

# FALLUJAH: A Four-Letter Word

By Ross W. Simpson

*The bloody Fallujah battles have given birth to new legends in leatherneck lore. This is the first of a two-part article on the Marines' attack in April 2004. The Marines were directed to pull back from Fallujah after that attack only to have to go at it again seven months later.*

**A**ny Marine who has fought in Fallujah, an anti-American stronghold in the Sunni Triangle of Iraq, will tell you it was like walking into "hell" with your eyes wide open.

First Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, the first ground unit to attack into Iraq in March 2003, was deployed to Al Anbar province a year later to stem the flow of foreign fighters who were slipping into Iraq from Syria and setting up a base of operations in Fallujah from which they launched deadly attacks on U.S. and other coalition forces.

The battalion arrived a few days after insurgents in Fallujah had ambushed four civilian contractors, dragged their badly

burned bodies through the streets and hung two of them from the girders of a bridge. The Marines were ordered to enter Fallujah and find those responsible for butchering these civilians.

Marines from 1/5 approached Fallujah on April 4 and spent the next day digging in on the southeast side of town to begin what First Lieutenant Christopher D. Ayres, 2d Platoon commander, "Bravo" Company, described as a five-phase operation.

"Operation Vigilant Resolve was a theater-level operation in which 1/5 played a small part. We were tasked to cordon off the city, attack and occupy key objectives throughout the city, prosecute selected targets throughout the city, augment security operations with an Iraqi brigade and turn over full operations to the Iraqi brigade."

But the operation started to unravel within a matter of hours.

"Shortly after midnight on April 5, the battalion was ordered to push into the city," said Corporal Ronnie Garcia, a squad leader in Ayres' 2d Squad, "but we

**Right: These Bravo Co leathernecks were moved just north of the intersection of Phase Line Violet and Route Michigan to establish a vehicle control point during the Battle of Fallujah in April 2004. (Photo by 1stLt Jon T. McGaughey)**

**Below: The only way to truly clear the city was one house and one street at a time ... the hard way.**



immediately came under heavy rocket, mortar and small-arms fire."

By daylight, street fighting had slowed to an occasional outburst of automatic-weapons fire as the platoon reached its objective, "Route Orange," the limit of advance into Fallujah.

Set up in an L-shaped defense, the platoon took sporadic sniper fire for the rest of the day from abandoned buildings across Route Michigan, the east-west road that cuts Fallujah in half.

When the leathernecks noticed considerable vehicular activity around the area on April 6, Ayres and his Marines set up vehicle control points (VCPs) to deter anyone from coming into their zone. By afternoon, small-arms fire began to increase. Elements of the battalion crossed Route Michigan three times that day to silence the insurgents.





On April 7, 2d Plt manned VCPs again while 3d Plt was sent on patrol near the intersection of Route Michigan and Phase Line Violet. That main north-south artery, along with Route Michigan, cuts Fallujah into four equal-sized sectors.

Also on April 7, Lieutenant Colonel Brennan T. Byrne, the battalion commander, was touring the lines about the time Bravo Co's 3d Plt started receiving small-arms fire from the northwest. Byrne linked up with Captain Jason E. Smith, the commanding officer of Bravo Co.

Smith told Ayres to move his platoon up to him. Once 2d Plt lined up with the company, Ayres was told to deploy 500 meters south and 200 meters west and link up with Alpha Co to the south and also link up with the 81 mm Mortar Plt and tanks to the west.

"We could see the 81s and tanks as we

slowly pushed up and made visual contact. At that particular position, we discovered 300 empty RPG [rocket-propelled grenade] cases on a rooftop. This building faced Violet and was 2d Platoon's southernmost position of Bravo Company's defense," said Ayres.

By April 8, 2d Plt occupied a cheese factory that provided top cover against mortar and rocket attacks.

While 1st Squad helped the company "gunny" bring up the platoon's packs, Ayres took fire teams from 2d and 3d squads and along with Marines from the

mortar section cleared buildings in the area. Inside one building, the Marines found ammunition and crates of rocket-propelled grenades. They also found sniper rifles, AK47 assault rifles and PRK machine guns.

"The building looked like an ammo dump," said Ayres, "and that was just one building in Fallujah."

The back-clearing of buildings in his area of responsibility was put on hold when Lt Ayres received a call from Bravo Co's XO (executive officer). Staff Sergeant William Harrell, a platoon ser-

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**—1stLt Christopher D. Ayres, 2d Plt commander, Bravo Co**



geant in Weapons Co, 1/5, had located a sniper across the street.

Ayres rounded up 1st Squad, which had just returned with the platoon's packs, and headed across the street to a house where the sniper was believed to be hiding.

While Ayres was on the roof, one of his team leaders, Lance Corporal Dennis "Luke" Lukyanenko, a Russian immigrant in 1st Squad, reported that he had a sniper pinned down in an alley.

#### Face to Face With the Enemy

With help from SSgt Harrell and a squad of machine-gunners, Ayres moved toward the sniper. Hugging a wall as he

went around the corner of a building, Ayres ran head-on into the sniper.

"We both emptied a magazine, but didn't hit each other," said Ayres, who was nicked in the face with chips of bricks blown off a wall by the AK47 rounds.

After closing on that side of the building, Lukyanenko came running up the alley to say that he'd seen the sniper dart into a house across a nearby open field. Under fire from three or four insurgents across the field, Ayres and his men ran to the last covered-and-concealed position near the house.

"When I called back to the company command post, the XO sent me First

Lieutenant Joshua Palmer and 3d Squad and pushed me some tanks as well," Ayres said. Bravo Co's Weapons Plt, led by Gunnery Sergeant Sean Cox, also was attached to Ayres' platoon.

Harrell took up a position on the other side of rubble that he and Ayres shared. But as Ayres stepped back to see if everyone was in place, a shot rang out. SSgt Harrell was hit in the throat by a sniper in the house. Harrell was hit providing covering fire for his Marines to cross an open area to where Ayres had set up his position.

As Ayres explained to Palmer what was going on and where he needed him, one of Palmer's Marines was shot in the left inner thigh close to where SSgt Harrell had been standing.

While Ayres waited for a medevac to arrive, Palmer and some of his Marines entered the house.

Shortly afterward, Ayres heard three or four explosions as the insurgents and Ma-

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**Leathernecks of Alpha Co, 1/5 took up their positions inside the AAV that would take them into battle in Fallujah.**

cide vest packed with blocks of C-4 explosive," Ayres said.

"Thank God a Marine dropped the sniper dead in his tracks before he could pull the cord," added Ayres. "Otherwise he'd have gone out in a blaze of glory and taken a lot of Marines with him."

After telling Capt Smith what he had found, Ayres told his commander that he was going to "blow the sniper in place."

"I didn't want another insurgent taking that vest off the dead man and using it against other Marines," said Ayres. He rolled in a fragmentation grenade, which caused the C-4 to explode. The blast shattered every window in the house and blew a 3-foot-long trench in the concrete kitchen floor.

Bravo Co Marines spent April 9-10 finding more ammunition and weapons as they back-cleared more buildings in the company's sector.

By April 12, LtCol Byrne was tired of

his Marines being picked off one at a time by snipers. He moved Ayres and his leathernecks across Route Violet.

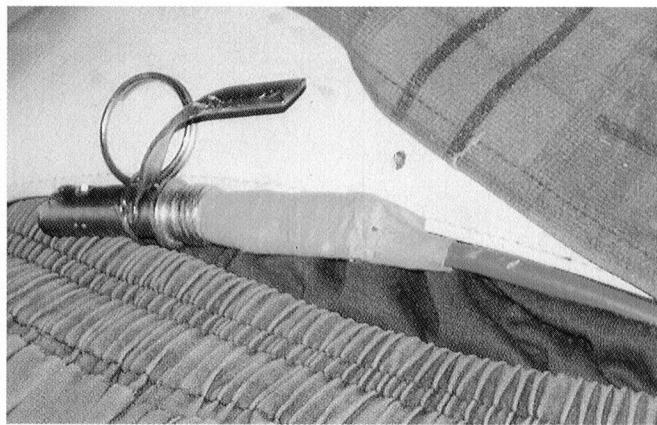
#### **Hunters Become the Hunted**

Ayres and 2d Plt crossed Route Violet at 0400 on April 13 and established listening posts in three houses along the north-south axis. By afternoon, Ayres and his Marines needed additional food, water and ammo, but the resupply mission was launched before Ayres could set out security to guide them in. As a result, a humvee with needed supplies overshot Ayres' position and was ambushed by insurgents.

When advised of what happened, the XO moved two amphibious assault vehicles (AAVs) forward to Ayres, one for 2d Squad and another for 3d Squad. They fanned out to find the dozen or so insurgents who shot up their resupply vehicle.

"It was working great. We were mowing the enemy down," said Ayres, who

**The Iraqi sniper (below), with his hand near the pull ring of an explosives-laden vest (left), died quickly, and that quick kill probably saved the lives of several Marines who were clearing the building. (Photos by 1stLt Jon T. McGaughey)**



Marines threw grenades at each other. Moments later, Ayres heard on his ISR (Intra Squad Radio) that 1stLt Palmer was down. A sniper hiding in the kitchen killed Palmer with a single shot. One of Palmer's squad leaders killed the sniper with a bullet to the head. Two other enemy personnel with grenades hanging on their waists were detained along with two women and five children. A second gunman was found hiding outside the building. Ayres identified the dead sniper as the same gunman he fired at a few minutes earlier in a Wild West-style shootout in a nearby alley.

#### **Loaded for Bear**

Ayres ordered some of his Marines to search the dead sniper while others gently carried 1stLt Palmer's body from the house.

"When they were searching the dead guy, they pulled up his shirt and found a pull cord attached to a white canvas sui-

was advised by the gunner that the other trac was firing at the enemy to the north of them.

When Ayres asked Cpl Kevin T. Kolm, the amtrac's gunner, to contact 3d Squad, Kolm couldn't raise anyone on the radio. When Ayers returned to Camp Pendleton, Calif., on July 15, he discovered why.

"Third Squad was pushing farther west than we were," said LCpl Abraham McCarver, a squad automatic weapon gunner, "but soon they became engulfed in enemy fire. RPGs knocked out their radios and wounded at least one Marine."

Thinking that 3d Squad still was attacking west a couple of streets north of him, Ayres kept pushing in that direction, hoping to make visual contact and link up. He learned later that 3d Squad took three RPGs through the open troop-compartment hatches on top of the AAV,

setting the engine compartment on fire. At that point, the trac was able to turn around and limp back to friendly lines. The trac from 2d Squad could not turn around. The deeper they pressed into enemy territory, the greater the volume of fire directed at them.

"When I couldn't get comm [communications] with 3d Squad, I called back to the XO and gave him a sitrep [situation report]. I told him I couldn't contact my other trac, but I was going to push up and try to make visual contact. When we reached an open field and couldn't see the other trac, I got the XO on the horn again and told him I was going to push another 200 meters and then turn around, but as soon as we started to move up, we came under fire," said Ayres.

Ayres was hit right at the start of the ambush. An RPG penetrated the side of

**GySgt David J. Culhane, B/1/5, held a uniquely fashioned, double-barreled rocket-propelled grenade launcher that he and his Marines uncovered while clearing a building in Fallujah.**



1STLT JON T. MCGAUGHEY



the AAV right below the amtrac commander's hatch, hitting him in the leg and exploding in the engine compartment, setting the trac on fire.

"When I looked down at my leg, I could see my [utilities] were blackened, but I couldn't feel my leg. It was numb instantly, and it's been numb ever since," said Ayres.

"The round blew off my hamstring," said Ayres, who now wears a special cast on his right leg that looks like a giant shoehorn.

#### Going for the Jugular Vein

The enemy tried to disable the AAV. They fired a volley of three RPGs at the front of the vehicle. McCarver said two missed; one exploded harmlessly in the street.

"It felt like there were more than 900 insurgents trying to kill us," said SSgt Ismael Sagredo, the platoon sergeant who was looking down the left side of the trac and covering the rear of the trac.

"There was probably no more than 200 or 300, because if there had been any more than that they could have overtaken us," said Sagredo.



COURTESY OF 1STLT CHRISTOPHER D. AYRES

**First Lt Chris Ayres, platoon leader, 2d Plt, Co B, 1/5, pictured immediately prior to the assault into Fallujah, was severely wounded in the early operations.**

Hospitalman Preston Gage, one of two Navy corpsmen from 2d Plt, surveyed the damage to the AAV upgun station where Cpl Kevin T. Kolm was killed during Fallujah operations on April 13, 2004. (Photo courtesy of 1stLt Christopher D. Ayres)



### Turning and Burning

The streets in Fallujah were so narrow that the driver, Private First Class Mathew D. Puckett, couldn't turn around. He did the only thing he could do—attack west to Phase Line Yellow, which was 800 meters west of friendly lines.

Puckett finally was able to hang a couple of lefts and turn his 25-ton trac back toward friendly lines, but it was burning furiously. The leathernecks in the back were having trouble breathing because of heavy, black smoke filling the troop compartment.

Sometime between Ayres getting hit and the trac coming to a halt dead in the street, Cpl Kolm was hit in the chest by a rocket-propelled grenade and killed instantly. LCpl McCarver, sitting directly behind the gun turret, was blown into the belly of the trac by the explosion.

McCarver saw the RPG coming, but he was powerless. "It wasn't like I could shoot it down," said the veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom I who could only brace for the impact.

When he regained consciousness, McCarver could feel the left side of his face burning. The blast also partially deafened

him, and he couldn't hear out of his left ear for days.

From where McCarver was lying, he could look into the turret above him. McCarver climbed back onto the bench in the open troop compartment in the rear half of the trac and fired four 200-round drums of 5.56 mm ammo into alleys full of insurgents.

The Marines in the troop compartment felt like ducks in a shooting gallery, but they didn't give up. McCarver remembers walking his rounds into a mass of humanity.

"I couldn't miss," said McCarver, who squeezed the trigger when he approached an intersection and kept the hammer down until the trac passed the kill zone.

The battle-scarred trac gave up the ghost about 150 meters from a house that

offered two necessary ingredients for survival: "cover and concealment."

For the next six hours, they fought like demons against overwhelming odds and lived to tell their story.

*Editor's note: The conclusion of this story of the Marines in the first battle of Fallujah will be in the March issue. Ross W. Simpson is a nationally known radio broadcaster for the Associated Press Radio Network in Washington, D.C., and is a longtime contributor to Leatherneck magazine. He was an embedded reporter during 1/5's operations in Iraq during OIF I and maintained contact with Marines of the battalion and their families as the Marines prepared for deployment and returned to Iraq for OIF II.*

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