

APPENDIX A

KARBALA V

The Karbala V battle effectively broke the spirit of Iran's resistance. It demonstrated that—contrary to popular opinion—Iraq was willing to fight, and to incur casualties. It further showed that Iraqi commanders were able to deal with developing crises—they were not limited to set battles. We will look first at how the battle unfolded, and then give our analysis of what we believe went on.

The Karbala V battle was fought in five distinct stages. Stage one commenced on the morning of January 9, 1987, with an attack by the Pasdaran and Basij across the open space east of Fish Lake (see Figure 9). The area was screened by a single battalion of Iraqi infantry which presumably was overrun. The Iranians then boated across Fish Lake, disembarking on to the western shore where they made a dash for the Shatt Al Arab, 12 kilometers distant. They were intercepted and forced back to the lake by several brigades of presumably Iraqi Republican Guard infantry. The Guards held the Pasdaran to a bulge 500 meters deep by 5.5 kilometers. That ended Stage One.¹

Unable to break out due west, the Pasdaran boiled around and erupted from the southernmost tip of the lake into the midst of the 11th Border Guard Division, which manned three separate lines of defensive berms facing east toward the international frontier, i.e., at a right angle to Iran's breakout. The Iranians penetrated between defensive berms two and three. The defenders occupying the second berm—having been taken on their flank—abandoned its northern portions and formed defenses at a 90 degree angle to the Iranians coming out of the bulge.²

Meanwhile Border Guards defending the eastern-most positions adjacent to the frontier began falling back, once they

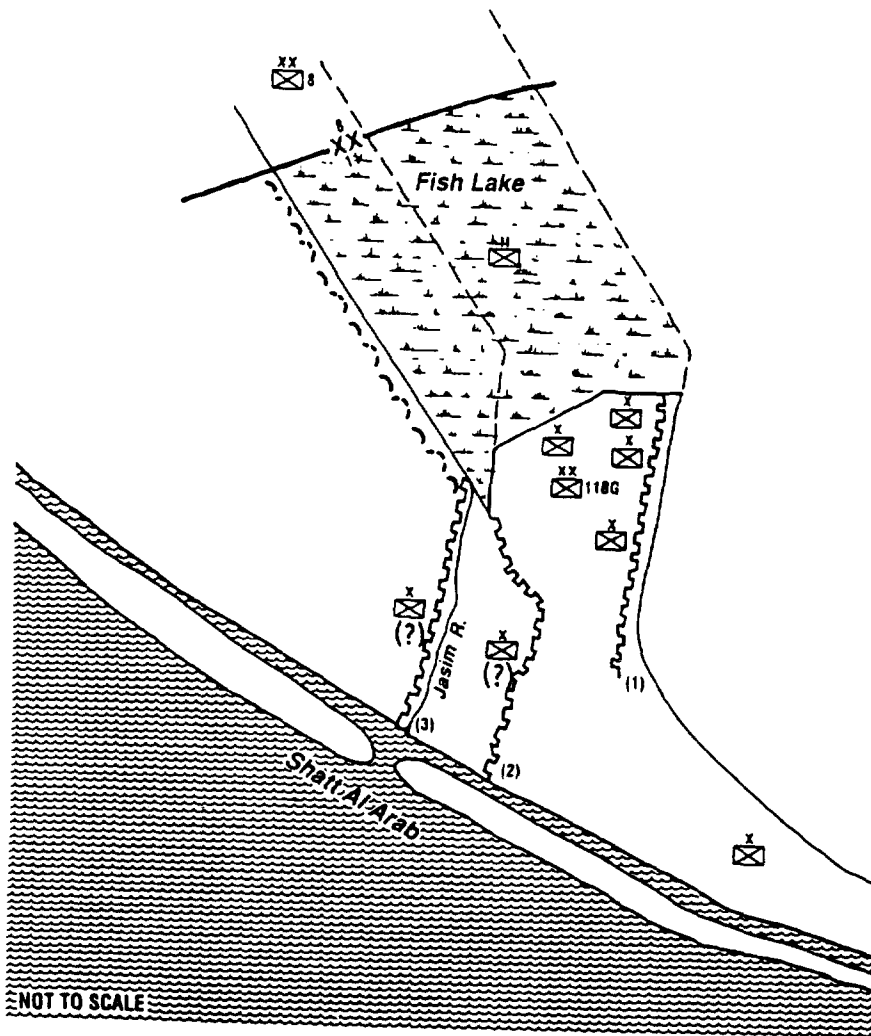


Figure 9. Late November 1986.

saw themselves in danger of being cut off from the rear by Iranians. At the same time, however, they had to repulse Iranian attacks from the east along their front. Ultimately all the imperiled Border Guards linked up to execute a slow, fighting retreat to the south, keeping the Jasim River on their left.³ (See Figure 10.)

At this point, the III Corps appears to have taken action to secure the Jasim River line, probably with reserve units. We note in the Iraqi communiques several references to the 5th Mechanized Division, which may have been used to shore up the defense. Such action would have allowed the 11th Division to concentrate on its immediate problem of staunching the flow of Iranians into their area. (See Figure 11.)

Large numbers of Iranians continued to flow out of the bulge crowding the narrow space between berms two and three. Their progress, however, was blocked by the Border Guards, who gave way slowly contesting every meter of ground. This produced a frenzied butting match that went on for over a week. Finally, on or about January 17, the Border Guards side-slipped across the Jasim, opening the way for the Iranians to surge across the Shatt Al Arab. Before they could do so, however, they had first to ford a small channel and then traverse an island in the middle of the Shatt. As the Iranians prepared to complete this maneuver, Stage Two ended.⁴

Before the Iranians could start their river-crossing, the Iraqi high command committed a division of infantry to stop them. The division attacked south on the island and within 48 hours had succeeded in driving the Iranians off it—thus ending Stage Three.⁵ (See Figure 12.)

The fighting now subsided for a brief interval, while the Iranians continued moving fresh troops into the "liberated zone," and the Iraqis consolidated their defense line along the Jasim.

On January 27, the Iranians played their last card—they tried to ford the Jasim and were briefly successful in doing so.

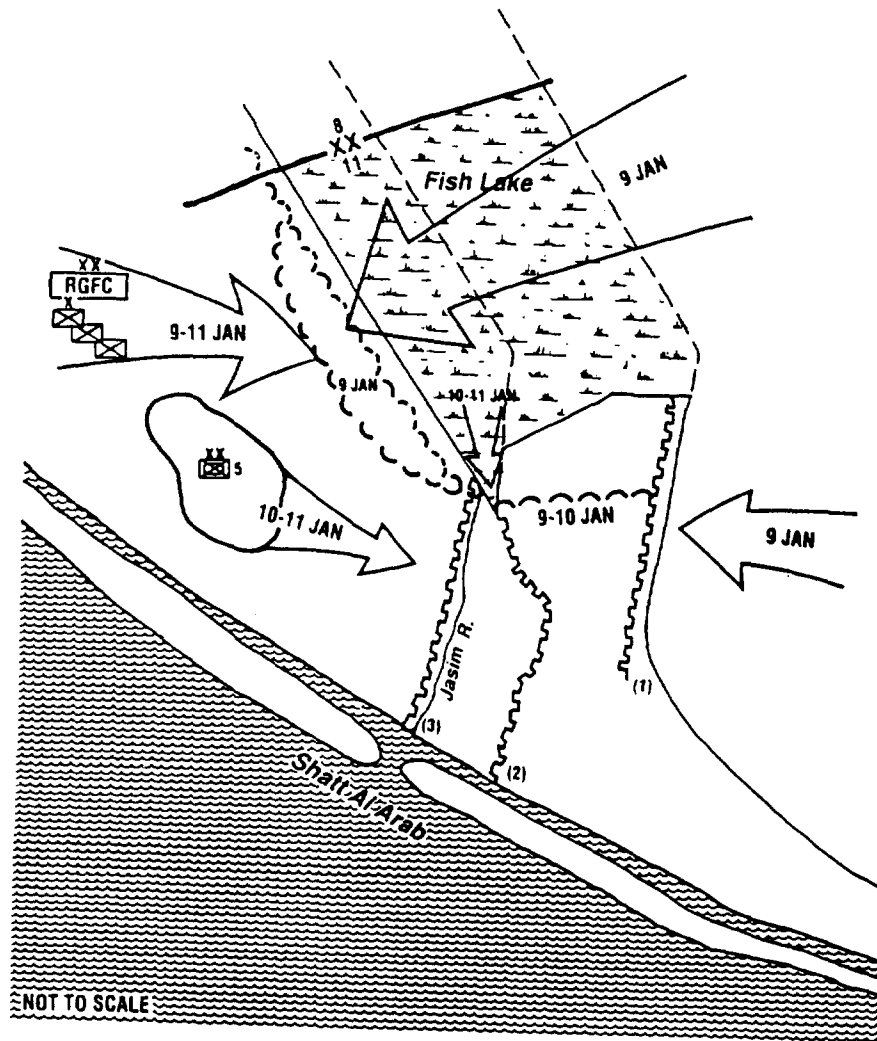


Figure 10. 9-11 January 1987.

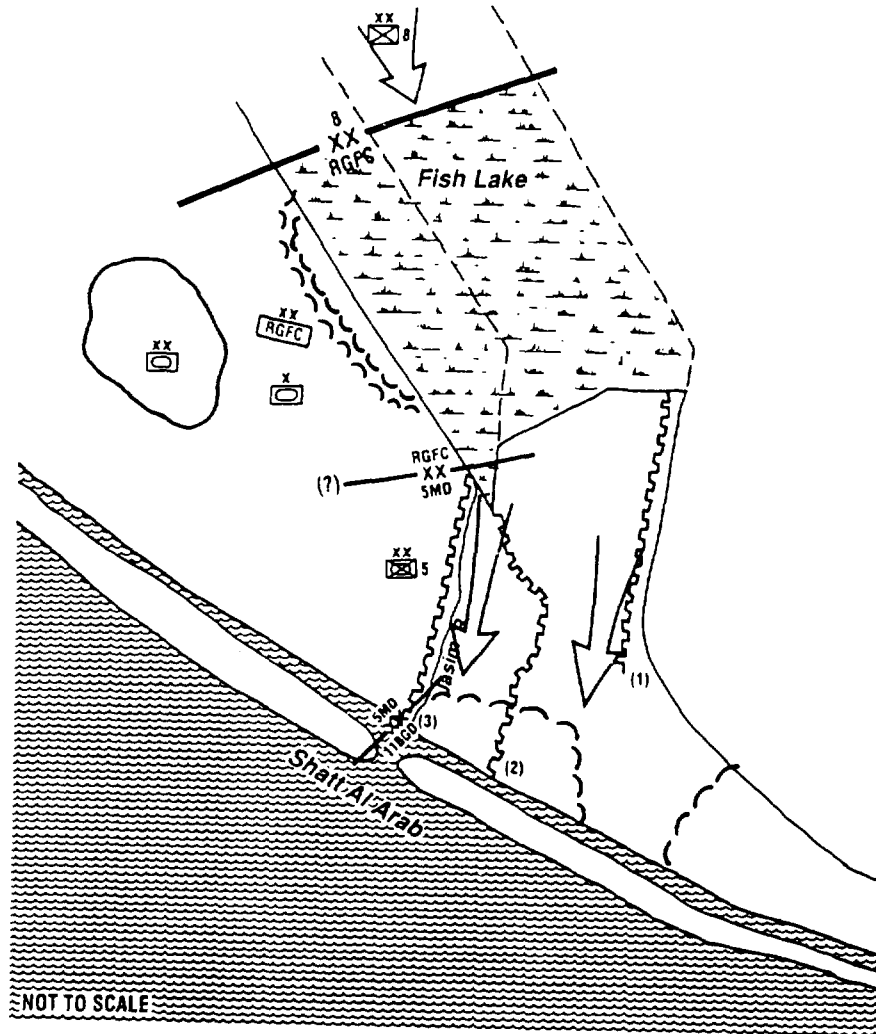


Figure 11. 11-14 January 1987.

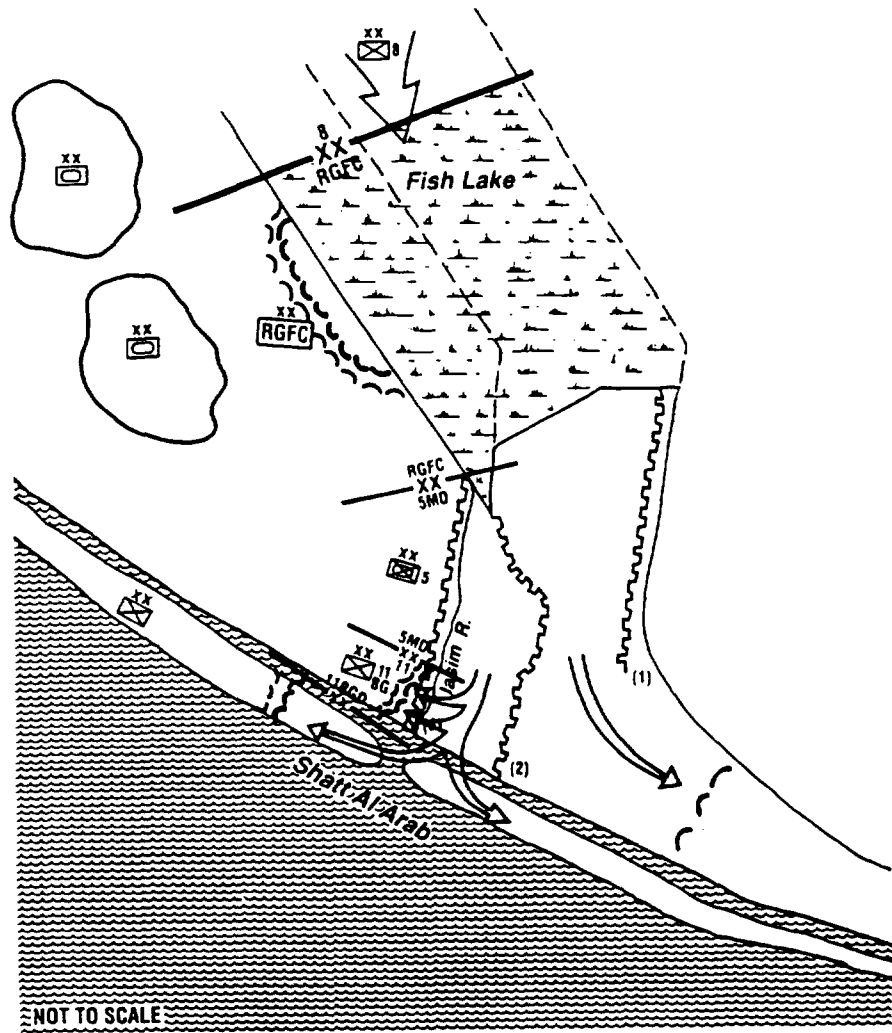


Figure 12. 14-21 January 1987.

However, after an advance of no more than a few meters, they stalled as the Iraqi defense stiffened, hurling the Iranians back. This marks the close of Stage Four.⁶ (See Figure 13.)

The final stage came on January 28 when a new infusion of Republican Guard reserves crushed the bulge along Fish Lake, preventing the Iranians from making further crossings. With that the battle ended.⁷ Our analysis follows.

The secret of the Iraqis' success—it appears to us—lay in their repositioning of large numbers of units in the battle area; as one observer noted, "the whole battle area was practically wall-to-wall Iraqis." This sort of behavior on the Iraqis' part is characteristic; we have seen them on other occasions hold units in reserve until they have pinpointed the focus of an attack, after which they are committed along their excellent roadways. This clearly calls for shrewd judgment on the part of Iraq's senior officers, but leaders like Generals Rashid and Fakhri seem to have this competency.

Second, the Iraqis showed themselves able at Karbala V to fight a largely infantry battle; something they had not previously demonstrated.⁸ For example, the 11th Border Guard Division was not an elite unit and yet it managed to conduct a fighting withdrawal for 10 days while turning a flank 90 degrees and defending in two directions simultaneously.⁹ The Guards may have been reinforced with reserves as they retired. Still, their initial feat of absorbing the Iranians' breakthrough, regrouping, and then falling back in good order, is altogether commendable.

Next we note the Iraqis' willingness to risk casualties. They obviously were determined to make a stand at Karbala V (in order to embarrass the Iranian leadership which had promised a decisive end to the war by the New Year). To accomplish this it was necessary to overcome the Iranians' fanaticism, psyched as they were to achieve a great victory. To break the Iranians' ardor would require bloody fighting. The Iranians' assault could not be stopped except by inflicting extraordinary casualties upon the attackers.

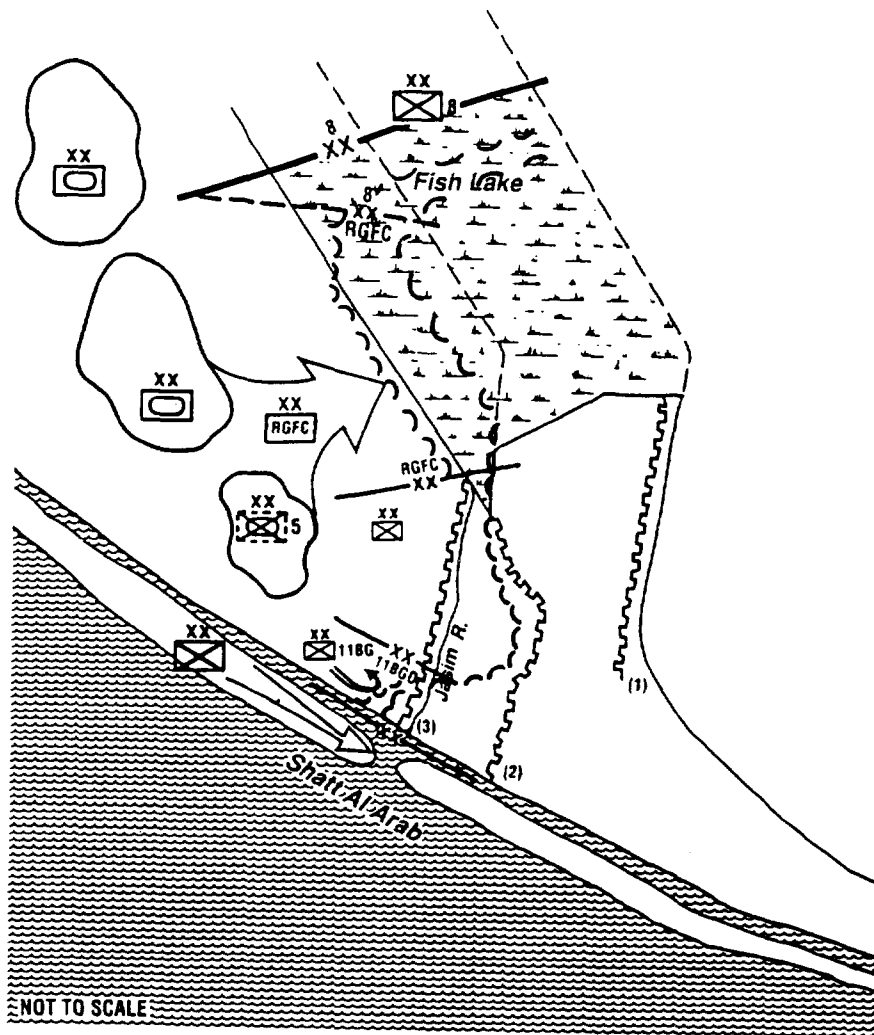


Figure 13. 27 January – 2 February 1987.

Indeed it appears that the Iraqi high command seized the tactical opportunity to create a "killing zone" in which to maximize the slaughter as they had done before. They trapped the Iranians in a box, and kept them penned there while Iraqi artillery rained devastation on them. Satellite photography shows numerous berms facing each other in the corridor leading to the Shatt. From this we conclude that the Iraqis kept the Iranians at bay by fighting behind these barriers. This sort of positional warfare takes us back to Vauban.¹⁰

Despite wildly varying claims it does not appear that in fact the Iraqi losses were all that high. This may have been a consequence of reserve units constructing successive fallback positions and then allowing units in combat to pass through and hand-off the battle to fresh troops in prepared positions. This would have turned the battle into an endurance test in which the Iraqis remained the freshest and thus wore the Iranians down.

The III Corps command structure apparently had no difficulty in adapting to this unique procedure. Indeed, it may even be that more than one command headquarters operated under this setup. The counterattack on the island, for example, might have been handled by the VII Corps (Iranian communiques mentioned VII Corps involvement while the island battle was taking place, and the Iraqi press praised "the heroic VII Corps defenders" for assisting the III Corps).¹¹

In any event, the shifts were accomplished without apparent confusion and no loss of operational cohesion. The ability of the high command to make such impromptu arrangements we find exemplary.

In sum, this battle reveals several aspects of Iraqi doctrine, the most remarkable being their penchant to use a plethora of forces. One could argue that this was a one-time arrangement to cope with Iran's massive buildup. We think, however, that it is doctrine because the very next year—in the Tawakalna Ala Allah campaign—they adopt the same procedure. In Tawakalna Ala Allah the preponderance of Iraqis taking part in

the engagements was astounding—in some cases as high as 50:1 in Iraq's favor. At Shelemcheh one observer noted that this was the biggest tank battle since Kursk (in World War II)—but all the tanks were on the Iraqi side. Our belief is that overkill, for the Iraqis, is a means to guard against system failure.

A basic principle of information theory holds that in a system that is prone to breakdown, failure can be avoided by increasing the number of elements that perform the same function, and by multiplying the connections between them. This would seem to apply in the Iraqis' case. The generals were anticipating recurring human wave attacks. Given Iran's massive buildup, these would take their toll on frontline forces. Troops under this kind of pressure might reasonably be expected to crack.

The generals' solution was to take the recently recruited Republican Guard infantry, special forces and commandos—who were for the most part college youth, and therefore, we assume, fast learners—and drill them exhaustively. They then set them out behind the lines, and over the course of the battle wherever emergencies developed, they threw them into action.

That this was a calculated technique seems to be borne out by evidence in the war. If we look back at the Iraqis' performance in the earliest battles, we see them exhibiting just this type of behavior. Unwilling to trust the commitment of the Shias, they backed them with Popular Army units. Then, when the Popular Army failed, they backed it with Republican Guards. In other words, the Iraqis seem to have quite naturally evolved the tactic of using supererogatory units. If they persist in this practice, it must be because it resolves some perceived problem.

The Iraqis also may operate in this manner because of training problems. The constant necessity to expand the size of the force—to meet Iranian buildups—has posed numerous command and control difficulties. Iraqi units have not had time

to "grow together" before being thrown into the front. (See Chapter 4 on tactics.) Under pressure, this, too, might be a factor in causing dissolution of units at the front.

In addition, the Iraqis—after Karbala V—began conducting combined arms operations. Here, it is not only necessary that individual units perform as a team, but that units coordinate their activities. With half trained units, this would present an almost insurmountable difficulty. "Supererogation" could thus be viewed as a stopgap solution to a command and control problem.