

REVIEW BY BRIAN HANLEY

*TakeDown: The 3rd Infantry Division's
Twenty-One Day Assault on Baghdad*

by Jim Lacey

Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 2007

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM has been a boon for the publishing industry if not—as yet—for America's strategic position. Many of the books that treat this subject are of doubtful or perishable value but a handful are authentic gems that illuminate as well as promise to transcend the historical moment that called them into being. Jim Lacey's *TakeDown* fits squarely in the latter category. This is historical writing of a very high order: clearly written and painstakingly researched yet free of even a trace of pedantry and never reliant on the jargon and hyperbole that too often hampers sympathetic narratives of contemporary military operations.

Clearly Lacey admires the soldiers he writes about; but his lively, efficient prose also demonstrates his respect for prospective readers and, most important, he has done posterity a service by capturing the state of mind of field commanders and their soldiers in the immediate aftermath of combat. Readers of every sort—the military buff as well as the non-specialist book buyer who enjoys an engrossing story—will find putting down this book to be a challenge.

TakeDown offers readers a detailed operational and tactical account of the 3rd ID's drive into Iraq and the ensuing battle for Baghdad. The point of view here is, naturally enough, predominantly that of American soldiers but Lacey also gives us the contemporaneous perspective of the Iraqis and, where suitable, he also includes cogent surveys of Iraqi battle plans and the military and political

outlook that they served. The tactical maps are well placed within the narrative and easy to read. The dozen or so photographs are of varying graphic quality but never do they fail to complement Lacey's story; the soldiers who operated the cameras doubtless had a great deal more on their minds than the artistic perfection of their snapshots of battle.

Two themes emerge from *TakeDown*: that the nature of combat has hardly changed from the age of Achilles—despite the hoopla that attended the “shock and awe” conceit—and that the American press more often than not distorts rather than clarifies the character of battle.

Lacey's account puts the lie to the idea that the war was somehow a walk-over: that it represented the victory of a space-age force—weapons of astonishing complexity and power served by technicians—over a collection of ineptly led, poorly motivated thugs. There is an element of truth in such a view, but Lacey rightly points out that combat in Iraq was as brutal and confusing as ever—the outcome pivoting on the mettle and discipline of troops more so than on the particular equipment they carried. Here is one passage that aptly illustrates the narrative casting of *TakeDown*:

Captain Wright and his small force fought off one attack after another [during the battle for Baghdad]. As other units had discovered at Samawah, Najaf, and other locations, the Iraqis did not lack for bravery. Hour after hour they continued to make suicidal assaults, only to be broken by hails of concentrated fire.... To beat them off, Wright had to call for more than twenty danger close artillery missions and another six danger close mortar missions. When, after eighteen hours, the Iraqis seemed to melt away it was discovered that the battalion had used up almost twice its normal basic load of ammo. If the Iraqis had continued to press their attack, in less than an hour the company would probably have had to resort to hand-to-hand combat. (250)

Lacey's description here—there are plenty of other vignettes that are at least as harrowing—echoes accounts of combat on Guadalcanal and at Bastogne.

Lacey, who was an embedded reporter for *Time Magazine* during the war, is unsparing in his criticisms of the mass media. Emanating from news broadcasts in particular was a pessimism that did not reflect the outlook of the troops doing the actual fighting—emotionally and physically taxing though many of the combat encounters proved to be. Far from demonstrating a useful skepticism about conventional points of view, Lacey argues, the media chanted a litany of

despair as if the volume and repetition of notions about the war that obtained in editorial offices in New York City, Atlanta, and Washington D.C. represented a truth more compelling than fact (119-22).

In a word, *TakeDown* should be read by anyone with an intelligent interest in the Second Gulf War, as well as by those who relish history as it should be written.