamed Ghost 13 over the FS net. The net was instantly silent, and all stations cleared the air for Ghost 13 and Steel 22. Less than 60 seconds after receiving the call-for-fire, rounds impacted on the lead seven BMPs attempting to assault the troop. Dual-purpose improved conventional munitions (DPICM) halted them in their tracks.

We don't know if the DPICM disabled the vehicles or if the Iraqis became lost and afraid and abandoned the vehicles. For as soon as they stopped, the Bradleys got a bead on the vehicles and fired 25-mm rounds and TOW missiles; one of

the tank platoons hurried over to plug the gap, resulting in the direct-fire annihilation of all Iraqi lead vehicles.

Down on the gun line, the action was just as ferocious. The 6-41 FA with the 2d ACR's How Battery had been ready to fire for nearly an hour before the first fire mission. Once the first mission came in, there was no rest for the next five hours. The calls-for-fire came in one after the other.

The Howitzer Battery 2d Platoon's fire direction center (FDC) quickly began to feel the strain. It was clear from the very beginning that this was no Army training and evaluation program (ARTEP).

"It was unbelievable," said battery computer system (BCS) operator Specialist David Battleson. "With all those radios going, the BCS running, the hatches shut because of light discipline and five men closed up in a M-577—we all stripped down to our boots and underwear, drenched with sweat."

A similar picture was being played out in the howitzer sections. As the night and torrent of missions continued, resupply began to loom as a problem.

Specialist Adeolu Soluade, number one man on gun one in Howitzer Battery 2d Platoon, said he would never forget that night.

"No one could do the same job all night—they just couldn't. I think I did almost every job on the gun that night.

"What I remember most," he continued, "was when we ran out of ammunition on our gun. But the missions never stopped. We had to run to the other guns in the platoon for rounds. Then, just as we all ran out of ammunition, out of the dark came a HEMTT [heavy, expanded-mobility tactical truck]. It dropped its sides, and the guys in the back started kicking rounds out. We picked them up and ran to the guns. We never even missed a hitch!"

The leader of the HEMTT ammunition convoy, Sergeant First Class Joe Daniel, had been somewhat delayed because of difficulties with navigating at night.

"I passed by this one officer," Daniels said, "and he gave me directions. We followed his directions, but he neglected to tell me that the route he gave me would have carried us through the front line. I figured that out when I looked up and saw two Bradleys fire 25-mm and a TOW."

Once Daniels made a slight detour, he arrived just in time for resupply and to see a rather spectacular sight:

"It was incredible. The guns had been firing so long without a break that carbon was building up in the tubes. When one of them fired—no kidding—it was like watching a World War II film clip of a 16-inch gun firing off a battleship. There were flames 20 feet long shooting out of those howitzers," Daniels said.

As darkness descended, the enemy continued to attempt spirited, albeit uncoordinated and piecemeal, counterattacks. With the emplacement of the Ghost FIST team on one side of the troop's front and the COLT on the other, just as in Eagle's sector, the maneuver commander and platoon leaders could focus on their primary roles—direct fire. Fire supporters were then able to focus on their primary function—indirect fire.

As was the case earlier in the day in Eagle's sector, the COLT NCO had equipment problems. The thermal sight of the M981 had ceased to function, and there wasn't enough light to use the ground/vehicular laser locator designator (G/VLLD). Amid small-arms fire, he occasionally had to run back and forth between the nearest Bradley and his FIST-V to get targeting information for fire missions.

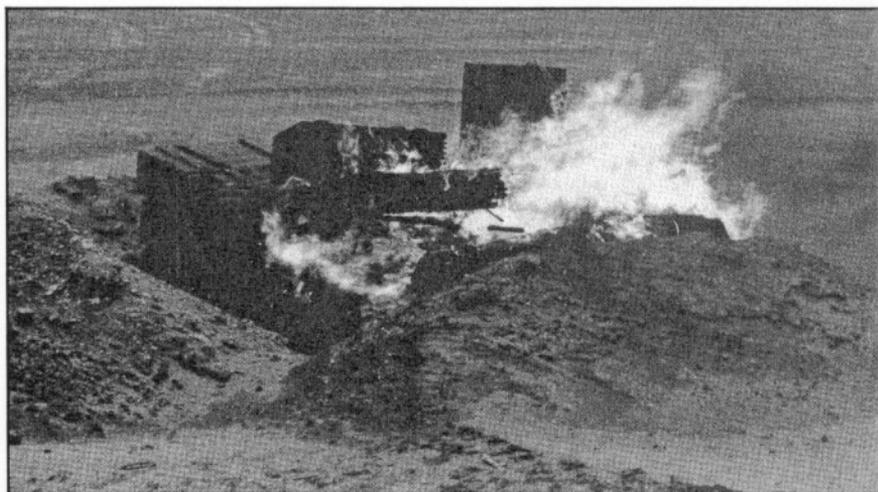
As the night wore on and the battle began to wane, Eagle 13 noticed an area on the back side of a slight rise, just out of reach of the direct-fire weapons. He had seen several enemy vehicles come from that direction during the previous three hours of combat. They had quickly



Eagle Troop took so many prisoners, it had to move them to the rear piled up on Bradley fighting vehicles.



Eagle Trooper SPC John Brown searches an Iraqi prisoner after the Battle of 73 Easting.



One of the 2-2 ACR's M1A1 high-explosive anti-tank rounds destroyed its target.



Black smoke from burning oil wells covers the horizon as Eagle Troop Commander Captain H.R. McMaster (left) poses with the author after the battle.

been destroyed by TOW missiles or tank HEAT rounds—depending on who could get the round off first. However, as no one could see that far and the squadron wasn't allowed to carry the attack any farther, only indirect fire could reach beyond the rise.

At 2204 hours after a lull in firing, Eagle sent a mission in with the deep grid. The first fire-for-effect resulted in numerous secondary explosions. A repeat was called for—more secondary explosions. A third call with augmenting fires resulted in still more secondary explosions. It was clear that something was over the rise, and whatever it was, it was big.

The time for passage of the 1st Infantry Division was at hand, so the final repeat had to be coordinated through corps. In the mean time, as the direct-fire fight was now over, tankers and scouts ventured outside their vehicles for the first time since the previous afternoon. As permission for the final mission was granted, cavalrymen all along the squadron front sat atop their vehicles and watched the show.

At exactly, 2240, 6-41 FA, Howitzer Battery and C/4-27 FA (multiple launch rocket system, or MLRS), fired on an area more than three kilometers wide and one kilometer deep. They fired a total of 228 DPICM rounds, 92 HE/PD rounds, and 12 MLRS rockets. It was a spectacular sight—the booms and flashes of the guns to the rear, the rush and streaks of light from the rockets and, finally, the peppering impact on ground of the ICM bomblets finding their marks. The nearly non-stop thunder created by the explosions could be felt as clearly as they were heard.

One would have thought it was the grand finale to a 4th of July fireworks show; the cavalrymen's "ooohs" and "ahhhs" were followed closely by rousing applause.

As ground reconnaissance later revealed, the battalion mass destroyed 27 ammunition bunkers, three tanks, four BMP-1s, two SA-9s (Soviet-made anti-aircraft missiles), 35 trucks (of various sizes) and five fuelers. Additionally, the 6-41 FA Battle Group destroyed 11 tanks, damaged four more and destroyed three BTRs (Soviet-made amphibious armored personnel carriers) and caused numerous enemy personnel casualties during the Battle of 73 Easting. By firing hundreds of other rounds all over the battlefield, the artillery clearly aided the direct-fire assets in destroying many other targets.

As the tanks and armored personnel carriers (APCs) of the 1st Infantry Division began rumbling through the 2d ACR's front, soldiers all over the Dragoon battle area had a chance to finally contemplate what they had just been through. The friendly casualties had been astronomically low—one soldier from the entire squadron killed in action. The losses to the enemy force were equally astronomical—more than 100 armored vehicles destroyed, countless soft-skinned vehicles destroyed and hundreds of enemy soldiers dead. In all directions, the amber-yellow glow of burning vehicles gave the night an eerie aura.

## Battle Lessons Confirmed

Artillerymen of the 2-2 ACR learned several important lessons from the Battle of 73 Easting—or rather confirmed lessons of the past. First, like all combat leaders, the FSO must lead from the front, especially in the desert. With the field of view sometimes as far as 10 kilometers, there's enough warning time to react to contact. In a European-type environment, the FSO may have to choose the most likely area of contact and position there, but even then, he must be forward where he can react to changing situations.

Another sometimes critical function the FSO can perform is observing and reporting the friendly battlefield. In the case of main enemy contact, the first detailed news the squadron had of Eagle Troop's attack was over the FS net. The primary function of the maneuver element is the direct-fire fight. When Eagle 6 crested the hill and found his troop in close tank-to-tank combat, his first responsibility was to engage the enemy force and deploy his unit. The FSO, not immediately calling indirect fires, instantly reported on the squadron FS net the details of what was happening and where. These quick details allowed the squadron commander more flexibility in deciding how best to use the remainder of his resources.

Being aggressive on the radio proved to be another valuable asset. During the heat of battle, the squadron FSO reminded the Eagle Troop FSO that plenty of artillery fires were available. The troop FSO then prompted the troop commander, which sparked him to call for Field Artillery fires in depth to isolate the direct-fire battle from enemy positions farther to the east.

Cross talk between FISTS helped prevent fratricide. Eagle and Ghost's FSO's talked continuously over the FS net, updating one another on flank-unit locations; the locations were then relayed over troop command nets. While eavesdropping, the squadron FSO could easily track unit positions to ensure that artillery fires weren't called in on friendly formations. When enemy and friendly vehicles are interspersed, continual updates on flank-unit locations decreases the possibility of mistakes.

An artilleryman who's positioned forward, who's aggressive and constantly seeks to help his maneuver unit is an asset of tremendous value to the commander.



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