

Hear! Hear! to the Scots.

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Bayonets in Basra - A Case Study on the Effects of Irregular Warfare by Edwin Halpain and Justin Walker

Scope Note

This report is a brief case study on the tactical success of a bayonet charge in Basra, Iraq in April 2004 by British soldiers. As a case study, the findings are not intended to automatically apply to other situations in different locations. Nonetheless, this incident marks a helpful contribution to the larger study of irregular warfare. The research is based on open source reporting combined with collaborative discussions about the incident by military, social science, and technology analysts at the Urban Warfare Analysis Center (UWAC). Interviews with the actual participants in the battle would be a logical next step to better understand the dynamics and significance of this event.

Executive Summary

In May 2004, approximately 20 British troops in Basra were ambushed and forced out of their vehicles by about 100 Shiite militia fighters. When ammunition ran low, the British troops fixed bayonets and charged the enemy. About 20 militiamen were killed in the assault without any British deaths.

The bayonet charge appeared to succeed for three main reasons. First, the attack was the first of its kind in that region and captured the element of surprise. Second, enemy fighters probably believed jihadist propaganda stating that coalition troops were cowards unwilling to fight in close combat, further enhancing the element of surprise. Third, the strict discipline of the British troops overwhelmed the ability of the militia fighters to organize a cohesive counteraction. The effects of this tactical action in Basra are not immediately applicable elsewhere, but an important dominant theme emerges regarding the need to avoid predictable patterns of behavior within restrictive rules of engagement. Commanders should keep adversaries off balance with creative feints and occasional shows of force lest they surrender the initiative to the enemy.

I. Overview of Bayonet Charge

On 21 May 2004, Mahdi militiamen engaged a convoy consisting of approximately 20 British troops from the **Argyll and Sutherland Highlanders** 55 miles north of Basra. A squad from the Princess of Wales regiment came to their assistance. What started as an attack on a passing convoy ended with at least 35 militiamen dead and just three British troops wounded. The militiamen engaged a force that had restrictive rules of engagement prior to the incident that prevented them from returning fire. What ensued was an example of irregular warfare by coalition troops that achieved a tactical victory over a numerically superior foe with considerable firepower.