



## Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad

By David Zucchino

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**Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad** By David Zucchino

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More than just a rendering of a single battle, Thunder Run is a candid account of how soldiers respond under fire and stress and how human frailties are magnified in a war zone.

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## **Thunder Run: The Armored Strike to Capture Baghdad By David Zucchino Bibliography**

- Sales Rank: #183123 in eBooks
- Published on: 2007-12-01
- Released on: 2007-12-01
- Format: Kindle eBook



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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Even a very short, victorious shooting war against a disorganized, dispirited, vastly outnumbered and underequipped enemy is hell. That is the central message that *Los Angeles Times* correspondent Zucchino brings home startlingly well in this riveting account of the American military's lightning capture of Baghdad in April 2003. Zucchino (*The Myth of the Welfare Queen*) is an experienced, Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter, and he shows off his reportorial skills in this reconstruction of the "lightning armored strike" in Iraq that the military refers to as a "thunder run." The narrative focuses on the men who commanded and battled in the tank battles as the Americans fought their way to Iraq's capital city. It is often not a pretty picture, nor one for the faint of heart, because Zucchino unhesitatingly and graphically describes the violent and grisly fates that befell hundreds, if not thousands, of Iraqi Republican Guard troops and fedayeen militiamen, their Syrian allies (at the border) and the unfortunate civilians who were killed or wounded by the deadly high-tech American armored vehicles and their well-trained crews. He also does not shy away from intimately describing the deaths and injuries of American troops. The Americans who fought their way into Baghdad engaged in, according to Zucchino's account, a vicious, if short-lived, war. While the Americans overwhelmed the Iraqis on the road to Baghdad, U.S. troops faced periodic stiff resistance; rocket-propelled grenades caused death and destruction among the crews in the Bradley fighting vehicles. Zucchino tells his story primarily from the American troops' point of view, but does include a section describing the experiences of a Baath Party militia leader and some Republican Guard officers in this high-quality example of in-depth and evocative war reporting. First serial to Men's Journal.

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From [Booklist](#)

It is a popular misconception that the city of Baghdad fell painlessly, like a ripe plum, into the hands of U.S. forces. True, the feared scenario of a protracted, Stalingrad-like siege did not emerge. However, as this intense and thrilling account makes clear, the capture of the city was no walkover. Zucchino is a foreign correspondent for the *Los Angeles Times* with extensive experience in war coverage. His account is a fast-paced, gritty, and frequently surprising story of men and women in combat, and he expertly interweaves the drama of individual human experiences with the broader strategic and tactical objectives. There are gut-wrenching, deeply disturbing accounts of slaughter, and Zucchino captures the sheer savagery of the early stages of the battle as Iraqi regular and irregular troops sought to parry the initial U.S. armored thrust into the city. Of course, inspiring examples of individual heroism are cited, but there is also a consistent, almost chilling, aura of cool professionalism--these men are superbly trained warriors, after all. Despite the relative inexperience of many of them, they display expertise in the art of high-tech killing. Zucchino's assertion that the conquest of Baghdad could revolutionize concepts of urban warfare is likely to be hotly debated, but this is an outstanding chronicle of an underreported battle of the war, and the buzz is likely to be loud. *Jay Freeman*

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From The Washington Post

When asked to describe a battle as seen through the camera of an unmanned aerial vehicle, one Army brigade commander said it was like watching a football game through a straw.

The same metaphor could be used to describe the pictures and stories relayed by embedded reporters in Iraq. This innovative program took civilian reporters and attached them to combat units on the ground and at sea.

The downside was that these journalists often saw little more than their unit's piece of the battlefield. Fortunately, this cannot be said of David Zucchino's *Thunder Run*, which chronicles the armored assaults on Baghdad by the 2nd Brigade of the 3rd Infantry Division. Zucchino paints a vivid picture of the battle by stitching together the narratives of soldiers, officers, generals and Iraqis whom he interviewed during and after the war. As a result, his book goes far beyond the "first draft of history" that he filed from Baghdad in April 2003.

Zucchino wasn't meant to cover the Spartan Brigade or its thunder runs. He was originally embedded with the 101st Airborne Division, a light infantry force that was supposed to get the mission to assault Baghdad. But in the fog of war, both things changed. Zucchino and his equipment were dumped into a canal by a vehicle accident, and he decided to hitch a ride with the 3rd Infantry Division instead of the 101st. As it turned out, his instincts paid off, and he accidentally found himself with a ringside seat for the war's pivotal battle.

The Spartan Brigade's mission was to slice through Baghdad to the heart of the Hussein regime in order to break the Iraqi army and the Iraqi people's will to fight. Conventional wisdom held that it was unwise to send armored forces into urban areas and, indeed, given the recent U.S. experience in Somalia, that it was unwise to fight in cities at all. However, American planners were convinced that an armored force could smash through Baghdad's defenses without getting bogged down in house-to-house fighting.

More important, though, the mission was designed to win the information war in Iraq. The presence of American tanks in Baghdad would give the lie to propaganda that said Iraqi soldiers were killing American soldiers in droves and winning the war. Mohammed Said al-Sahaf, the beret-wearing Iraqi minister of information known as "Baghdad Bob," particularly irked officers in the 3rd Infantry Division with his claims that U.S. forces were committing "suicide at the gates of Baghdad." The best way to prove him wrong, joked Spartan Brigade commander Col. David Perkins, was to "ask for validation for parking for a hundred tanks" in the middle of Baghdad. As Zucchino shows, not everything went right for the brigade during its two assaults on Baghdad. A tank caught fire a few miles into the first thunder run, slowing the column and jeopardizing the entire mission. One tank mistook a journalist with binoculars for an artillery spotter and killed two reporters with a deadly accurate shot to the Palestine Hotel during the second thunder run. The Iraqis' low-tech weapons pounded the Americans' high-tech tanks and Bradley armored vehicles on both missions and exacted a heavy price from support vehicles brought up to refuel and rearm the Spartan Brigade. Iraqi fighters also came close to severing the brigade's line of communication during one of the war's toughest battles, for three highway interchanges known as Objectives Moe, Larry and Curly.

Most of *Thunder Run*'s narrative focuses on the captains, lieutenants and sergeants who led the fight -- men (only men fought in the brigade's three combat battalions) mostly in their late twenties and their thirties who had all served in the post-Vietnam Army, grown up on stories from the Gulf War, and come of age in that conflict or the brushfire deployments of the 1990s. An after-action review credited these officers and their training with producing a "seasoned fighting force that was trained and ready to fight and win on any battlefield."

As an embedded reporter, Zucchino spent enough time with the troops he covered to understand the complex social dynamics that define warriors under fire. "They were fighting for their country, of course, and for the inherent nobility of their profession," he writes. "But mostly, they were fighting to come home alive and to ensure that the men beside them came home, too. . . . A few men spoke of 'getting some,' that peculiar, sexually tinged reference to confronting the enemy and killing him. But most of them spoke of getting out of Iraq alive, and their buddies with them."

Reviewed by Phillip Carter

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