

The FUTURE of IRAQ

A special section chronicling two North County Times journalists in Iraq and their experiences covering the country's first free elections in 50 years

BUILDING HOPE

Camp Pendleton Marines open door to peace in war-ravaged city of Najaf

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It was a day brimming with hope but checked by fear. Defying skeptics and insurgents alike, election day unfolded quietly in the ancient Iraqi city of Najaf.

From crumbling adobe slums in the north to the ancient heart of the Old City that bears fresh scars of war, men in checkered head scarves and women in black robes walked the streets with little sign of fear.

Barefoot children kicked soccer balls and chased one another around the city's empty dirt streets as if it were a holiday, while thousands of Iraqi police and soldiers manned checkpoints and patrolled the roads.

The U.S. Marines who had fought, some with their lives, to bring peace to Najaf, were nowhere to be seen. They remained out of sight, nearby, at their bases. It wasn't their day.



The surreal scene was a far cry from other regions of Iraq, where the insurgency was strong and where voters were threatened ---- some killed ---- by mortar attacks and suicide car bombs.

And it was a world away from the Najaf of last summer, when the city was ravaged by street battles between local militants and the newly arrived Marines of Camp Pendleton's 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit.

With the fighting behind them and Marines helping to rebuild the town, hundreds of thousands of residents voted on Jan. 30 without a single report of an attack or bombing.

What marked the day was not raucous celebration or demonstrations of joy, but a dignified calm and cordial air of community among the Iraqis who filled the streets, worked the polls, stood sentry at checkpoints and shared the moment with neighbors outside the polling places.

It was their day.

At the polling stations ---- mostly schools that the Marines had rebuilt and painted bright green and blue against the city's dingy beige ---- volunteer

Iraqi election workers guided voters through paces most had only dreamed about.

"This is a new birth for Iraqis," said Najaf resident Kasim Kadum Saagban, 45, after workers helped him and his wife vote in the bullet-ridden Medina section of the Old City.

Just a few blocks away stood the revered Imam Ali Mosque, which was the epicenter of a fierce battle between Marines and local militia just six months before. In the interlude, the Marines and locals had joined hands to start rebuilding damaged quarters of the city, paid thousands of residents injured in the fighting, and were holding together a fragile working peace that allowed the elections to happen without bloodshed.

With his forearm taut and sure, Saaban proudly held up his finger, stained with purple ink, in a pose that has become synonymous with the election.

"Iraq is changed forever," he said, eyes wide and voice shaking with intensity.

But despite such euphoria and confidence, Najaf's rise from a city mired in violence to an emerging beacon of peace could still be as fragile as a house of cards.

"If we're not careful," warned Col. Anthony Haslam, the Marines' top commander, "it can all go away, just like that."

'America doesn't get to see this side'

In Najaf, where the Marines seemed to have more friends than enemies, the calm on election day and stability in the days that followed signaled a victory of sorts. The 2,200 Camp Pendleton Marines stationed in the southern Iraqi city of Najaf could say they were leaving Najaf better than they found it.



After two other assignments covering the Marines in Iraq ---- first during the 2003 invasion two years ago and then again during the first siege of Fallujah last spring ----- no experience was as surprising as our third and most recent trip to Najaf and its surrounding region, where the American effort seemed to be working.

Arriving in Najaf in mid-January, North County Times photographer Hayne Palmour and I found a city marked more by peace, cooperation and bustling reconstruction than by war.

While a bloody, pivotal battle in August left parts of the city in ruins and many residents maimed or killed, the Marines' legacy in Najaf also included dozens of new schools, a functioning local government, and enough local police that the governor generally asked the American troops to stay out of sight.

"It's funny that America doesn't get to see this side," said one young Marine lieutenant when a group of Iraqi men waved and cheered at his patrol of Marine Humvees passing a cafe along the banks of the jade-colored Euphrates River.

The progress in Najaf could be an anomaly, one that will be difficult or impossible to duplicate in other regions of the country. Or it could be a good example of what could happen in Iraq when the enemy fades, and when peace presents a new set of challenges and opportunities.

As the power base for the Shiite coalition that will dominate the new government and write Iraq's next constitution and as a relative success story for the U.S. occupation, all eyes are on Najaf to see if the peaceful gains the Marines and local residents made there will hold.

"That's key terrain down there," Gen. George Casey, the top U.S. general in Baghdad, told the Army commanders who replaced the Marines there in February.

"Don't lose it," he said.

The bloody beginning

While the ancient city seemed peaceful at election time, the Marines' tour in Najaf got off to a violent start.

Located in the desert near the Euphrates River some 120 miles south of Baghdad, Najaf lies in the heart of what is often called the "cradle of civilization" ---- a region where biblical tradition says Abraham once walked and where Noah built his ark.

Even now, shepherds tend to their goats and sheep and desert nomads who've temporarily stopped their wanderings keep camels in rustic camps at the city's edge.

Cloaked in traditional tunics and wearing sandals as they walk down dusty paths, the people of Najaf seem to live as they have for thousands of years were it not for the honking horns, Internet cafes and Arabic pop tunes blaring from televisions and radios.

It is a city of contrasts and of conflict.

One of the largest cities in Iraq, Najaf is home to nearly 600,000, mostly Shiite Muslim residents and Iraq's top Shiite clerics. Shiites, the religious majority in the country, were oppressed by the regime of Saddam Hussein, a Sunni Muslim.



Najaf is the font of power for Iraq's Shiites and is one of the most important Shiite cities in the world. It holds the sacred Imam Ali mosque and shrine ---- one of the more important sites in all Islam.

The city's cultural and religious prominence has made it a stage for many post-invasion power struggles and a target for Sunni extremists seeking to stoke civil war through bombings and assassinations.

Perhaps most important for U.S. forces in Iraq, the city is home to Iraq's top Shiite cleric, Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani. It also is a stronghold for anti-American cleric Moqtada al-Sadr.

Sistani has been a steady voice for peace in the region and, while not quite an ally, has tolerated the American mission there so far.

Sadr, on the other hand, climbed from obscurity in the chaotic and lawless wake of the invasion, capitalizing on American mistakes to win support for himself and his militia in Najaf, Baghdad and other cities.

Sadr and his militia openly challenged the U.S. occupation in early 2004, fighting Army soldiers in Najaf and other parts of southern Iraq months before the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit arrived in late July.

On Aug. 2 ---- after months of tense quiet and just two days after the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit took over for the Army in Najaf ---- a small Marine patrol stumbled into a firefight with a handful of Sadr's men.

That skirmish, which was followed by rebel attacks on police stations and Marine patrols, triggered weeks of fierce urban warfare in which Marines say they killed more than a thousand militants.

Seven Marines and two Army soldiers died in the battle, which military leaders now call a major turning point in the war that served as a model for similar assaults on other embattled cities, including Fallujah.

Returning to the graves

On Jan. 31, the day after the historic national election, a small band of Marines returned to the massive Wadi al Sallam cemetery, where the troops said the summer's fighting was fiercest.

The cemetery ---- its title means "Valley of Peace" in Arabic ---- sprawls for more than five dusty miles. It is thought to be the largest burial ground in the world, and many Shiites believe it is a portal to Paradise.

As their Humvees bounced along, the Marines looked out on the sea of tombs and recalled August's fighting. They fell into a trancelike silence, their fingers twitching closer to their triggers than at any other time during the patrol.

Lt. Chris Schickling broke the spell with a comment that seemed to sum it up for the others.

"I hate this place," Schickling said over the gravelly roar of the Humvee. "There's something evil about it."

As the Marines tried to remember and gradually recount those bloody days, certain details echoed the stories of other troops who fought there.

There was the 130-degree heat that pounded the grunts of the 1st Battalion, 4th Regiment as they clashed with the Mahdi fighters through the maze of brick and plaster tombs, through the tangles of wrought-iron gates and through the maze of pathways and catacombs.

There was the smell of death that stewed in the summer air, and the spookiness of the tombs, where some Marines swore they saw ghosts.

There was the adrenaline-fueled rush over tombs and through catacombs alongside best friends in fighting so close that Marines said a private from Alpha Company slit an Iraqi man's throat with his Kabar knife.

And then there was the frustration they felt that with all their superior firepower on the ground and in the air, the Marines were not allowed to take the prize ---- the gold-domed Imam Ali mosque, a sanctuary from where militants hammered the Marines with machine guns and mortars.

The troops said their commanders were warned that they risked widening the conflict in Iraq and triggering protests around the world if they damaged or destroyed the mosque.

The bloodletting was finally staunched near the end of the month when Sistani ---- Iraq's top Shiite leader ---- stepped in to stop a final assault on the mosque. He drafted a deal by which the mosque was spared, and the couple hundred remaining militants walked out in amnesty on the condition they would not return.

Militia fades away

As the nervous Marines completed their nostalgic loop around the cemetery, Iraqi soldiers standing around campfires waved the Marines on, raising AK-47s and fingers stained purple from their trip to the polls the day before.

So far, the militia had not resurfaced in the cemetery or anywhere else in Najaf under the watch of the new Iraqi sentries, the Marines said.

And with the militia gone, Marines in Najaf no longer suffered from roadside bombs and ambushes like those that threatened, wounded or killed fellow Pendleton Marines nearly every day in other cities such as Fallujah and Ramadi.

"We don't have too many war stories these days," Navy Corpsman Doug "Doc" Debrauwere said one chilly January morning before a patrol into Najaf and nearby Kufa.

His lightly armored Humvee was cluttered with candy for children, chalked up inside with Arabic phrases the troops used to converse with locals, and armed with slingshots they used to scatter the mangy, wild dogs that stalked the streets.

"Now," Debrauwere said with a tone of regret, "we do battle with dogs."

Haslam at the helm

The transformation of Najaf from a battleground to a functioning city wasn't magic and didn't happen overnight, said Haslam, the expeditionary unit's commander.

The conditions that allowed the Marines to turn it around after the battle largely depended on Sistani, who decreed that Shiites not attack the Americans or even retaliate against Sunni insurgents who attacked them to ignite sectarian war. Peace was needed in the months before the election to ensure a big Shiite turnout at the polls.

Not wasting a good opportunity, Haslam said the Marines' new peaceful tack took a lot of risk, compassion, patience and plenty of cash.

Haslam should know. The Marines' Brooklyn-born commander personally propelled the turnaround and guided it with both style and guile ---- part Rudolf Giuliani, part Tony Soprano, in camouflage.

Haslam, 49, is a tall and energetic Marine who was selected to be brigadier general while leading the Marines' peacekeeping and reconstruction mission in Najaf.

The top U.S. generals in Baghdad have credited him with leading the Marines to the first "strategic victory" for U.S. forces since the invasion for not only crushing the militia but keeping the peace for so long thereafter.

By the Jan. 30 vote, the Marines had spent or helped other agencies spend some \$36 million to build dozens of schools, markets, police stations and water treatment systems ---- some 300 projects in Najaf and surrounding villages and towns.

Haslam's closest aides said he spent most of each day in what he called "the ville," personally making sure the reconstruction was coming along.

Haslam said his first mission was to spread money around town to get Iraqis on board.

The troops enlisted hundreds of local laborers, paying each one five bucks a day to clean the streets of rotting bodies, crumbled buildings and other battle debris. They recruited both obvious allies and potential troublemakers, reasoning that shovels and brooms were better than rifles in their hands.

The \$45,000 cleanup payroll was a quick injection of cash to take the edge off and kick-start reconstruction; it also put the word on the street that there would be more where that came from if everyone played along.

Haslam quickly rewarded local sheiks and other leaders who sided with the Marines during the battle, creating an apparent pecking order for reconstruction projects.

At the same time, he reached out to those who disliked his men and even those who supported the anti-American militia. He said he wanted the rebels to meet the Marines and see for themselves that his men weren't the merciless infidels that Sadr said they were.



A big score, he said, was finding a couple of creative, English-speaking contractors who were not afraid to work with the Americans. Together, they and the Marines hunted for projects that would have political legs in the community ---- especially schools, markets and police stations.

Within months, even in anti-American quarters of the region, nearly every neighborhood could boast a new school, had been earmarked for a project or had grown used to the sight of Marines' camouflage fatigues on their streets.

Reaching out

Without the ready threat of attacks, the troops employed waves and smiles as effectively as they employed their weapons. Their convoys and patrols were often like parades.

Everywhere, Marines handed out candy to children. They waved, yelling, "Salaam ilikem" ---- Arabic for "peace be with you" ---- to the adults.

"Like a politician," said 23-year-old Cpl. Josh Schmidt as he waved mechanically at Iraqis crowding a market in Kufa, a city near Najaf, after the elections. It was part of the job these days, he said.

Sailors, part of the expeditionary unit's medical corps, became key diplomats during the peace. Navy corpsmen, who went on nearly every Marine patrol, patched up Iraqi children's cuts and scrapes, and the Marines occasionally set up mobile dental and medical clinics in nearby villages.

Navy surgeon Lt. Maureen McClennahan, a Fallbrook High School graduate, made many house calls on trips to town with Haslam and his entourage of aides and guards.

She was known in city neighborhoods and nearby villages for her tender touch and easy way with Iraqi children. She pulled strings to get vision tests for a partially blind teenage girl and held a little girl as she gingerly explained to a mother that the girl's brain tumor was probably inoperable.

Whether such encounters occurred in public or in private, they seemed to sooth the neighbors, and the Marines' medical roadshow made friends wherever it went.

"They're my secret weapon," Haslam said of his Navy medical team.

By his own example, Haslam encouraged the Marines to try to do the right thing.

When Marines found 25-year-old Iklas Hakak, whose leg and foot had been severed by an errant round fired from an American plane, Haslam and his crew helped get her to Baghdad for surgery and then paid her regular visits as she healed.

They would usually find her confined to a pad of blankets on the living room floor, steps from where the shell had crushed her legs.

"Please, don't forget me," she whispered to Haslam during one of the Marines' final visits to her modest home.

Despite the cause of her wounds, they had become friends, and Haslam promised not to forget.

Before he left Najaf, Haslam brought Hakak and her family to the Marines' base to celebrate her birthday and introduce them all to Haslam's replacement so that her care could continue once he was gone.

Looking for trouble

While Hakak may have forgiven the Americans ---- easily smiling, laughing and crying in their company ---- - the Marines never knew the vast majority of other Iraqi civilians who were damaged by the guns in August. Most were silent, somewhere out there, below the surface of the troops' public attempts to make amends.

Taking the town's temperature in the wake of the fighting was not easy.

While throngs of children usually waved and cheered as Marines rumbled down Najaf's streets in Humvees, most adults seemed to ignore the troops, their expressionless faces impossible for the Marines to read.

Others sneered ---- pointing thumbs down or drawing fingers across throats ---- as the Marines passed on patrol. But the troops said it was their policy to reach out to the grumblers, too.

Take a patrol in February: Marines stumbled upon a vendor in the Old City selling posters depicting rebel cleric Sadr and a burning American Humvee. The Marines said they took it as an opportunity to reach out instead of strike back.

They climbed out of their vehicles and approached the vendor. Using an interpreter, they asked him why he disliked Americans and asked him how they might help him and others in the market. By the time they left, it was handshakes and smiles all around, the Marines said.

The patrol leader, Capt. Steve Kintzley, called his non-lethal approach "killing 'em with kindness."

Paying for peace

Haslam said that a big part of his post-battle plan was to put cash into the hands of those Iraqis most affected by the fighting to resuscitate the wounded street economy and begin the community's healing.

Almost as soon as the smoke had cleared, while wounds were fresh and militants were still creeping about, Marines drove a truckload of money into some of the poorest and hardest-hit neighborhoods so that Haslam could personally pay residents for battle damage.

It was the start of what they called "solatia," or condolence payments, which they later turned into a weekly event in portable buildings and under circus tents in a downtown lot near the governor's compound and main police station.

The troops set up and ran the show with the same gung-ho zeal that they might otherwise muster for combat.

"It felt good," said 20-year-old Cpl. Irene Chan of her role during a payment in February. "(It) gave them a little hope and faith."

Over four months, Marines and their Army civil affairs counterparts paid out almost \$10 million on some 20,000 claims. Military leaders said the weekly Monday morning bonanza gave them powerful leverage for keeping the peace.

"I admit ---- it's a buy-off," said Army civil affairs officer Maj. Paul O'Leary, a former Special Forces operator who oversaw the payments one frozen morning in February. "But it's a lot cheaper than war, and you win over a lot more people this way."

Pricing life and limb

Most of the solatium claims were for property damage ---- anything from camels and goats caught in the crossfire to bullet-ridden automobiles to hotels crushed to gravel by bombs.

But some of the thousands of residents who gathered in an empty lot outside the Marines' downtown payment site also bore the physical scars of the August battle; the limbless and the lame struggled pitifully through the trash-strewn lot to reach the Marine adjudicators.

A black-robed woman lugged her damaged daughter over her shoulder like a sack of laundry on one cold morning in January, the purple wounds still visible on the young girl's legs.

A man lifted up his son's shirt to show a jagged-edged scar that ran red across the boy's pale gut.

When reporters approached a crowd of Iraqis queuing up for compensation, men hoisted little boys into the air to show scars that criss-crossed legs and marked faces in a grotesque bid for an edge with the Marines, who would decide what their wounds were worth.

The human toll of the battle also was demonstrated by the families of those killed, families who made tearful pleas to the Marines with photos of their dead.

"I hope for them to help me," said 23-year-old Tahir al Sumbaly as he and his mother struggled against the crosscurrents of language and culture to appeal for payment for a daughter and sister who they said was killed by Marines in August.

"I want to get my justice," he said.

After nearly four hours of lines and letdowns, they were finally paid \$1,500 for their damaged house and \$1,500 for the dead daughter.

Haslam decided their compensation, as he personally did for every death claim. He would never say how many there had been.

'Good' Iraqis with guns

The post-battle calm was a fertile time for reconstruction and reconciliation, and it gave the Marines the break they needed to help build local security forces, which were key to their eventual road out of Iraq.

Starting with thin ranks of police and soldiers who did not desert during the fighting, Marines helped the local government recruit thousands of new men and women from the region's legions of unemployed.

One of the Marine rifle companies became a training battalion, and other troops took to issuing gear, such as weapons, radios and body armor, to their Iraqi counterparts.

By December, the Marines had helped train most of the more than 10,000 Iraqi police and soldiers in the region. Najaf and nearby Karbala became the first two major cities outside the northern Kurdish regions where most security decisions were made by Iraqi leaders and enforced by Iraqi troops.

Their first big test came on Dec. 19, when car bombs were driven into crowds of mourners during funerals in Najaf and Karbala. While casualties exceeded 60 dead and wounded, the Iraqi police stopped one of the vehicles from reaching its target and handled the fury that followed the blasts, re-establishing order without the Marines' help.

The second milestone ---- which many Marines said they considered the Iraqis' graduation to autonomy ---- came on election day.

While U.S. troops in other areas of the country patrolled communities bracing for attacks on voters, most of the Marines and sailors stationed near Najaf took the day off. Many said they spent the day sleeping, watching DVDs or packing their sea bags and rucksacks for the upcoming trip home.

Out on the dusty streets of Najaf, it was clear why the troops were so laid-back.

Some 10,000 American-trained Iraqi troops and police manned checkpoints, guarded the polls and patrolled the streets in the city and the mud-brick villages along the Euphrates River and the vast desert stretches of the province.

They blocked all traffic except for their own patrols and the 1,000 or so buses that were rented by the new local government to shuttle voters to the polls.

Local security chiefs and Najaf Gov. Adnan Zurfi had asked the Marines to stay away. "We can handle it," they said.

Proudly sitting out the election

Back on their bases, the Marines said the sideline was a fine spot to wrap up their seven-month tour in Iraq.

They had vigorously swept the region for insurgents for weeks before the election, helped train and equip the security forces and reinforce the polling sites, and otherwise set the conditions for success.

"This is probably the safest place in Iraq right now," said Lance Cpl. Raymond Thomas, as he stuffed gear into a sea bag for the trip home.

Before he left Najaf in February, Sgt. Emmanuel Patida, 25, echoed dozens of other troops who said they did everything they could during their tour there.

"From the time that we got here in August, this place was a ghost town," he said while standing watch over several hundred Iraqis at the Marines' final solatia payments shortly after the election.

"After the militia pulled out, this place came to life," he said. "We didn't know where people were coming from; it was like they came out from under rocks."

As Iraqi police controlled the crowd outside the lot with batons, Patida relaxed the grip on his own weapon and just took it all in.

"They can really do everything themselves," he said, nodding toward the street filled with Iraqi troops and civilians. "This is a completely different Najaf."

Favors for some

Because Col. Haslam personally propelled so much of Najaf's progress since the August battle, its momentum seemed to depend on him, too.

Troops jokingly called him "the king" or quipped that he was stumping for the mayor's seat.

And like an Arab sheik, he dispensed favors: Access to him could mean money, protection or a job.

One possible pitfall of Haslam's handshaking and back-scratching was that his inner circle of favored Najaf residents ---- the top players after the battle, who included the governor and one of the main police chiefs ---- might not retain the same luster once the Marines were gone and Najaf's political deck was shuffled.

Another example of how fragile the peace and progress were in Najaf lay in the reconstruction work itself.

While dozens of shiny new schools and markets are like billboards for the Marines and the new pro-American governor, much of the heart of the Old City remains in rubble and the rest of the city is in gross disrepair after decades of neglect under Saddam and the last two years of war.

There is still little in the way of public sanitation or other services; fuel lines can be days long; and the city still suffers from blackouts that often last for most of the day. Disease and common criminals are as deadly as war.

Military leaders in the region were quick to point out that they were so free to spend money in Najaf that they used millions of dollars that American military units in other regions of Iraq could not spend because the troops were too busy hunting insurgents and dodging roadside bombs.

One question commanders in Najaf had trouble answering was, "Why not spend more?" Why not make Najaf the envy of Iraq worth every penny in marketing punch ---- just because they could?

Of all the billions of dollars spent annually on the war against Islamic terrorism, \$20 million seems a pittance in a city so important in Iraq and so dear to the heart of Islam.

Military officers mostly just shrugged off such questions, saying they had done all they could do there and adding that they squeezed every dime they could out of the war chiefs in Baghdad, where they said the pace of progress is really set.

Haslam, in fact, spent some of his final days in Iraq on an eleventh-hour junket to Baghdad, where he cashed in some of his personal clout to get his Army successor some more cash. He said he got a pledge of \$17 million from the military and a promise of an \$18 million regional prison near Najaf for his efforts. His closest aides said it all came down to shaking the right hand, scratching the right back and having the mojo to pull it off.

Apprehension about the future

While they tried to do all they could to plant democracy's roots and set Najaf on a fair course before they left, some Marines said they still worried some about their legacy, and about the future for the thousands of children for whom they said their buddies had died ---- at least 12 Marines with the expeditionary unit were killed in action or accidents since they arrived.

"I'd hate to get back to the States and hear that this place has come undone," said Gunnery Sgt. Jeffrey Godfredson, 36, of Austin, Minn., on a patrol before the election.

Some Iraqi interpreters and natives of Najaf who worked for the Marines said they, too, worried about the future.

"They still don't get it," said one man, part of a group of interpreters ---- or "terps" as they called themselves ---- who said they have worked with U.S. forces, as well as British, Spanish, Polish, Italian, Dutch and Salvadoran members of the U.S.-led coalition in Iraq.

The Iraqi observers warned that discontent grew in Najaf even as progress was made. The musical-chairs style of rotating occupation forces has led to many repeat mistakes and a general failure to reach the Iraqis' basic expectations. Average Iraqis are losing patience, they said, and unemployed youth remain easy recruits for local militia should it return.

"The people expected big things from the Americans, like big projects, big American companies with jobs," said one translator named Haider, getting instant nods of affirmation from a half-dozen others standing around him waiting for assignments with Army soldiers who were now replacing the Marines.

Haider said he had tired of trying to defend the American occupation to friends and family who are weary of the strife and who had expected the Americans to at least restore basic services after they invaded their country.

If the Americans can put a space shuttle on Mars, he reasoned, then surely they could restore electricity to Najaf.

"But they don't!" Haider said.

"My home is like a grave!" he said. "We have electricity two hours (a day). My children freeze. Everyone is disappointed."

Unsavoury allies

Perhaps more ominous than gripes about heat and lights was a complaint by residents that some of the American-trained police have abused their new authority under the protection of the Marines.

In fact, as the Marines pulled out of Najaf, small pockets of residents took to the streets to accuse the head of Najaf's Emergency Forces of corruption.

Abdel Aal al-Koufi ---- commonly known by his first name, Abdel Aal ---- was appointed by the U.S.-appointed governor and armed and otherwise supported by the Marines to lead a special paramilitary wing of the police that the Marines call "Kufa SWAT" or the "Kufa Reaction Force."

He and his men have a reputation for heavy-handedness.

"He's my get-things-done guy," Haslam said of al-Koufi when he ran into one of the Iraqi chief's lieutenants during a security patrol.

The Marines acknowledged that al-Koufi's men ran a black market in fuel. Haslam said he had paid to have a new pumping station built for police and other government workers to separate them from civilians and to limit the opportunities for police corruption, but Marines said al-Koufi's troops still operated in the open and with impunity.

Even in front of the Marines and the media at one of the recent solatia payment centers, al-Koufi's men fired AK-47s into the air in intersections to control traffic and smacked cowering civilians with collapsible batons to keep them in line ---- nothing egregious by Iraqi standards, but perhaps an indication of his style.

"I worry about him sometimes," Haslam said. "But then again, this is Iraq; it's a place where force rules."

While Haslam would say little about leaving al-Koufi in charge, the colonel's longtime translator said al-Koufi could be a liability to the Marines' legacy.

"Some people say he is like Saddam ---- they don't like the way he does things," said Kasim al Asedi.

"They are worried," he said. "But most people say it is a time of emergency. They need someone like him for now."

A hopeful course

For all the reasons that could make Najaf's progress appear precarious ---- dissatisfaction about the pace of progress, persistent signs of the anti-American Sadr, and often hapless security forces who are led by some unsavory characters ---- al Asedi said the Marines left Najaf on a promising course.

"Najaf will miss the Marines," said al Asedi, who spoke daily with dozens of locals on his rounds with the colonel. "They did good here."

Even Haslam's replacement, the new Army commander who was saddled with the daunting task of holding Najaf together, seemed hopeful.

Days before the Marines left Najaf and turned operations over to the Army National Guard in late February, Najaf Gov. Zurfi credited the Marines with Najaf's experimental peace and wobbly steps toward democracy.

"You are making history in this country," he told a group of officers at a final banquet of lamb and bread together at his downtown compound. "Sixteen million Shia are free. That would never have happened without your support ... All Najafis know this."

Lt. Col. Apicella, the second-in-charge of the 11th Marine Expeditionary Unit, said hope can be heard even in the Iraqis' own complaints about progress.

He chuckled recently when he heard Iraqi drivers gripe about potholes in the roads.

"When I start hearing complaints about the conditions on the road, I know they were getting the fuel they need," he said, leaning back with a satisfied grin as he waited for the C-130 cargo plane that would take him and his Marines out of Iraq.

"And if they're out there driving, it means they're not afraid of IEDs (improvised explosive devices, or roadside bombs) and ambushes," he said. "And chances are they've got somewhere to go, something to sell, and somewhere they feel safe to sell it."

"I think it's a good sign," he said. "Now it's up to the Iraqis themselves."