



Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad

David Zucchino , Mark Bowden (Foreword by)

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Based on reporting that was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize, Thunder Run chronicles one of the boldest gambles in modern military history. Three battalions and fewer than a thousand men launched a violent thrust of tanks and Bradley Fighting Vehicles into the heart of a city of 5 million people and in three days of bloody combat ended the Iraqi war. Thunder Run is the story of the surprise assault on Baghdad—one of the most decisive battles in American combat history—by the Spartan Brigade, the Second Brigade of the Third Infantry Division (Mechanized). More than just a rendering of a single battle, Thunder Run candidly recounts how soldiers respond under fire and stress and how human frailties are magnified in a war zone. The product of over a hundred interviews with commanders and men from the Second Brigade, Thunder Run is a riveting firsthand account of how a single armored brigade was able to capture an Arab capital defended by one of the world's largest armies.

Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad Details

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Martin says

Well reported account of the taking of Baghdad by American armored units in 2003. I was familiar with the armored run on April 5th, through the city to the American lines at the airport, and that story fascinated me -- it seemed like an audacious move that overturned any expectation that the fighting in Baghdad would play out like the ill-fated raid in Mogadishu portrayed in *Blackhawk Down*.

But I wasn't really aware of the rest of the story, and was glad to find this book that carefully goes through the follow up assaults on downtown Baghdad that lead to the collapse of the regime. It includes a lot of first hand accounts and I especially appreciated that some Iraqi accounts are also given.

This book is focused on the few days of the battle in Baghdad, and as such mostly avoids the vast morass of issues surrounding the sad story of the American involvement in Iraq.

Nicholas says

Armored Warfare

Great book about modern armored warfare. Exciting, thrilling and factual. It also provides a glimpse into what our generation of warriors had to go through.

Roger Burk says

I read this book because I wanted to find out how the decision was made to ignore doctrine and send columns of tanks through Baghdad. It didn't directly answer the question because it is written mainly from the point of view of the companies that executed that decision--which surprised them as much as anyone. They had destroyed Saddam's armored forces on the way to the capital and expected some rest while the infantry cleared the city. No such luck.

I surmise that the decision came about because aerial recon showed none of the usual preparations to defend a city--roadblocks, blown bridges, and so forth. So a reconnaissance in force was sent through the city to test the defenses, entering from the south, driving to the center, and exiting eastward to the airport. It found that Saddam and his sons had prepared a new means of defense, startling in its originality, simplicity, boldness, insane wastefulness of life, and almost complete ineffectiveness. They relied on hordes of ill-trained militia and volunteers, armed only with assault rifles, obsolete rocket propelled grenades (RPGs), and cars packed with explosives, sent in swarms at the American force. Except for occasional freakishly lucky hits, the rifles and RPGs had no effect at all on American armor. The suicide vehicles were always destroyed before getting close. But Saddam's dupes kept coming in their hundreds, without skill, military knowledge, coordination, sensible tactics, or learning from experience, to be mown down. Perhaps never in history was so much cold-blooded contempt for death wasted to so little purpose and in so poor a cause.

The swarming tactics reminded me of the British retreat from Lexington at the beginning of the American War of Independence. They also were swarmed by hordes of militiamen from all around the countryside. The difference is that the American militiamen had some notion of sound tactics, and their weapons were just as effective as those of the British, who were lucky to make it back to Boston at all.

It is hard to praise too much the quickness and boldness of the American commanders at Baghdad, who realized at once the possibilities of the unexpected situation, or the fortitude and skill of the troops who executed their orders and thereby shortened the war by weeks. No doubt in the end they saved Iraqi as well as American lives. The second thunder run went into the center of the city to stay, occupying Saddam's palaces and the surrounding central area. Three additional objectives were also held at intersections 1-2 miles apart on the route into the city center. Here the swarming tactics were not so completely ineffective, and over the course of a day ammo ran low and there was real anxiety that the positions would be overrun and destroyed. They had fewer tanks, and since they stayed in one place more militiamen could be sent against them. The four positions were not secure until a resupply convoy made it through in the late afternoon, carrying fuel and ammunition in unarmored trucks with a few lightly-armored escorts. The convoy took significant losses, but enough made it through to allow the Americans to stay overnight, and the Baathist regime disintegrated.

The book reads like an epic. It begins *in media res*, with the Americans on the outskirts of Baghdad. Every few pages a new soldier is introduced with a brief background and character sketch, just as Homer gives a few lines to every Greek hero who faces Hector, or Trojan who faces Achilles. It has relatively little about the war as a whole or about its consequences. It is a story of three days of men at war: the best-trained and best-equipped soldiers in the world.

Paul says

For most of us, our memories of the two gulf wars are represented by little more than smartbomb camera footage. The awesome power that the USA was able to deploy in Iraq was overwhelming - to the defenders, as well as the global audience. There seemed no doubt that military might would win a clear victory. In this frontline account of the armored column entering Baghdad, the author brings us a much more harrowing tale of personal bravery, fear and loss.

It rapidly becomes clear how far the US war machine was stretched, and how close they came to perhaps encountering their "bridge too far".

And I suspect quite unintentionally, it exposes an unsettling realisation of the degree to which religion - Christianity - plays in the minds of US troops. While no means universal, I was struck by the number of times which religion pops up in this book - or soldiers seeking guidance from Army Chaplains that "what they have to do is allowed by their god", of all the prayers that are offered to save the living or commemorate the dead. The message I took away from this is that the US - like virtually every other country that has ever gone to war - clearly exploited religion both explicitly and implicitly in order to exhort their troops to maximum effect on the battlefield. I do not think this is what the author intended, but the main thought in my head at the end of the book was the surprising similarity this realisation brings to our understanding of the people holding the line on both sides of the war.

Terri says

This book lacked a certain magic in the writing that would have guaranteed it 5 stars from me, but it is still a great book and I give it 4.

Thunder Run is a straight talking, no nonsense, in your face retelling of the Thunder Run into Baghdad. The details are richly retold and you nearly feel like you are there (which is the power of a good book).

If there is one thing this book gave me that most other books on the wars in the Middle East haven't, it is the shrapnel casualty rate. Thunder Run truly made me realise that it isn't always RPGs and AK fire that will cause large casualty numbers in a firefight.

A large portion of injuries outlined in this book seemed to be shrapnel. I knew of it's dangers, but this is the first time I got a true sense of how debilitating this secondary danger can be during operations under fire.

Mike says

Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad is a 5 Star combat classic that brings home the noise, fear, sweat, grime, adrenaline-pumping thrills and sleep-deprived exhaustion of the race to capture Baghdad in the Iraq war. Mr. Zucchini provides a narrative as compelling and readable as his friend Mark Bowden's tale of Mogadishu, *Black Hawk Down: A Story of Modern War*. Zucchini doesn't waste much time on set-up, he gets you right into the battle, starting at the edge of Baghdad, 2 weeks after the invasion started. From there, you get a blow-by-blow tale of the next 3 days as the US Army takes the fight into the city, capturing Saddam's palaces and government centers of power. The fight to hold on to the palaces hangs in the balance as the supply lines are under attack. Mr. Zucchini does a superb job painting the tactical and strategic situation around the action. He also does a reasonably good job bringing in other points of view, such as Iraqi civilians and military observers and participants in the battle. Mr. Zucchini fairly describes the Iraqi and mercenary resistance to the Thunder Runs as uncoordinated and unprofessional, while maintaining a fair point of view and recognizing the bravery of some of the Iraqi fighters. It is certain that you will be on the edge of your seat as the fight develops. You will also be amazed and proud of the young troops who take on the uniform and perform with such valor. One of the better battle histories I have read. If I had any request or complaint, it would be for pictures of the battle and participants (none in the book) and detailed maps of some of the pitched fights. Mr Zucchini's focus is pretty much only on the Army's part of the battle and he rarely brings in any of the joint aspects, like airpower, into the picture. That's fine for his tale but I would have liked a little more comprehensive picture of the overall battle.

Lucas says

The central problem of this book is a dramatic one: the battles are completely one-sided. The Iraqis were completely ill-equipped to defend against tanks and die by the hundreds for every U.S. casualty. I think the overwhelming success was completely lost on whoever was in charge of the occupation that followed the invasion, and they replaced practically invincible heavy armor for Humvees. Half the time I was trying to think of inexpensive defenses (swarms of rc or autonomous landmines on wheels?), and the other thinking of things the tanks seemed to be missing (like real-time aerial reconnaissance, they were basically charging in with very little knowledge of what was in store for them).

The parts I appreciated the most were the events that overlapped with those in Anne Garrel's *Naked in*

Baghdad but from a different perspective.

The first was a U.S. tank that was disabled by a lucky shot from an rocket-propelled-grenade or recoilless rifle (which is sort of like the cannon on a tank but mounted on a truck or freestanding), and then abandoned, after which the Iraqi information ministry brought foreign reporters to see it as proof of their defeat of the Americans- this book describes it from the point of view of the people in the tanks, and Garrels was among the reporters who saw it later.

The second event is more tragic, where a U.S. tank fired on the Palestine Hotel where Garrels and other reporters were staying and two Spanish reporters died as a result.

The first half or two thirds of the book which covers the actual 'thunder runs' of the title seems stronger, but I had difficulty later on keeping events at different locations distinct and characters are very rapidly introduced and then ignored after their moments pass. The other thing was that I had some difficulty visualizing the pacing of events- the author (and probably the interviewed participants) edits out the boring parts, but doing the math on shots fired or vehicles destroyed shows things happened in quantity but somewhat spread out in time.

Hugh Henry says

Here is the minute-by-minute description of the armored offensive to capture Baghdad that the 3rd Infantry Division executed in March 2003. The best book about one campaign since Black Hawk Down, Thunder Run wastes few pages with setting the scene, preferring instead to dive into the maelstrom of the armored offensive that was not supposed to be possible. Ever since the Soviet campaigns in Afghanistan and Grozny, military scientists had counseled against using tanks in urban terrain. As I can attest from experience, armored units trained on urban warfare tactics and strategies in contradiction of this advice and their preparations paid off. The battle for Baghdad was a harsh one and a few times the American commanders were not sure that their infantry and armor could hold the positions they had taken. Hold they did, performing their job so well that the battle was nearly over before many viewers in the States knew it had begun.

Chrissy says

This book was an enjoyable read covering, as the name implies, the two thunder runs into the city of Baghdad by the Army's 3rd Infantry Division. The strong point of this book in my opinion was that it integrated viewpoints of a large number of troops in that battle along with alternative viewpoints of some Iraqi military members and some of the American soldiers' family members back home. I felt the author did a pretty good job not bogging the reader down or confusing them despite the mixture of these different viewpoints. I also enjoyed the moments when the author dabbled into some of the soldier's thoughts on killing. I would recommend this to anyone who wants to know more about the thunder runs themselves or

anyone with an interest in tanks.

gemsbooknook Geramie Kate Barker says

Jake McLaughlin led me to this book.

It started like this. I was watching the TV show *Quantico*, halfway through the first episode I was getting frustrated. Not because of the show but because of my own memory. I recognised the actor playing Ryan Booth but could not for the life of me figure out what I had seen him in. After the episode had finished I looked him up. After finding out I had recognised him from a show I use to watch called *Believe*, I read the rest of his biography. It turns out that before Jake was an actor he was in the military. After reading about his military history, his biography referenced a book he was mentioned in. After pondering for a few minutes I thought why not. It's been a while since I have read anything from the military genre, let's give this one a go. And that is how Jake McLaughlin led me to this book.

I am really glad that I decided to read this book. I honestly can't believe I hadn't read it sooner. It could be because I find that books from the modern military genre are a bit hit and miss. Well that couldn't be further from the case with this book. David Zucchino's *Thunder Run* defiantly hit the mark.

After reading *Thunder Run* I had a much deeper understanding of urban warfare. It's advantages and it's challenges. Expertly written by four-time Pulitzer prize finalist David Zucchino. This book really takes you on a journey. A walk through a part of American Military History. The interviews taken during and after the war, with both American and Iraqi soldiers are seamlessly woven together creating a rounded picture of the battle to capture Baghdad. David really captured the chaos of combat. With an in dept look at events and strategy leading up to and during the armored strike.

Thunder Run is not a book for the faint of heart, with graphic descriptions of the violence and horrors of war. This is a must read book for anyone with an interest in military tactics, urban warfare and modern weaponry. David Zucchino's *Thunder Run* is not a book I will be forgetting anytime soon, and given its historical relevance and it's subject matter I believe it is important that it isn't forgotten at all.

Written by Geramie Kate Barker
<https://gemsbooknook.wordpress.com>

James Korsmo says

Thunder Run is an account of a pivotal armor incursion into the heart of Baghdad during the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The book was written in 2004, and doesn't really step back and judge the overall merits of the war, but that isn't his purpose. Zucchino was an embedded reporter with the Spartan Brigade of tanks and personnel carriers. They were (much to their surprise) tasked with a bold charge straight up the central highway into the heart of Baghdad, and two days later, were then sent right into the heart of the city to capture and then hold the central government palace. The book, much in the mold of *Black Hawk Down*, is an account of the battles and the men who were involved. It deals with command decisions and the overall flow of the battles, as well as recounting in vivid detail the experiences of the soldiers tasked with these challenging duties.

The book is well written, and the story well told. It brings to life a key moment in this first stage in what we now understand to be a long and ongoing conflict in Iraq. The books strengths are its immediacy and the

vividness with which it captures the ebb and flow, the confusion and planning, that are involved in an urban battle. And Zucchini also doesn't shy away from either the carnage of battle or the mindsets of the soldiers taking part. His insight into why soldiers fight and how they feel about killing is itself one of the most worthwhile elements in his reporting.

Rodney Harvill says

This book brings back memories of news reports by embedded reporters of the coalition advance into Iraq during the 2003 Operation Iraqi Freedom and press interviews of Baghdad Bob, Iraq's Information Minister, in which he made the most outlandish claims about American casualties. I cannot remember if any American soldiers ever photo-bombed one of his interviews in Baghdad in which he claimed that Americans were nowhere near Baghdad.

The title of the book, *Thunder Run*, refers to a tactic of reconnaissance by fire, first used in Vietnam, in which a mechanized force would advance through enemy territory and provoke enemy soldiers into firing on it and exposing their positions, which could then be destroyed. The book describes two thunder runs in which an armored unit advanced into the Baghdad airport and then from their newly acquired advance base at the airport into downtown Baghdad a few days later. This was a particularly radical move because army urban warfare doctrine at the time called for infantry to advance into a city while armored units maintained an ever-shrinking perimeter around the city. Why? It was felt that tanks and other armored vehicles were at a disadvantage and vulnerable in urban environments featuring buildings with floors too high for tank main guns to hit at close quarters and featuring allies and other great hiding places for recoilless rifles and RPG teams who would target the vulnerable rear engine grills of M1-A1 Abrams tanks. A hit to the grill would not necessarily breach the crew compartment, but it would kill the engine and disable the tank.

From the news, it appeared that American units had easily swept aside Iraqi resistance, but this book dispels that misconception. The thunder run into the airport encountered moderate resistance, but the thunder run into Baghdad was a completely different situation. The original plan was to enter downtown Baghdad, destroy something of significance and return to the airport, having shown that the Americans could go anywhere they pleased, whenever they pleased. The ground commander felt, however, that they should seize and hold part of downtown Baghdad. At the time, Iraqi propaganda was emboldening resistance by stating incorrectly that the Americans were being defeated. The commander hoped to demonstrate conclusively that resistance was futile in hopes that such a message would dissuade armed resistance and reduce casualties, both American and Iraqi. In this thunder run, a unit of tanks and other armored vehicles would travel up a highway from the airport to the Republican Palace in downtown Baghdad. Another unit would come after them and secure highway interchanges so that supply convoys of fuel and ammunition trucks could travel safely up and down the highway to resupply all the armored units. As with the thunder run into the airport, there was moderate resistance, and the area in and around the Republican Palace was easily captured. However, the units tasked with guarding highway interchanges ran into very stiff resistance that day. As a result, the supply convoys had to travel up the highway under fire, and several trucks transporting fuel and ammunition were hit and destroyed. Furthermore, the tactical operations command (TOC)(for communication with outside support such as air and artillery support) at the airport was hit by a missile and had to be reassembled with spare parts. The next morning was when the armored unit at the Republican Palace came heavy attack. These battles were probably the most intense fights of the war up to that point.

During the fighting, four reporters were killed. Two had stayed behind at the airport during the thunder run into Baghdad, considering it too dangerous. However, the missile that destroyed the TOC incinerated them.

The other two reporters that died were in the Palestine Hotel across the Tigris from the Republican Palace. A working two-way radio had been found on a dead Iraqi soldier, and the Americans were able to listen in as a forward artillery observer was calling in artillery and mortar strikes on them. The Americans promptly started looking for him so they could kill him. A tank crew saw a man with some equipment on a tripod on a balcony of a building across the Tigris. Thinking the equipment was a range finder, they concluded that the man must be the forward observer they were seeking and put a main gun round into the balcony where he stood. That building turned out to be the Palestine Hotel, and the man with the tripod was a press cameraman. He was killed along with a reporter in the room below. I have to wonder if the other two reporters would have been able to identify the hotel and warn the tankers about targeting it had they been there.

Up to this point, I have discussed the action, of which there was an abundance. However, there is so much more in this book. Killing people takes a toll even on trained soldiers, as does watching friends die. The author did an excellent job of giving the soldiers a mouthpiece to express those issues along with their desire to survive and return home to family. And, he didn't stop there; he apparently had interviewed some of the Iraqis involved in the fighting and told their stories, too. All in all, I found this to be a very well-rounded book.

Jonathan says

An unflinching look at modern armored combat. The author has a knack for conveying the confusion and chaos of the battles as they unfolded. The writing style is brisk and keeps the reader on their toes and gives one a sense of the chaos while reading, a miniscule taste of the firefights if you will. While the book does concentrate on the US armored forces the author takes the time to share some of the Iraqi side of things as well as some of the journalists side. On par with the book 'Black Hawk Down' (the author of Thunder Run was Mark Bowden's editor for BHD).

Interesting questions were put forth by the vets so many resources and time were devoted to toppling regime that little to no thought had been put into how to rebuild the country, that once the fighting ebbed the newly blooded combat vets weren't quite sure what to do, neither did their command know. The ending left a question of whether the risky 'Thunder Runs' had been worth it, they toppled the regime from the inside out avoiding a long and drawn out battle for the city. These same units years later were sent back to Iraq to fight the very kind of battles the 'Thunder Runs' had avoided.

Jason says

A great book in the tradition of "Black Hawk Down", Thunder Run is a story of the young men and women we send as the sharp end of America's spear in the world. It's how we took Baghdad and the horror and pathos of war. It's got triumph, as US tanks roll into an enemy capital for the first time since the Korean War, and it has tragedy, as we see young men lose their lives too damn soon, and a news crew pay the price for getting way too close to the story. (When you read Mr. Zucchino's description of that event, you see him understand the reason, and yet, regret the fact that it had occurred). It makes sense of the grainy and shaky camera images we saw in 2002, and it's a memorial I think, to all the young Americans lost in Iraq thus far, support or oppose the war, read this book, and you'll understand a little bit the young men we ask to "destroy the enemy with maneuver, fire and shock effect."

Yulia says

This book was very personal to me. As a wife of a soldier who actually was with the Tusker battalion at the time and went with them on the second Thunder Run and who didn't want to talk about his war experiences for nearly 9 years, I very much appreciate this book that helped me to better understand what my husband and his fellow soldiers went through. I love the style of Zucchino's writing. I like that the book is written from many different viewpoints not just the US soldiers but also their families and also Iraqi people with real dreams, emotions, fears. I personally love David Zucchino for letting my husband use his reporter's satellite phone to give me a brief call and let me know that he was alive and in the middle of Baghdad.
