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Operation Swatter

In the early hours of Thursday 1 April 2004, at precisely 2am local time, the inhabitants of four residential complexes near As Samawah received unexpected visitors. Dutch and British forces burst into their houses and detained all 21 men found there. The homes were searched; all weapons, ammunition, computers, ID and money were confiscated. The Coalition troops subsequently took the men outside, where US liaison officers officially arrested them. Ninety minutes after the start of the operation, the Americans and their detainees left for Tallil air base in a British Chinook helicopter. There, the men were transferred to a C-130 Hercules transport aircraft and taken to Baghdad.¹

Operation Swatter was a large-scale ‘Knock Talk Search’ operation in which Coalition troops acted as cordon, search and arrest teams. The operation set its sights on a group of suspected arms, drugs and human traffickers. Military forces rounded up the criminal network at the request of the Americans, as it supported the armed uprising in the Sunni regions of Iraq by smuggling arms and radical Islamic fighters (including suicide bombers) from Saudi Arabia to Iraq. The network was also connected to former Baath party members. The clan and family tie-based As Samawah criminal organisation was headed by Shirshab Tarish al Zayadi, who had long been sought by the authorities. Although the allies initially thought that Shirshab had been captured during the operation, it later turned out that he was not among the detainees. The operation nevertheless dealt a severe blow to his organisation.²
Operation Swatter’s commanding officer was the new commander of the Dutch battle group in Al Muthanna, Lieutenant Colonel Richard van Harskamp, an army officer who together with his mechanised infantry battalion had taken over from 2 NLBG two weeks earlier. The new battle group, 3 NLBG, was built up around Van Harskamp’s 42 Armoured Infantry Battalion (Limburgse Jagers Regiment) and a company from 12 Air Assault Infantry Battalion (Van Heutsz Regiment). Almost all sub-units of the NLBG participated in the major KTS operation, or were on standby as reserves or acted in a support capacity. For Operation Swatter, Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp had also been allocated the support of a British infantry company, Puma and Lynx helicopters, sniper teams, a Chinook helicopter to transport detainees, a Phoenix UAV and a Nimrod reconnaissance aircraft to monitor targets and the operation from the air.3

The British infantry company (Delta Company from 2 Para Battalion, stationed at Shaibah Logbase) entered two nearby locations about one kilometre from the Dutch Camp Smitty. The objective of two Dutch companies from 3 NLBG was slightly further away, but also very close to As Samawah. A third company from the NLBG was on standby as airmobile reserve. The search locations had been given code names, in this case the makes of cars: Buick, Chrysler, Audi 1 and Audi 2. The Dutch – who surrounded and entered the Buick and Chrysler locations – opted to use commandos from the FLT and reconnaissance personnel as the search and entry team. Regular armoured infantry personnel manned the cordon around the locations.4

Van Harskamp reported Operation Swatter to be a success. Not a single shot was fired, there were no casualties and, with one exception, all the suspects had been arrested and handed over to the Americans. The new NLBG commander was disappointed, however, that such a large-scale operation by the Dutch contingent had passed unnoticed in the Dutch media, and therefore by the country in general. “At a time when there is much debate about whether to extend [the Dutch contribution after July 2004] and when the presence of terrorist groups [in the Dutch area of operations] is a topic of discussion, it seems to me that successes like this one should be exploited as much as possible,” the Lieutenant Colonel grumbled. In his opinion, the neglect also failed to do justice to the achievements of his personnel and “the (considerable) risks” they had run.5

Van Harskamp was in fact arguing in favour of a more open media policy, in the conviction that this would contribute to broader support for the Iraq mission. The top echelons in The Hague did not seem convinced,
however. Operation Swatter did not properly match the image of the Dutch allied contribution as a mission in the tradition of peacekeeping, excluding executive police tasks or anti-terrorist operations. The Ministry of Defence’s official press release stated rather evasively that Dutch forces had merely provided “assistance” in the arrests (made by the British) and gave the impression that only the Dutch helicopter detachment had provided transport support.6

Operation Swatter was NLBG’s baptism of fire in Iraq, and a good illustration of the state of affairs. It was a major cordon and search operation, similar to previous actions to improve public order and security conducted by the NLBG. In fact, it was a larger follow-up to a KTS conducted by the Marines on 19 January against the same group of traffickers. Also, a couple of weeks previously, on 17 March, NLBG had provided support – on a smaller scale – to a similar arrest operation by British Special Forces, which had been dubbed Operation Meatloaf. This type of operation against criminal organisations which supported the insurgency had become the norm over the past few months. It meant that the NLBG was chiefly acting to back up the new Iraqi regime as it increasingly came under attack from irregular opponents. The action against the trafficking mafia was intended as a counter-terrorism measure, by striking at the logistics of the armed resistance. Operation Swatter demonstrated how the stabilisation operation was beginning to take on the characteristics of a counter-insurgency.

This was also evident from the guidelines issued by the British divisional headquarters to the Dutch battle group. For months, the divisional commander’s list of assignments, based partly on that of the US high command in Baghdad, included: defeat terrorism. This was followed by: neutralise ‘non-compliant forces’. The threat assessment spoke of a “major physical threat” from, among others, terrorists, militias, foreign fighters, religious extremists and criminal groups. Each for its own individual reasons, these enemies were attempting to derail the political, administrative and social transformation which was to lead to the transfer of sovereignty from the CPA to a new Iraqi government in June 2004.

Since the summer of 2003, US forces in the northern Sunni regions had been the primary target of the emerging insurgency, which concentrated in the urban areas. However, the Shiite south was not immune to these developments. Resistance movements started to target Coalition troops to sow doubt among the ranks and on the home front about the usefulness of participating in the occupation initiated by the US and the UK. Attacks
against the Italians, Spanish and Japanese were examples of this tactic. At the end of January 2004, the Dutch embassy in Baghdad was targeted by rocket fire. The other feature of the violence in Southern Iraq was an evolving bitter and violent power struggle between the different Shiite factions. It was this development which caused the greatest concern.

The mismanagement of the occupation by the CPA and the inability of the occupying powers to respond effectively to the irregular military threats made the situation even more complex. US forces made matters worse by conducting intelligence (and interrogation) operations that had the opposite effect to what was intended and which – when the manner in which they were carried out became public – tarnished the image of the US leadership and of the entire Iraq operation. In March and April, the first stories emerged of the systematic abuse of Iraqi detainees in the Abu Ghraib prison complex to the west of Baghdad. These events could not be ignored in the southern region either – although it was a different operational environment from the Sunni areas, where there had been robust armed resistance for some time.

It was difficult for Coalition members to distance themselves from such developments. The NLBG had conducted various cordon and search operations, such as Operation Swatter, at the request and in the presence of American and British troops. The detainees from these operations had in some cases been handed over to US military personnel. Certainly, the 21 prisoners captured in Operation Swatter had been transported to Abu Ghraib. Moreover, in Iraqi eyes all foreign military personnel were part of the same Coalition. Why would detainees in British or Dutch hands be safeguarded from the kind of treatment dealt out to detainees by the Americans? The American misconduct affected the whole allied campaign.

For the time being, the gathering storm of the insurgency did not seem to hit Al Muthanna, at least. Examples of everyday occurrences during the first weeks of 3 NLBG’s deployment included the arrest of a number of criminals; support for apprehensions by the Iraqi police; the recovery of stranded vehicles on Routes Tampa and Jackson; and the confiscation of weapons from people who could not produce a valid weapon permit. On 27 March, explosive ordnance personnel cleared some grenades from a location in As Samawah. Two children had been killed that day when a high-explosive shell they were playing with exploded. Infantry personnel provided security for an operation by the NLBG’s engineers to raise and fortify a dyke near Al Khidr. It had been close to collapse after the water level of the Euphrates river had risen substantially over the previous
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few days. Also, 3 NLBG’s Alpha Company conducted joint patrols in As Samawah with the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps. The daily reports by the various sub-units frequently contained statements such as “it is quiet”, “another hot day” and “no irregularities”.

This image of relative calm tied in with the optimistic mood in which the Marines had handed over Al Muthanna to 3 NLBG. At the change of command ceremony Lieutenant Colonel Oppelaar, the departing commander, in the presence of local dignitaries such as governor Al Hassani, CPA administrator Soriano, British divisional commander Major General Stewart and the second most senior US general in Iraq, Lieutenant General Thomas Metz, noted that the province he left behind could “be considered as one of the most secure and stable areas in Iraq”. This did not stop the 2 NLBG commander, however, from issuing a warning: “there are still elements that seek instability. And this province is not an island in a great ocean.”

Armed opposition: the Mahdi Army

Oppelaar had a point. Something had been brewing in Southern Iraq for a while, which could also have consequences for Al Muthanna. Basra and its surroundings were particularly turbulent, and opposing forces regularly attacked Iraqi security services and Coalition troops. Dutch military personnel at divisional headquarters and at Shaibah Logbase reported on this, even though they had so far been largely unaffected. At the Dutch battle group in Al Muthanna, it was initially the teams that conducted the ‘information operations’ which noticed a marked deterioration in the atmosphere. The Info Ops group (also known as PsyOps, from ‘psychological operations’) ensured that the Iraqi people in the Dutch sector were informed about the intentions and activities of the NLBG. To this end, the battle group’s PsyOps Support Element (PSE) teams were often to be found out on the streets, where they handed out flyers and newsletters, kept local media informed, put up posters or played messages via loudspeakers. The PSE functioned as one of the feelers put out in 3 NLBG’s area of operations.

On 1 April, in consultation with commander Van Harskamp, the head of the PSE decided to halt a campaign that had been going on for a few days and was aimed specifically at the tens of thousands of Shiite pilgrims travelling northwards through the province to celebrate the religious Arba’een festival at sacred sites in the cities of Karbala and Najaf.
reason for ending the campaign was “an increasingly aggressive response” to Dutch military personnel handing out flyers. When questioned, a local imam explained the conduct of the pilgrims by stating that anger at the Coalition and the poorly functioning CPA in general was now so deep-seated among some groups in Southern Iraq that they no longer distinguished between the different national contingents of the Coalition.¹⁶

In little over a year, the euphoria in the south of Iraq at the toppling of the Baath regime and the end of decades of repression had transformed into widespread antipathy towards Coalition Forces. The negative sentiment was growing. The majority of Shiites, however, still intended to wait patiently until the foreigners had left. This also applied in the quiet ‘Dutch’ province of Al Muthanna, where Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp reported that it was as if the locals “were happy to sit back and wait for 30 June [the date for the transfer of sovereignty] before pursuing their own agenda”.¹⁷ The view held by the majority of Shiites was that the international forces should depart as soon as possible after that date.¹⁸

Yet not everyone was that patient. The Sadr movement again began openly to cause trouble in March 2004, having slowly but surely expanded its influence in the Shiite neighbourhoods of Baghdad and other major towns in the south over the previous months. It got support from those who were dissatisfied with the chaos, the poor governance and the violence in large parts of the country. Iraqi political parties in general, but specifically the Sadrists, organised demonstrations against the high levels of unemployment, fuel shortages or poor utilities. Emotions ran high at these events. There was widespread incomprehension about the fact that the foreigners – perceived as rich and all-powerful – were apparently incapable of solving everyday problems and improving living standards. Muqtada al Sadr gained many supporters among the large group of poorly educated, unemployed young people in urban areas who were hardest hit by these problems.¹⁹

In Baghdad, Karbala and Najaf, the Mahdi Army was again seen carrying weapons on the streets in order to – as they themselves said – maintain law and order for ordinary citizens. After months of hesitation, the CPA took up the gauntlet. The occupation authority closed Al Sadr’s Al Hawza newspaper on 28 March 2004; it was generally assumed that it did so in order to goad the populist leader into a response.²⁰ The Shiites became furious when an associate of Al Sadr was arrested on 3 April. Their anger was further fuelled by the announcement that an arrest warrant had been issued against the leader himself in relation to the murder in 2003 of Ayatollah Abdul-Majid al Khoei.
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Al Sadr escalated the crisis. He barricaded himself in a mosque in Kufa, and later in Najaf, and called on his followers to put up resistance. His Mahdi Army forcibly occupied government buildings and police stations in many southern towns. It was a deliberate attempt to seize power and quickly led to an armed confrontation with Coalition troops. The Spanish contingent’s camps in Najaf, north of Al Muthanna, were attacked and fire fights broke out between the Mahdi Army and the Italians in Dhi Qar province. A Coalition compound was also attacked in Diwaniyah, close to Al Muthanna. US forces, which had been faced with a large-scale armed uprising in the Sunni areas for some time already, were now also fighting the Sadrists in Baghdad. The British, Ukrainian and Polish contingents fought for control over the towns of Amarah, Al Kut and Karbala respectively. It was noticeable during this widespread violence that the other Shiite parties and groups, and in particular SCIRI’s Badr Brigade militia, remained on the sidelines.

Province of peace?

In Al Muthanna, where over the previous days the Dutch troops had experienced hostility from the pilgrims travelling to Karbala and Najaf, the situation remained remarkably calm compared to the widespread violence in the surrounding provinces. It had long been known that the Sadr movement had no power base in the region and was poorly organised. On 30 March, political adviser Robbert van Lanschot distributed an analysis explaining why he believed Al Muthanna would remain relatively immune to political violence or dominance by extremist groups. Van Lanschot’s evaluation proved to be quite accurate in relation to the sudden Sadr uprising a couple of days later.

The factors which had made and would keep Al Muthanna a “province of peace” were, in the diplomat’s view, the authoritarian governor Al Hassani, an admired former resistance leader with many of his own militia in the police forces; the widespread social control by the tribes, who negotiated in social conflicts and closely monitored the arrival and actions of outsiders; the lack of an urban proletariat (Sadr was mainly successful in recruiting poor, unemployed youngsters in impoverished neighbourhoods in the great cities) and the fact that the population was almost homogeneously Arab-Shia, which meant that sectarian violence could be ruled out.21

Nevertheless, the Sadrists also tried to gain a foothold in Al Muthanna. Their initial success in neighbouring provinces encouraged them to
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attempt to expand their influence to include the desert ‘oasis’ protected by the Dutch. They initially targeted Ar Rumaythah, where an armed crowd gathered in front of the Medina mosque on 5 April. The local Sadr movement leader and imam at the mosque, Fadhil Ashaara, gave the police an ultimatum: all cops should lay aside their uniforms and weapons, and the Mahdi Army would take over the local police station. The FFS, the security service for government buildings which contained many Ashaara sympathisers, simply dissolved into thin air. However, the regular police refused to give in to the Sadrist demands. Police Commissioner Ali Mutheser Nejem and Mayor Abbas Mansur entered into consultations with Ashaara in order to prevent an armed confrontation. The Dutch Bravo Company responsible for the area was asked to act with restraint and kept out of the way. As a temporary compromise, six unarmed ‘observers’ from the Sadr group were allowed into the police station. Before long, however, a delegation of eminent tribal leaders visited Ashaara and warned him to stop causing trouble. The Sadrist subsequently departed quietly from the police station. The Sadr movement’s attempt to neutralise the police in Rumaythah and take over the town had failed.22

It was striking that governor Al Hassani rose to the occasion and manifested himself as a powerful leader after these events. That same evening, he summoned the province’s tribal and religious leaders to his office. Above all, he recognised the situation as one from which he could benefit politically, by acting as the true wielder of power.23 The next day, he agreed with CPA administrator Soriano and NLBG commander Van Harskamp that the Iraqi security services in the province would play a leading role in curbing the uprising. The Dutch would monitor from a distance whether the Iraqis were capable of maintaining law and order by themselves. If not, the Dutch could act against the Mahdi Army anyway. In the meantime, 3 NLBG conducted patrols in order to display as great a presence as possible and to keep abreast of what was going on.24

In the evening of 6 April, on local television, governor Al Hassani called on the population to stay away from planned demonstrations against the Coalition and the CPA. The protests the next day in the province’s three towns attracted few participants and passed off peacefully. Only thirty people participated in As Samawah. The Iraqi police and the Civil Defence Corps were “accompanied from the sidelines” by Dutch forces and had the situation well under control. Reports reached the NLBG that the Sadr movement had been “substantially” intimidated by local leaders, security services and ordinary citizens. “This mechanism apparently works in this
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province,” Van Harskamp reported to the Dutch Defence Staff. The NLBG commander expressed his intention, however, of remaining alert, as he was not convinced that the situation would simply resolve itself. 25

That, contrary to appearances, the Iraqi authorities still felt insecure was demonstrated by the fact that none of the Iraqi border police personnel in As Samawah reported for duty that day. 26 Vigilance was required while the situation could at any moment erupt into urban warfare, the NLBG’s intelligence specialists expected, as it had in neighbouring Nasiriyah. In recent days that town had seen heavy fighting between Italian troops and the Mahdi Army. It could be assumed that the Sadrists would attempt some kind of action in Al Muthanna too. This prediction was borne out. On the night of 7 April, half an hour before midnight, the Japanese battalion’s camp came under indirect fire. Three 82mm mortar grenades fired from inside As Samawah landed just north of the perimeter fence. Two exploded. 3 NLBG immediately dispatched patrols from the nearby Dutch camp to search for the firing location, but the perpetrators had already fled.

The next morning, Iraqi police found a number of rocket-propelled grenades close to the CPA compound. Other channels tipped the troops off that the Mahdi Army had set its sights on the occupation authority’s office. The CPA buildings were indeed attacked at 10.30pm. A group of unknown individuals opened fire using automatic weapons and RPGs. The Dutch forces present – including Special Forces snipers housed there – and Blackwater private security guards contracted by the CPA returned fire, at which the attackers fled. Units from the NLBG, the Iraqi police and the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps subsequently combed the city but failed to find the enemy combatants. A Dutch patrol came under fire from rocket grenades during this search. 27

The attack led CPA boss Jim Soriano to decide the next morning to evacuate his employees to the Dutch base camp outside town. Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp offered the CPA administrators accommodation, but also expressed his dissatisfaction at the move. He thought that the evacuation gave the “wrong signals” to the troublemakers. 28 Governor Al Hassani also thought that the risk to local CPA staff should not be exaggerated and believed that the occupation authority should hold its ground. The governor blamed the attack on the compound the previous day on nothing more than a psychological need by Sadr followers to ‘do something’, while in fact they had largely been neutralised under pressure from the local power brokers. 29 Once Soriano had been reassured by Van Harskamp and Al Hassani, he and his staff returned to their quarters in the city.
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Around this time, 3 NLBG encountered more and more armed civilians in different parts of the province. Patrols reported that there were armed guards in the Dawa and sciri party buildings in As Samawah. Iraqis from all walks of life seemed to have decided it was better to arm themselves. There was a growing risk that groups would choose to ally themselves with the insurgency out of opportunism or self-preservation, intelligence officers estimated. In the early hours of 10 April, a Bravo Company patrol stopped a red Mazda car carrying four nervous-looking men just outside Ar Rumaythah. In the boot they found an 82mm mortar, five mortar grenades, guns and ammunition, and hand grenades. One of the men was carrying a Badr Brigade ID card. The men were arrested for possessing prohibited weapons and were transported to the British DTF prison complex in Shaibah via Camp Smitty. A day and a half later, on the morning of Sunday 11 April, a Charlie Company patrol intercepted a minibus carrying another four men. They were in possession of a rocket launcher and ten rockets. They were also apprehended and sent to the DTF.32

At this stage of the uprising, the overall impression of the threat was rather vague. No-one knew exactly what roles the parties other than the Mahdi Army played. There were rumours that criminal organisations were involved. The sciri militia was also acting in a suspicious manner. The intercepted vehicles containing weapons could be linked to that group. The weapons could have been intended for self-defence, but the Dutch forces had to assume that sciri might try to provoke an armed conflict between the NLBG and the Mahdi Army. Sources in As Samawah confirmed that both the mortar attack on the Japanese camp and the attack on the CPA compound were indeed the work of the Sadr movement. Other information pointed to the continued threat posed by a handful of Baathists, and in one case in Ar Rumaythah the two threats combined: a Major and influential member of the former ruling party was thought to be supporting (or to have joined) the Mahdi Army and to be preparing attacks on Coalition and Iraqi forces.33

It was certainly true that the armed opposition was seeking ways to affect and weaken the Iraqi security organisations. Rumour had it that the Mahdi Army also wanted to abduct a member of the international forces. For some time, elsewhere in Iraq, various resistance movements had successfully been using kidnappings of foreigners, military personnel or aid workers as scare tactics in their propaganda campaign (including shocking beheadings circulated on the internet) or to force concessions or ransoms. On 12 April, in response to this threat, Lieutenant Colonel
Van Harskamp discussed security measures for two high-ranking Dutch officials in his area of operations: political adviser Van Lanschot and the newly-appointed police mentor at the CPA, Colonel Veltman. Both worked from the CPA compound in As Samawah and regularly travelled around the province. Colonel Veltman had one close-protection guard, a Sergeant from the Marechaussee’s Special Security Missions Brigade (BSB). Diplomat Van Lanschot had no close protection at all. He had an arrangement with Van Harskamp to have commando Special Forces and reconnaissance personnel from the NLBG assigned to him for personal protection.34

The battle group commander thought that the situation warranted improved security measures.35 For the time being, Veltman and Van Harskamp agreed to support from the NLBG “while awaiting [extra] close protection from the Special Security Missions Brigade”. The Defence Staff in The Hague also recognised the need for improved protection for the two Dutchmen who moved around a lot and were therefore vulnerable. A special protection team from the BSB was created, which arrived in the area of operations in mid-May. It brought two armoured vehicles with it. Several weeks later, another two armoured vehicles and three close-protection guards were added.36

Incidents and provocations

Regardless of the unrest, Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp reported that the Iraqis were eager to be in charge. He wrote that “this desire is very clear from various conversations between NLBG personnel and the tribes, locals and public administration officials”.37 It therefore suited the main provincial players that the Dutch commander and his staff opted to continue their policy of giving the Iraqis the lead in countering the uprising. The idea was that as of June the NLBG would be able to adopt a new role of providing assistance only. The recent attacks did not alter this strategy. At the end of April – in the midst of the Sadr uprising – this approach was even laid down in an official operational order.38

Although alert to escalation, the Dutch therefore kept their distance while maintaining a presence and standing ready. Intervention was not required, however, as the Iraqis had the situation firmly under control.39 A demonstration by about 150 Sadr followers on 14 April in As Samawah, for instance, was closely supervised. The governor had permitted the protest in advance. The police had the upper hand throughout and the march through town was resolutely ended when the demonstrators got too close
to the CPA compound. There was no violence or disturbance of any kind. The Dutch ‘green MPS’, who were observing events, reported: “The Iraqi Police had the demonstration fully under control from start to finish. ... Each major junction was cordoned off and traffic was subsequently allowed to move again once the demonstrators had passed.” Once the police had broken up the demonstration, the assembly “dispersed into small groups and returned to the town”.40

The efforts by the Iraqi authorities to keep control of the situation did not altogether prevent attacks from occurring. Some contacts, however, appeared to be misunderstandings. On Saturday 17 April, an Alpha Company patrol was involved in a gunfight in As Samawah. Following a tip-off, that evening Dutch troops headed for a junction close to the football stadium in the north of the town, where opposing forces were reportedly preparing an ambush. Alpha Company’s personnel set up a temporary observation post near the location and waited. After a while, two armed men approached the Dutch position and opened fire. The infantrymen shot and captured both. One of the attackers was seriously injured. His condition was so critical that he had to be operated on in the NLBG’s mobile field hospital at Camp Smitty. He turned out to be a security guard at the stadium and explained that he had fired at the Dutch because he thought they were looters.41

That same evening, an Iraqi Civil Defence Corps checkpoint near Ar Rumaythah was fired on from a car. A few days later, on the night of 20 April, the attack was repeated. On that occasion, the Iraqi paramilitary forces reported that the occupants of a white Opel had fired at them with a rifle. A patrol from Bravo Company hurried to their aid. There was no sign of the gunmen when the Dutch infantry arrived at the checkpoint. The patrol commander was briefed by his Iraqi colleague and the two conducted a search. Shortly afterwards, a Mercedes coming from Ar Rumaythah drove at the Dutch and Iraqi troops at high speed. The Iraqis opened fire. A Dutch lieutenant also fired at the vehicle, which by now had sped through the blockade and had come to a stop about one hundred metres further on. Of the two occupants, the passenger died of his wounds on the spot. No weapons were found.42

Dutch forces were also involved in incidents outside Al Muthanna. In the early morning of Wednesday 21 April, there was a coordinated attack with five simultaneous car bombs targeting Iraqi police buildings in the Basra area. It was the largest terrorist attack in Southern Iraq since the fall of the Baath regime. Dozens were killed.43 One of the five suicide bombers
tried to drive onto the police academy site in As Zubayah. The explosion killed two Iraqi policemen, a relatively low number compared to the other attacks thanks to protective measures erected earlier, such as concrete obstacles near the gate. Dutch MP instructors were working “at a distance of about 75 metres from the blast” at the time, but were not hurt.44

Although the Sadr movement still did not pose a real threat to the international assistance force in Al Muthanna or stability in the province, the number of provocations increased. At about 2.50am on 22 April, another mortar attack took place in As Samawah. This time, the target was not the Japanese but the Dutch camp. Guards observed two explosions, after which the alarm was raised and all personnel took shelter in the bunkers. Alpha Company “left the base with as many units as possible” in order to track down the culprits. Back at the camp, it was discovered how lucky the Dutch had been. A dud mortar had hit an accommodation container while its occupants were still inside. 3 NLBG had “had a close call,” Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp reported to The Hague. If the mortar had exploded “I estimate there would have been two [to] six deaths and an unknown number of injured.”45

The mortar attack led to additional security measures in and around the Dutch camps. In order to be able to identify the source of enemy fire more quickly in the future, 3 NLBG asked the Defence Staff for permission to deploy tracking radar. Three of these systems were brought to the area of operations from the Netherlands a few weeks later.46 This came too late for the next indirect fire incident, which rebels conducted exactly one week later. Three mortars landed near the Japanese camp at about 2.15am on Thursday 29 April. The bunker alarm sounded at the nearby Dutch camp too.47 A day later it was the turn of Bravo Company in Ar Rumaythah. Also at about 2am two 82mm mortars landed in the base and one outside. There was only material damage.48 The mortar attacks received a great deal of attention in the Dutch media because of the sizeable press presence, which happened to be in theatre to cover a visit to the NLBG by Minister of Defence Henk Kamp.

On 30 April, the Minister’s and his entourage’s final evening in Al Muthanna, 3 NLBG received a reliable tip that a smuggler with ties to the resistance who had evaded capture four weeks previously during Operation Swatter would be at his home in As Samawah. Jasim Musair Shauree was the right-hand man of the Zayadi gang leader Shirshab. The NLBG immediately planned a house search, which was conducted by commandos from the FLT. The suspect was detained and handed over to the British.49 This was remarkable, in light of the recent Abu Ghraib prison
scandal. The procedure of handing detainees over to the British continued however.\textsuperscript{50} As far as the Dutch were concerned, responsibility for handling the prisoners correctly lay with the occupying powers.\textsuperscript{51}

Trafficking in explosives and weapons, and the public use of arms by unauthorised persons and militias continued, resulting in more incidents. On 24 April, a day on which the province suffered very heavy rainfall and strong winds, a Charlie Company patrol intercepted an arms trafficker with nine 107mm rockets in his car near Al Khidr. Under cover of the bad weather, the man was attempting to take the rockets from Basra to Karbala but encountered a temporary vehicle checkpoint, or VCP, manned by the Dutch infantry. He turned round and escaped, but was later caught making a detour. The smuggler and his passenger were arrested. The man claimed he was transporting the mortars for money on behalf of an armed group that wanted to use them against Coalition forces in Karbala. His passenger proved to be an innocent hitchhiker.\textsuperscript{52}

A day later, on the evening of 25 April, an incident took place in the same area. At about 9.30pm, a car approached another Charlie Company VCP, stopped and turned round. The Dutch troops at the checkpoint warned a patrol nearby. Two military vehicles blocked the car’s possible escape route. The driver responded by accelerating and driving at the Dutch forces at speed, narrowly missing two of them. The Dutch soldiers opened fire. The car crashed through the checkpoint and was pursued until it reached the town of Al Khidr. There the Dutch found it, containing one dead and two injured men. Four uninjured occupants were arrested. It later turned out to have been an unfortunate panic reaction by the driver, as the Iraqis in the vehicle thought they had encountered armed carjackers when they came across the checkpoint in the dark.\textsuperscript{53}

On Tuesday 4 May, yet another Charlie Company patrol came across a pick-up truck carrying armed men near the hamlet of Al Warka. The patrol stopped the vehicle. When a Dutch soldier got out and walked towards the Iraqis, the latter aimed their weapons. The Dutch rifle section responded to this hostile gesture by cocking and aiming their own rifles and machine guns. The Iraqis then fled on foot, abandoning their vehicle. They disappeared into the village. Subsequent inquiries showed that the men had not been anti-Coalition fighters but armed tribal militia members. There was an ongoing and heated dispute between two tribes in the area. The Dutch were urgently requested not to become involved. The company reserve arrived, searched a few houses and questioned villagers. No trace was found of the armed men.\textsuperscript{54}

The volatility of the situation in Al Muthanna as a result of such
incidents led to commander Van Harskamp and his staff reporting that it was “impossible” to estimate the threat level. Intelligence was not always of sufficient quality. On the one hand, after a few weeks of heightened tensions, there appeared to be a gradual normalisation of relations (certainly compared to the rest of Iraq, where heavy fighting was going on). On the other there were still occasional firefights, mortar attacks and interceptions of armed individuals. But Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp reported optimistically that “the signals given out by the population and the tribes were ... unanimous: we want peace and no violence; anyone who turns against the Dutch is also turning against us.” Yet, the NLBG commander added, “For what it’s worth! We remain on guard.”

**The power struggle at its peak**

One task for the NLBG in this period was the guarding or monitoring of important facilities, government buildings and main infrastructure works. Although permanent guard duties for the CPA premises had been handed over to the private security firm Blackwater in mid-March, there were plenty of vulnerable sites which still needed monitoring. One of these was the bridge over the Euphrates in As Samawah, which was a major bottleneck in the Route Jackson north/south connection. In mid-April, the British divisional commander ordered 3 NLBG to provide a permanent guard, after a similar crossing had been blown up by insurgents on Main Supply Route Tampa in the more northern central division’s sector. There had also been a number of other unsuccessful attacks on bridges. The impression was that opposing forces were attempting to sever the Coalition’s main supply routes. The blocking of Route Tampa temporarily increased the importance of Route Jackson. Together with the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps, the NLBG took on guard duties at the bridge. Alpha Company was initially responsible for this task, while Charlie Company took over at the end of April.

Guard duties were conducted both on the bridge and in the surrounding area. 3 NLBG set up an observation post overlooking the bridge in the nearby Civil Defence Corps barracks. Alpha’s Quick Reaction Force was also stationed there, as was a medical evacuation team. Dutch infantry patrolled the bridge at varying times. Their Iraqi Civil Defence Corps colleagues guarded the area surrounding it. The battalion staff decided not to set up a fixed roadblock or checkpoint in order to avoid interfering with traffic too much. It was also thought that this would be “a fairly easy
target for attacks”. Guarding the bridge nevertheless made the soldiers vulnerable. At the end of April, the battalion received intelligence that opponents wanting to kidnap Dutch personnel were aiming to do so at that location.

When Charlie Company took over the bridge from Alpha Company, the newly-responsible unit initiated a discussion on how to conduct its task. The company’s staff wanted to improve the protection of its own personnel by setting up one or more fortified positions. Battalion staff and company commanders discussed the proposal on Monday 10 May and rejected the idea. It was concluded that it would be better for personnel on the bridge to keep on the move. The consideration that traffic over the bridge should be delayed as little as possible also played a part in leaving the situation as it was.

An attack took place that very same evening. At about 10pm, two men on a motorcycle threw two hand grenades towards patrolling Dutch forces. A Lance Corporal and a Sergeant First Class were injured. The Sergeant died from his wounds a couple of hours later in the military field hospital at Camp Smitty. He was the first fatality as a result of enemy action during an international operation by Dutch armed forces since 1995, when two Privates were killed in Bosnia. The Iraqi police were able to quickly round up the attackers, who were initially detained at the Dutch camp and subsequently handed over to the British authorities. An almost simultaneous attack on a Bravo Company patrol in Ar Rumaythah, just after 10 pm, resulted in no casualties.

At a staff meeting the day after the attack, Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp emphasised the need to stay calm. He asserted that a tougher attitude towards Iraqis in general or a retreat behind armour and the ‘walls’ of the base camps would only play into the hands of their opponents. “It is my intent,” the commander stated, “to keep the nature of NLBG’s operations largely unchanged”, in order to ensure that all “relationships, security and stability ... which have been built up over the past ten months” did not go to waste. However, Van Harskamp also expressed his aim to step up targeting operations against the leadership of the opposing forces.

In mid-May, the conflict between the Coalition and the Mahdi Army intensified throughout Southern Iraq. US troops had initiated an offensive to the north of Al Muthanna, in Karbala and Najaf, and had laid siege to the Mahdi Army in a number of towns. Heavy fighting aimed at eliminating the Sadrist positions was also taking place in Baghdad, in the British zone near Basra and in Maysan province. The untrained militia was no match for the international troops, who inflicted great losses on it. It was typical,
however, that the Mahdi Army often managed to retreat underground as quickly as it had reared its head. This made for an elusive opponent who was difficult to eliminate entirely.65

The Sadr movement made another attempt to seize power in Al Muthanna on 14 and 15 May. On the afternoon of 14 May, after Friday prayers, a group of armed Al Sadr followers gathered at their party office in As Samawah. The group, comprising a few dozen men, carried AK-47S, RPG launchers and hand grenades and threatened to storm the Governor’s compound. The NLBG provided support for the Iraqi police. The battalion reserve and FLT were deployed to protect government buildings. While Iraqi dignitaries and sheiks – led by the governor and the chief of police – attempted to negotiate and calm the situation, the Dutch prepared for an offensive action, just in case. The unrest continued throughout the evening. The Sadrists set up barricades. The gathering in the town dispersed only at nightfall, when small groups of armed men slipped off under the cover of darkness and fanned out over a wider area. Dutch patrols were subsequently and repeatedly fired upon. According to the NLBG, the Dutch found themselves in a situation “which was turning into a type of urban guerrilla warfare”.66

The next day, the Sadrists continued to provoke unrest. The Iraqi authorities therefore decided to act against the party’s headquarters. Governor Al Hassani requested assistance from the NLBG and the Dutch cordoned off what was known as the “Sadr House”. When militia members armed with Kalashnikovs threatened to use their guns against the Dutch soldiers, Special Forces snipers on nearby roofs countered the threat by firing their precision weapons at points close to the troublemakers to intimidate them. The Sadrists subsequently fled. The men succeeded in escaping because the Iraqi police let them pass. The cops were afraid to confront the Sadrists in a fight for fear of revenge.67 Police forces occupied the Sadr movement’s building after the Dutch military had searched it. Fighting in the town continued for the next few hours between police and Sadr militia. Also, there was a failed attempt by the Sadrists to recapture their party’s offices, in which at least one of them was killed.68

In spite of the fact that the Iraqi security services still had some failings, they were able to maintain control. They did not allow the situation in As Samawah to get out of hand as their colleagues had in the neighbouring province of Dhi Qar, where the Mahdi Army took temporary control of almost the whole of the city of Nasiriyah and most government buildings. The CPA there was forced to evacuate its personnel under fire to Tallil Airbase outside the town. Local administrators went into hiding and security services disintegrated. It took
the heavy guns from an AC-130 Spectre flying gunship to restore control. The situation had, however, got so out of hand that things would never be the same again. The CPA and Coalition Forces (in this case the Italians) did not recover until the start of Iraqi self-administration at the end of June.69

There was no such escalation in Al Muthanna, although the situation was tense for several days after 15 May. Dutch military personnel, Iraqi police forces and the Iraqi Civil Defence Corps were repeatedly involved in shootings. One of the more serious incidents occurred in the early hours of 17 May. Insurgents attacked a Dutch military checkpoint on Route Jackson north of Ar Rumaythah, close to a small village near the provincial border. The roadblock was manned by a rifle section from Bravo Company. At 2am, the unit suddenly came under fire from behind a railway embankment. According to the section commander the “surprise attack” was “very intense”. Bullets and rocket-propelled grenades flew about. Their rapid return fire and, as they themselves admitted, “poor marksmanship” on the part of the attackers, ensured that no-one was hurt. The enemy fighters broke off the attack very quickly. Together with the Iraqi police a daylight search was later conducted of the houses in the neighbouring village. There the soldiers found grenades, ammunition and a plan of attack drawn in the sand.70 Two privates, both gunners on the patrol’s vehicles, were later awarded the Cross of Merit for their bravery in returning fire from a vulnerable upright position, “in the midst of a hail of bullets”, and in doing so contributing to the repulsion of the attack.71

The ambush triggered a discussion among the Dutch on reinforcements in order to counter the threat which had evolved. The question was whether the 2003 decision to conduct the Iraq mission with light infantry and a ‘vulnerable’ open posture could still be justified. In consultation with the higher echelons in The Hague, the NLBG analysed the situation and put in a request for “extra armoured material” to provide better protection for the Dutch soldiers outside the camps, in particular against RPGs. “The material being used within NLBG [Mercedes Benz jeeps and Patria armoured vehicles] is not quite resistant to these,” Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp wrote with a feeling for understatement. More heavily armoured personnel carriers had already prevented casualties among Coalition Forces in neighbouring provinces. The NLBG commander requested the Defence Staff to provide him with YPR armoured tracked vehicles (an infantry fighting vehicle with 25mm rapid fire cannon, which at that time was allocated to armoured infantry battalions such as his) and a number of Leopard tanks. His unit already had sufficient numbers of trained crews.72
Over the next few days, the threat remained high, but the general feeling within the Dutch unit that they were on the eve of an armed uprising proved to be unfounded. The most frequent incidents were minor clashes between the Iraqi police and armed groups, including a drive-by shooting which targeted the Sadr House occupied by police forces. There were no further major assaults, although Tallil Airbase suffered a rocket attack on 20 May in which two projectiles hit the base. On 27 May, a mortar attack targeted the Governor’s compound in the centre of As Samawah. Of the three grenades two exploded, but no-one was hurt. The incident led Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp to refer in his daily report again to the “highly unpredictable nature” of the situation. He classified the actions by opposing forces as a “type of asymmetrical warfare”.73

On 21 May, the Dutch government announced that six AH–64 Apache combat helicopters would be deployed to Southern Iraq as soon as possible as reinforcements for the NLBG. A Ministry of Defence spokesperson told the media that the main reason was the “growing number of incidents”.74 An analysis by the Defence Staff had reached a different conclusion from that of the NLBG staff, namely that the requested extra armoured vehicles could be seen by the local population as too aggressive. More armour would deviate too much from the Dutch ‘open approach’ doctrine. It was decided to stick to the original plan, which had sometimes even been referred to as a ‘Dutch approach’. The Defence Staff’s argument was that the use of armoured vehicles, even tanks, might be counter-productive. Thanks to “their mobility, sensor systems and reaction speed”, the Apaches would be better able to contribute “to assessing the security situation”, and would therefore be better suited for the role of observation tool and airborne Quick Reaction Force.75

“A highly welcome addition,” the NLBG reported.76 Additional facilities were set up at Tallil Airbase for the new weapons systems and their crews (about 100), like ‘parking bays’ for the aircraft, large maintenance tents and accommodation. The first three Apaches arrived on 27 May. Together with an accompanying Chinook (carrying technicians and security personnel), they made a remarkable four-day journey to Iraq hopping across Europe and the Middle East. The flying quartet flew from the Netherlands to Tallil under its own steam, with nine interim stops in seven countries.77 The other three Apaches arrived in Southern Iraq in June.

At about 9am on 31 May, a car bomb (or Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device / VBIED in military jargon) exploded along Route Jackson in As Samawah, just as a US convoy was passing. The explosion caused no
damage or casualties among the Americans; one Iraqi civilian was injured. Dutch forces were dispatched to cordon off the site and investigate. The car in question, which contained the remains of dried-out, unexploded Iranian-made explosives, proved to come from Baghdad. It was Al Muthanna’s first encounter with a phenomenon that was already common in the guerrilla war against the Coalition elsewhere in Iraq. It would not be the last. A month later, two Dutch soft-top vehicles were also targeted by a VBIED on the same highway in neighbouring province Dhi Qar, not far from Tallil. The vehicles’ high speed and poor timing by the bomber, as well as the fact that not all the explosives ignited, prevented any damage or casualties. “Another guardian angel used up,” Lieutenant Colonel Van Harskamp commented in a report.

Although the threat from irregular warfare appeared to increase as a result of the IED attacks, the unrest in fact dissipated over the next few weeks. The reason for this was negotiations with the Sadr movement which culminated in a nationwide ceasefire. In Al Muthanna, resumed its modus operandi from before the uprising. The month of June was dominated by the transfer of sovereignty to the Iraqis and the formal end of occupation. An interim government, led by Prime Minister Ayad Allawi, was installed in anticipation of general elections in January 2005. One of its first decisions, now that it was responsible for national security, was to ‘upgrade’ the paramilitary Iraqi Civil Defence Corps to form the Iraqi National Guard (ING).

At the request of the new interim government, the international troops remained active in Iraq and were officially renamed the Multi-National Force Iraq (MNF-I), or MNF. The force’s mandate was laid down in UN Security Council Resolution 1546 of 8 June 2004. The old occupation army entered into a “security partnership” with the new Iraqi authorities. The precise agreements were contained in an exchange of letters between US Secretary of State Colin Powell and Prime Minister Allawi, included as an annex to the UN resolution. This extended the authorisation for the existing international forces, as initially formulated in Resolution 1511 of October 2003. The MNF would continue to conduct operations to create a secure environment, would continue to assist reconstruction activities, and would continue to help build up effective Iraqi security services.

One shadow on the way to Iraqi self-government in Al Muthanna was the news that governor Al Hassani, doubts regarding whose integrity had circulated for many months, was officially accused of corruption. The judicial authorities in Baghdad had apparently started an investigation. Plausibly, the accusations had been instigated by former governor Sheikh Sami, who was still an influential figure
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in the province and, having failed to obtain a ministerial post in the interim
government, was now trying to create a political crisis that would enable him
to return to Al Muthanna. The crisis passed, however. Al Hassani remained
governor, and would hold that position until his violent death in a roadside
bomb explosion in August 2007.

The Dutch contingent was initially to remain in Al Muthanna until just
after the transfer of sovereignty. On 11 June, however, the Dutch government
announced that it wished to extend the mission by eight months, until after
the crucial Iraqi national elections of January 2005. A fourth Dutch battle
group took over the security task from 3 NLBG in July. By then, Iraqi self-
governance was already in place. CPA shadow governor Jim Soriano and his
people stopped their work on 20 June and departed without much ado. On
28 June, CPA chief Paul Bremer officially transferred sovereignty to the Iraqi
interim government. The unexpectedly early handover had been prepared
in the utmost secrecy. The international force, including the Dutch battle
group in Al Muthanna, was just as surprised as everyone else. 3 NLBG heard
the news via the media. The transfer passed off peacefully though. The new
Iraqi President, Ghazi al Yawar, spoke of “a historic day, a happy day, a day
to which all Iraqis have looked forward”. But while the occupation of Iraq
may have been over, this could not be said of the country’s many problems.

The second uprising

Following a brief ceremony on 14 July 2004, Lieutenant Colonel Van
Harskamp handed over command of Dutch operations in Al Muthanna
to Lieutenant Colonel Kees Matthijssen of 4 NLBG. Matthijssen was
commander of 13 Air Assault Infantry Battalion (Stoottroepen Prins
Bernhard Regiment), the battalion which formed the core of the new
battle group. Like its predecessor, the fourth battle group had an Alpha
Company in As Samawah, a Bravo Company in Ar Rumaythah and a
Charlie Company in Al Khidr, all air assault infantry units. At Camp
Smitty, there was also a ‘staff and heavy weapons company’ typical of air
assault battalions. Alongside the regular battalion staff and combat service
support elements, it encompassed a number of operational units for use
by battalion command, such as reconnaissance teams and two anti-tank
platoons. A mortar platoon had been added. In practice, in Al Muthanna
the latter sub-units acted mainly as infantry forces, providing security at
the base camp and for the logistic convoys, as well as battalion reserve.
In the first few weeks, the new NLBG had every opportunity to become
accustomed to its so-called normal framework operations and, as the unit itself said, “to shake out their feathers”. The situation was calm and local support for the Dutch military presence seemed to be as strong as ever. On 22 July, Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen gathered his staff and subordinate commanders to “establish the direction of the operation”. The main focus, he reported, “is security assistance, which I see as being twofold, i.e. on the one hand assisting upon request and on the other the further improvement and professionalisation of the Iraqi security services”. In this sense, the unit planned to operate in the same way as 3 NLBG. Now that the Iraqis were officially in charge, it was up to them. In line with the guidelines laid down by the higher MNF headquarters, the Dutch operated in the background and as much as possible outside urban areas.89

The Apache attack helicopters, known as Copperheads, conducted reconnaissance flights (including along the border area with Saudi Arabia) and were on standby as an airborne Quick Reaction Force. From Tallil, a section of two Apaches could be in the Dutch sector in about 30 minutes, depending on where they needed to provide aid or bare their teeth.90 The pilots regularly practised close combat attack procedures with the infantry companies’ forward air controllers. 4 NLBG also deployed the Apaches at night to observe roads or the environs of the base camps and around temporary checkpoints. Escorting convoys and transport helicopter flights was among their tasks as well.

The new phase of Iraqi self-governance meant that 4 NLBG operated in an essentially different environment from its three predecessors. Of course there was a downside. There was a strong impression that the new Dutch contingent had less situational awareness from the start. After a few weeks in the area, NLBG commander Matthijssen reported that his unit’s information position had changed. He initially attributed this to the reduced presence of his infantry in the towns, which meant less contact with locals and therefore also less intelligence. “The return of the CICIC Support Element and the FLT detachment to Camp Smitty, following the closure of the CPA building” in As Samawah had also led to less situational awareness.91 In previous months, it had mostly been personnel from these units who had kept abreast of local feeling on behalf of the battle group. During the period of CPA administration there had been “relatively in-depth insight into governmental developments”. The newly independent Iraqi authorities were less open in this respect.92 This was a disadvantage because “below the surface there are intelligence-related developments which I do not believe to be new but which do deserve attention,” Matthijssen stated on 25
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July. From the moment the Iraqis took charge, there were perceived ‘winners and losers’ with respect to the spoils of power and this created considerable tensions. Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen observed signs of friction between administrators, the police and the tribes, and dissatisfaction among locals with the “poor transparency of [the] government organisation”, which led to “a perception of corruption”. There were also “signs of Iranian influence, the presence of unknown foreigners, new political parties, indications of terror-related organisations and trafficking”.

In the meantime, the crisis with Muqtada al Sadr and his movement, although temporarily on hold, was far from resolved. In June, Al Sadr made it clear that he rejected the national interim government in Baghdad. It had been “put in place by the occupier” and in his view was therefore illegitimate. That summer, all eyes turned towards Najaf, where the Mahdi Army challenged the new Iraqi authorities and the traditional Shiite leadership by bringing in large numbers of arms – provided by Iran – and taking over whole districts. The Sadrists dug themselves in around the Imam Ali mosque and occupied what was known as the Valley of Peace, a large cemetery of religious significance on the edge of the town.

This renewal of the power struggle slowly escalated into a new uprising, which spread across the whole of Southern Iraq. At the start of August, the MNF placed a cordon around Najaf and Iraqi police started to round up Al Sadr followers. The Mahdi Army responded by kidnapping police officers and attacking police stations. Violence erupted on 5 and 6 August, first in Najaf, and later in other towns. Hundreds of Mahdi Army fighters were killed, as were personnel from the Iraqi security forces, innocent civilians and military personnel from the MNF.

In Al Muthanna, these developments led more or less to a repetition of the events that had occurred in April and May. Dutch intelligence personnel observed that powerful stakeholders, such as tribal leaders, put pressure on local Sadrists to keep them in order. This was only partially successful, however. Attacks occurred again. It was noticeable that the Iraqi police and National Guard were now being targeted more frequently than the Dutch troops. In order to keep an eye on the Mahdi Army throughout the province, NLBG concentrated its patrols on the major highways towards Najaf and supported the local authorities by jointly manning police and National Guard checkpoints. One such post near Al Khidr came under mortar fire on the night of 6 August. A policeman was injured and the perpetrators escaped, in spite of a search by two Dutch Apache helicopters.
Next was the capital As Samawah. In the early hours of Sunday 8 August, shots could be heard over a period of three hours. It all started at about 1am, when various Iraqi security forces’ buildings were fired upon using small arms and RPGs. A policeman was injured when three police cars were also ambushed. One of the vehicles was hit by an RPG. Three mortar grenades landed near the television masts during the fighting, but caused no damage or casualties. Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen reported that the Iraqi police tackled the issue “decisively”. Seventeen people were arrested.98

The NLBG commander also reported that the incidents surprised him somewhat. In the days prior to the fighting, everything had pointed to the Iraqis in Al Muthanna being appalled by the Sadrists’ conduct in Najaf. Matthijssen speculated that one possible reason for the sudden outburst of violence could be “the fact that they [the Sadr followers in Al Muthanna] had been called upon to contribute to the current campaign [by the Mahdi Army throughout Southern Iraq]”. Within the wider picture, it was thought possible that the leader of the local Sadr movement, Sheik Ghazi al Zargani, had given the more radical section of his party a free rein. It could also “not be ruled out that the majority [of the perpetrators] came from outside”.99 Police Chief Kareem let it be known that his information pointed to most of those arrested being from As Zubayah, near Basra.100 This moving about of Sadr militia was common. Many fighters from Al Muthanna had in turn been deployed in the major conflict against the MNF near Najaf, which the Mahdi Army viewed as the centre of gravity of its campaign. The Sadrists used reinforcements from elsewhere for operations in As Samawah or Ar Rumaythah.

The decisive operations by Iraqi police which so impressed Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen continued throughout the next day and night. NLBG’s Alpha Company provided support during a police operation in As Samawah, in which “a number of districts” were combed, houses were searched and suspects arrested. The total number of detained troublemakers was 26. The operation continued until dawn on Monday 9 August. A large number of Dutch troops were also operating off-base and Apaches conducted flights over the area, as there were indications of planned mortar attacks. It stayed calm that night, possibly due to the security measures of the NLBG.101 Yet there was an attack the next night. Three mortar grenades were fired at the Japanese base camp.102 Just over 24 hours later, two mortar rounds landed close to Camp Smitty.103
Ambush in Ar Rumaythah

Gunfights between the Sadrist movement and the Iraqi security forces continued over the next few days. In Al Khidr, too, the atmosphere was tense. On Friday 13 August, triggered by the crisis in Najaf, a large and emotionally-charged demonstration took place against the Iraqi interim government and Coalition Forces. An aggressive crowd threw stones at passing Dutch units, and elsewhere people displayed the soles of their feet (an insult) and some made cut-throat motions. Similar demonstrations were also held in Ar Rumaythah. The leader of the Sadr movement in that town, Fadhil Ashaara, again played a crucial role.

On the evening of Tuesday 10 August, a Bravo Company patrol reported being under fire in the centre of Ar Rumaythah. In the darkness, the Dutch soldiers thought the shots had come from a slow-moving truck, which later proved to have broken down and was being pushed by a few armed guards from the law courts (including three policemen) who had come to the aid of the driver. The return fire from the Dutch unit wounded the truck driver in his cabin. The incident incurred the wrath of the local police commander, who accused the Dutch infantry of having fired first and without reason. This rapid passing of judgement was illustrative of the bad working relationship between the leadership of the Iraqi police and the Dutch, in particular the detachment of ‘green MPs’ and the commander responsible for Bravo Company. The Dutch commanding officer in Ar Rumaythah, for his part, was furious with the police commissioner for the rapid, public denouncement of his troops and decided to sort things out at the police station. Harsh words were said during that confrontation.

Shortly afterwards, the ‘blue MPs’, as was usual, investigated the incident. On 11 and 12 August they discovered evidence (“traces of ricocheted bullets” in a wall) that the Dutch patrol had indeed been fired at, but from a different direction than it had thought. A witness, the nightwatchman at a nearby school, was to be questioned on Saturday 14 August. The man’s name and address were unknown to the MPs, which led to a decision on Saturday afternoon to pay a spontaneous visit to the school that evening, on the assumption that the man would then be at work. Late that evening the Dutch military police drove from Camp Smitty to Ar Rumaythah in three jeeps (containing six MPs and an interpreter). In doing so, the team drove into an ambush, the most serious attack directed against Dutch troops in their twenty months in Iraq.

The assault took place at about 11.30 pm when the military police team set out to return to As Samawah, after having held several conversations.
at the school in the centre of Ar Rumaythah. They did not get to talk to the
nightwatchman, as he was not on duty. In order to return to the highway
towards As Samawah (Route Jackson), which ran more or less through
the south-westerly part of the town, the three Dutch vehicles had to drive
through the town and cross a river and railway line. Once they had crossed
the bridge over the river, the team noticed that the streets were suddenly
empty of people. The unit came under fire shortly afterwards. The vehicles
were shot at over a distance of several hundred metres from buildings
on both sides of the road, until they reached the highway. The drivers of
the vehicles, two of whom had almost immediately been hit by bullets,
continued to drive at full speed in line with standard operating procedure
until they were about two kilometres outside the town, where they
stopped. The driver of the first vehicle had a bullet in his side, the other
a graze wound in his leg. The passenger in the second vehicle, a 29-year-
old Sergeant, showed no signs of life. The team members assumed he had
been hit right at the start of the ambush and killed instantly.110

The fight was not yet over. Bravo Company sent two Quick Reaction
Force teams to the aid of the military police personnel. At that time, company
command still assumed that it had been an opportunist shooting, a rather
common occurrence, and not a wide-scale, planned ambush.111 However, the
two QRF teams also came under heavy fire from rooftops and from between
houses in the same part of town. Two soldiers were injured in the second QRF
team’s second vehicle, an open all-terrain jeep. The unit also lost one of its
vehicles completely. Two anti-tank grenades hit it and brought it to a standstill.
The four occupants, three of whom were injured, hid in a nearby garden. They
spent over 45 minutes in ‘enemy territory’, until they were rescued and taken
to safety by another unit with two Patria armoured vehicles, sent especially by
the Bravo Company command post to find them.112 Twenty minutes before – it
was by now 1am and over 90 minutes since the start of the battle – two alerted
Apaches had appeared above the town. This was the moment at which the
insurgents gave up. A medical evacuation helicopter, a US Blackhawk, picked
up those who had been wounded from the meeting point outside town and
took them to Camp Smitty. The remaining troops drove to Bravo Company’s
camp via a detour.113

NLBG commander Matthijssen evaluated the actions of the rebels the
next day as “well-organised ambushes”.114 NLBG concluded that it must
have been a planned attack. This was due to the size of the enemy forces (a
few dozen) and the fact that they had positioned themselves around the few
unavoidable thoroughfares to the highway (chokepoints in military jargon).
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Moreover, the enemy’s equipment (small-calibre weapons, machine guns and RPGs) was well placed along the length of the routes and on both sides. The NLBG had been caught by surprise. Sections of the population in Ar Rumaythah must have known about the attack and its precise location and preparations. The same applied to the local authorities, including the security services, with whom the Dutch thought they maintained good relations. In the wake of the ambush, two questions needed to be answered. Firstly, why had the NLBG failed to see such a major attack coming and specifically failed to translate known intelligence – including the arrival of an armed group in Ar Rumaythah in the preceding days and warnings by a tribal leader – into preventive security measures? In the Netherlands, media reports alleged that the Dutch had been naïve to allow the military police team to go to Ar Rumaythah in unarmoured vehicles, without infantry protection and in the dark, at the time of such a widespread and violent crisis in the Shiite south.

Secondly, how had a small, radical minority been able to play such a dominant role? For months, Iraqi self-regulation had kept Al Muthanna the safest province in the whole of Iraq. During the provincial security council’s meeting on 16 August, governor Al Hassani reported that the police forces had been threatened and intimidated. He claimed that the instigator of the violence came from Nasiriyah. The Iraqi authorities had by this point lost the decisiveness that NLBG commander Matthijssen had admired earlier. Fear and indecision all of a sudden pervaded both the security service ranks and the civilian authorities.

Some light was shed on the incident by the company commander in Al Khidr. In the days following it, he maintained that “hardliners” in particular made use of a widespread sense of dissatisfaction among the population, arising “from a lack of job opportunities and the primary necessities of life”. In Al Khidr, there had for months been major problems with the water supply and the Iraqis viewed the local council as corrupt and incompetent. The entire province was also still struggling to cope with erratic fuel supplies. This had consequences for the Dutch military who, after all, were there to provide support for the distrusted Iraqi interim authorities. The people had lost faith in their government. As Charlie Company reported, in Al Khidr the Dutch were not quite (or not yet) equated with the Americans, but the town had definitely become “anti-SFIR”. In the week before the fighting, there had been signs of an armed operation against Dutch military personnel in Al Khidr also and Charlie Company personnel had been warned not to go into the town any more.
In addition to dissatisfaction with the authorities and high unemployment, combined with a tradition of resistance, the specific position of Ar Rumaythah close to the troubled provinces of Najaf and Al Qadisiyah also played a part. The Mahdi Army enjoyed the support of fellow radicals from Diwaniyah, north of Ar Rumaythah. At the same time, it quickly became clear that the Iraqi authorities badly wanted to believe that the violence came from outside the province, but disguised the fact that the Sadrists in Ar Rumaythah did in fact possess solid local support. This support arose from a mixture of ideology, dissatisfaction and the pursuit of financial gain. Sadrist leader Fadhil Ashaara had gathered a core of radicals. He paid unemployed men as well as opportunist petty criminals 400 dollars a month to act as foot soldiers for his movement. Many of these men also worked in the FPS. Furthermore, Ashaara had almost all of the town’s cops on his ‘payroll’. The money for this corruption came from Iran.

In response to the ambush, Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen decided temporarily to reduce the number of Dutch patrols in the towns. He did so partly at the request of the governor, who seemed to have lost control of Ar Rumaythah (his own tribal homeland) and of the southern districts of As Samawah (formerly controlled by his ‘own’ police forces). Prior to this decision, the staff of 4 NLBG held urgent discussions on how to respond to the challenges. A number of key officials argued in favour of more robust action in order to get the situation under control. To this end, local authorities such as the police chief of Ar Rumaythah and provincial governor Al Hassani would expressly be held to account, and daytime and nighttime patrols in the towns ought to be intensified. Tough countermeasures such as cordon and search operations would have to be considered. The NLBG had to act tough and make it clear to the Iraqis that the Dutch were not ‘white chickens’ (local parlance for cowards). To achieve this, the staff wanted additional forces from the Netherlands.

The main question was whether to show restraint or to surge forward. In the end, the former option was chosen, mainly because Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen thought that “adopting a dominant role in the towns was contrary to the post-28 June MNF strategy”. At this stage, the 4 NLBG commander had insufficient intelligence for targeting operations. Moreover, as it was “painfully obvious that the intelligence capacity was unsatisfactory”, the battle group staff introduced measures to improve information collection and analysis. One lesson learned from the Ar Rumaythah ambush was that the NLBG had indeed received snippets of
intelligence, but that these had been too vague for them to be able to be acted upon. 4 NLBG felt as if it had been more or less blind.\textsuperscript{128}

The intent was to conduct operations in Al Muthanna using improved intelligence. To this end, 4 NLBG was allocated additional support from the Netherlands: from the military intelligence service MIVD, the Army Special Forces Regiment and the tactical intelligence unit 103 ISTAR Battalion. Commandos and recon personnel were deployed more frequently at night in particular in order to maintain situational awareness. In consultation with the Defence Staff, the battle group was also reinforced by two extra infantry platoons.\textsuperscript{129} From the start, 4 NLBG had had less combat power than 3 NLBG, as an air assault battalion typically is smaller than an armoured infantry battalion. This was now ‘put right’.

**Ceasefire**

The security situation remained precarious for several weeks. During this period, the town of Ar Rumaythah and also a number of southern districts in As Samawah were very much under the influence of the Sadr militias.\textsuperscript{130} The Dutch, by choice of their commander, stayed well away from these areas. Yet they could not entirely avoid the enemy and occasionally ended up in gunfights. On the evening of Monday 16 August, for instance, a Bravo Company patrol came across two men preparing a firing position outside Ar Rumaythah. The Dutch briefly exchanged fire with the insurgents, after which the latter succeeded in escaping. A couple of hours later, the company base camp near the town came under mortar attack. That same night, two severe firefight erupted in As Samawah near the PJCC and three heavy explosions were heard as well, probably from mortar strikes.\textsuperscript{131}

Two days later, an Alpha Company patrol was involved in a peculiar incident near Camp Smitty. While personnel in two stationary Dutch jeeps were observing the area, a white Toyota approached them from the front. The driver stopped and flashed his headlights, then switched on the hazard lights and sounded his horn. He did so next to the two Dutch vehicles. He then drove off and stopped at a nearby Iraqi police checkpoint. After a few minutes, the vehicle turned and drove towards the Dutch patrol at high speed with the headlights on full. Shots were fired. In line with the Rules of Engagement, the Dutch soldiers opened fire. Both the car’s occupants were killed. An investigation by the Iraqi authorities and Dutch military police showed that the two had been drinking alcohol, which possibly explained their behaviour. The Dutch, who thought they had been fired
upon from the vehicle, found no weapons. The shots had been fired at and from the Iraqi police checkpoint.\textsuperscript{132}

In general, provocations by the Mahdi Army at this time were limited to firing at the international troops’ base camps. On the night of Monday 23 August, the Sadrist militia fired five mortar rounds at the Japanese compound. Another attack followed the next night. On the evening of 27 August, Bravo Company’s camp near Ar Rumaythah was again targeted. Three mortar rounds landed one hundred metres south of the base.\textsuperscript{133} Enemy operations were otherwise mainly aimed at the Iraqi security forces. Among the incidents were a gun battle at the ING battalion’s barracks in As Samawah on 24 August and an ambush of an Iraqi police patrol in which three cops were injured, two of them seriously, on 28 August.\textsuperscript{134} In general, de Sadrists controlled large parts of the towns, and thus the population.

Only when the crisis in Najaf had been resolved did calm return to Al Muthanna. Following an absence of several weeks due to a heart operation in the UK, Grand Ayatollah Al Sistani used his authority to bring about a compromise between the Iraqi interim government and Muqtada al Sadr. He orchestrated a ceasefire, starting on the evening of 26 August, and took over the disputed holy sites in Najaf from the Mahdi Army. All the parties – the Iraqi government, the MNF and the Sadrists – withdrew their troops. For the time being, Al Sadr opted for a political solution and called on his followers outside Najaf to observe the ceasefire too. The crisis passed, but the underlying power struggle continued. Whether it would be settled non-violently would have to become clear in the run-up to the general elections over the coming months.

In any case, the situation in Al Muthanna stabilised to such an extent that 4 NLBG resumed normal framework operations from the end of August. The Dutch forces also renewed their efforts in support of the Iraqi security services, with courses for trainers and officers, joint patrols, intensive coaching, the creation of a police training centre and joint exercises. The Sadr uprising had demonstrated that the Iraqi security forces were still unable to operate independently.\textsuperscript{135} This process would be most troublesome in Ar Rumaythah. Relations with the local police there had become severely disrupted. The police corps had obviously been infiltrated. There were suspicions that policemen had been involved in the ambush against the Dutch, or had at least been guilty of serious negligence. “It is really essential that a large section of the I[raqi] P[olice] in Ar Rumaythah be replaced,” Lieutenant Colonel Matthijssen concluded.\textsuperscript{136}

As a breeding ground for guerrilla activity, Ar Rumaythah remained
Caught between a power struggle and an uprising

the province’s ‘problem child’. The truce with the Mahdi Army had positive effects, but there were still plenty of radicals and criminals who intended to undermine the authorities and drive out the Dutch troops. An additional complicating factor was the power struggle within the local Albu Hassan tribe, to which governor Al Hassani belonged and which back in April had proved to be a useful instrument in suppressing the unrest. A fight for control between two of the sheikhs for the ‘top job’ caused part of the tribe to side with the Sadrist and there were even plans to assassinate fellow tribesman Al Hassani. The situation weakened the governor’s position to the extent that he adopted a passive stance, and in doing so he alienated the severely beleaguered provincial police force (and in particular Police Chief Kareem) which sought Al Hassani’s support in its time of need.

On Sunday 5 September, the NLBG hit back with a major cordon and search operation. Codenamed Kyodo, its aim was to arrest suspected insurgents in Ar Rumaythah. On the basis of apparently reliable information from the governor and a few dissident tribe members, Dutch military personnel targeted two locations and rounded up eight people suspected of involvement in the ambush of 14 and 15 August. A British Chinook helicopter dropped the Dutch Special Forces’ arrest team close to the two locations. It arrested three men at the first house, and another five at the second ten minutes later. The operators found firearms and ammunition and confiscated documents. As always, the British took over the suspects and initiated an investigation together with the Iraqi judiciary. Unfortunately for the Dutch, who were quite certain they had captured the culprits, the allies had to release all eight men a few weeks later due to a lack of evidence.

The enemy was quick to respond. On the evening of 11 September, a Field Liaison Team of Special Forces narrowly escaped an attack in As Samawah. As they were leaving a meeting with representatives of a political party, a hand grenade was thrown through an open window of their vehicle, but it failed to explode. Subsequent examination by experts from the Explosive Ordnance Disposal Service showed that the grenade had not detonated because the safety pin had broken off. If the grenade had exploded in the vehicle – containing four Dutch soldiers and an Iraqi interpreter – there would certainly have been casualties.

In October, in the area around Ar Rumaythah, there was a short-lived IED threat as well, which died down as quickly as it had arisen. Dutch military personnel experienced two close calls. At about midday on
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Saturday 2 October, a roadside bomb exploded near a Dutch jeep which was driving in the direction of As Samawah together with two other vehicles. The location was about five kilometres south of Ar Rumaythah, where two other IEDs had been discovered and disarmed by the Iraqi police the day before. As five days later, on 7 October, an IED exploded as a logistics convoy returned to As Samawah after bringing supplies to the Bravo Company. It went off next to a tanker truck. The vehicle was “perforated in multiple places by a large number of steel bullets”. A Sergeant who had been manning the roof-top machine gun sustained injuries to his left arm and leg. As the IED attacks were not repeated, they were interpreted by NLBG as warnings from the perpetrators of the ambush of 14-15 August to stay away, as a response to the cordon and search Operation Kyodo.

Complex crisis response operations

In the course of 2004, the NLBG in Al Muthanna was twice confronted with the sideshow of a full-blown insurgency. Armed resistance against the Coalition went hand in hand with a violent internal power struggle within the Shiite community that was subject to a high level of interference from criminal organisations. The resistance against Coalition Forces was strongly linked to a conflict of interests among several armed political groups, in which tribal relations also played a part. In this respect, for all his inciting nationalist and anti-American rhetoric, Muqtada al Sadr was above all leading an inwardly-focused, revolutionary movement of the young, impoverished Shiite urban proletariat. In order to overthrow the established power bases within the Shia community, his party twice entered into conflict with the international forces which protected his opponents. By attacking the international troops, Al Sadr hoped to mobilise the disgruntled masses. He was only partly successful. Moreover, it was a battle that he could not win militarily. At the cost of hundreds of lives, the insurgent leader was ultimately forced to adopt different strategies.

Only after much hesitation was the hybrid, violent situation of guerrilla, terror and political violence recognised by the Coalition for what it was: an armed uprising, or insurgency. The Coalition’s military leaders and planners gradually came to accept that operations to counter it should therefore ideally be in line with the principles of a counter-insurgency campaign. In spite of the relative calm in the ‘atypical’ province of Al Muthanna, where the armed uprising barely got off the ground due to
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specific local conditions, Dutch troops also encountered irregular attacks aimed at themselves and at the authorities that they supported (initially the CPA, later the Iraqi security forces and government institutions). Never, though, did the Dutch need to adopt a deliberate counter-insurgency strategy. The situation in Al Muthanna hardly required one.

The Dutch armed forces’ fairly broad experience in peace support operations did, however, result in tactical reflexes that matched quite well with some of the central tenets of counter-insurgency, such as a population-centric approach. Dutch military personnel came to realise that they could benefit from the guidelines and principles on countering irregular warfare. By chance, a new Army manual on this subject had just been published the previous year.146 Thus there seemed to be a mix of peace support and counter-insurgency tactics being adopted by improvisation. The main priority was to obtain and retain the support of the local population, for instance by showing restraint in the use of force and by demonstrating an ‘open attitude’. Another priority tactic was to put Iraqi security forces in the lead. The Dutch nevertheless realised that they held a precarious grip over a wary and suspicious population, and therefore lost situational awareness very rapidly after the change-over to Iraqi self-governance. The Coalition strategy of standing down and pulling back did not help either.

In the type of complex operational environment the Dutch experienced, actions were steered by intelligence. The gathering, processing and analysis of large amounts of information were therefore of immense importance, even more so than during previous military operations.147 This was initially insufficiently acknowledged and the NLBG particularly lacked proper analytical capability and satisfactory internal communications on intelligence. This had in fact been the case since 2 NLBG, not least due to an increasingly passive stance from the Iraqis themselves, both the authorities and the population. This process was exacerbated by the transition to Iraqi self-governance in June 2004. Only after a restructuring of internal NLBG intelligence processes in September did matters improve.

Over the course of 2004, these developments and shifts in emphasis led to operations by the NLBGs acquiring some characteristics of a counter-insurgency, or what in colonial times used to be called a ‘pacification campaign’. The specific conditions in Al Muthanna made this less dramatic than it sounds. It was and remained remarkably peaceful in the Dutch sector compared to the rest of Iraq.148 But the operations could clearly no longer be considered as a peace operation. Until 28 June 2004, the Dutch battle group was in fact part of an occupation army, which met with
robust armed resistance. After that date, it was part of a multinational stabilisation force supporting the government of a country taken to the brink of civil war by a violent, internal power struggle and sectarian strife.