

FALLUJAH: A Four-Letter Word



By Ross W. Simpson

This is the conclusion of a two-part article on one platoon's actions in the April 2004 Battle of Fallujah.

Second Squad, 2d Platoon, Company B, 1st Battalion, Fifth Marine Regiment, I Marine Expeditionary Force will never forget April 13, 2004. It's a day the "Deadly Deuces" cheated the Grim Reaper.

First Lieutenant Christopher D. Ayres, the platoon leader, his platoon sergeant

and 12 members of 2d Squad, along with the driver and crew chief of their amphibious assault vehicle (AAV) found themselves cut off from friendly forces in Fallujah in the Sunni Triangle of Iraq.

The squad was being attacked by hundreds of militants who were bent on butchering them and dragging their bodies through the streets. Militants had done something similar weeks earlier to four civilian contractors from Blackwater, a security firm in the United States.

Judgment Day

The Deadly Deuces were trying to link up with 3d Squad on April 13 when insurgents launched volleys of rocket-propelled grenades at their AAVs. One RPG hit the left side of the vehicle where 1stLt Ayres was sitting in the amtrac commander's hatch.

The RPG punched a hole about the size of a .50-caliber bullet in the Israeli armor appliqué that covered that portion of the trac and penetrated the aluminum hull of

The diesel engine quit about 75 to 100 meters after making that last turn. "It gave out between two intersections, leaving us stuck out there like a sore thumb."

—LCpl Abraham McCarver

"I also heard about an urgent casualty [Ayres]," said McGaughey, who immediately dispatched a medical evacuation team to 2d Squad's last known position. But the team never found the trac and had to turn back in the face of heavy enemy fire.

Puckett began speeding west at about 40 miles per hour. When the AAV approached a second intersection, an RPG impacted the upgun station, knocked out the .50-cal. and 40 mm heavy machine guns and killed the gunner.

Lance Corporal Abraham McCarver, a squad automatic weapon (SAW) gunner from Memphis, Tenn., was standing right behind the gun turret. He saw the round coming, but couldn't stop it from hitting Corporal Kevin T. Kolm in the chest.

Unlike 3d Squad, which was able to turn its amtrac around and limp back to friendly lines, the street was too narrow for 2d Squad's trac to do even a multi-point turn.

Puckett could drive only deeper into enemy territory in order to execute an about-face.

As they sped west, Marines in 2d Squad felt like they were ducks in a shooting gallery. McCarver saw insurgents com-

ing from everywhere. As fast as he mowed them down, more appeared.

"There were probably 300 anticoalition forces in the streets that day," said Staff Sergeant Ismael Sagredo, who was covering the left side and the rear of the trac, "but it seemed like there were 900."

Finally, Puckett turned left onto a street leading off Route Michigan, the main east-west artery through Fallujah. He was able to hang another left and turn his burning vehicle toward friendly lines, but he didn't get very far. The diesel engine quit about 75 to 100 meters after making that last turn.

"It gave out between two intersections, leaving us stuck out there like a sore thumb," said McCarver.

Some Marines wanted Cpl Ronnie Garcia to lower the ramp on the back of the AAV so they could escape the smoke and flames, but the squad leader didn't want Marines mowed down when the ramps came down.

"Most Iraqis can't shoot very well," said Garcia, "but I did not want to give them a big target to shoot at. The smaller the better," said Garcia, who slipped out of the small hatch and led his men to a nearby house.

Left: Leathernecks of Co A, 1/5 poured on the suppressive fire as they moved into Fallujah during the first battle there in April 2004.

Below: Intense combat was often preceded or followed by waiting and watching, as these Marines of Co B, 1/5 did at this observation post in Fallujah. (Photo by 1stLt Jon T. McGaughey)

the AAV. A stream of liquid metal, or "spalling," from the high-explosive anti-tank (HEAT) round sliced the hamstring off the lieutenant's right leg. Fortunately, it missed the femoral artery. The explosion also knocked the driver unconscious and set fire to the engine compartment.

First Lt Jon T. McGaughey, "Bravo" Co's executive officer (XO), heard Ayres scream over the intersquad radio at Lance Corporal Mathew D. Puckett from Mason, Texas, to get them out of there.

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CPL MATTHEW J. APPRENDI



"All 203s [40 mm rounds] had been expended. All SAWs were dry, and we were down to our last two magazines."

—SSgt Ismael Sagredo

The Lubbock, Texas, Marine used his body as a battering ram to break through locked gates.

"I was so pumped," said Garcia, "I could have punched through a brick wall." Once inside, Garcia went room to room, making sure the house was clear so his squad could set up defensive positions.

As LCpl McCarver jumped out of the burning vehicle, an RPG exploded against the wall of the house. It was becoming a foot race between the good guys and the bad guys, and the bad guys were closing the distance.

Cpl Bruno J. Romero, a machine-gun squad leader in 2d Plt, provided suppressive fire as the rest of the Marines sprinted to safety. Once inside the house, Romero occupied a position on the roof until an enemy grenade wounded him.

McCarver told Garcia that Ayres was alive but still in the trac, and if they were going to save him, something had to be done quickly.

"Staff Sergeant Sagredo and I ran back to the burning trac and climbed up top where we found the lieutenant crawling around," said McCarver.

Sagredo thinks Ayres was temporarily blinded because he just stared at him and kept asking where they were. Sagredo saw what was left of the lieutenant's leg when he reached for him.

Sagredo told Ayres he would have to roll off the top of the trac because in his condition, he couldn't climb down. Sagredo said Ayres understood and said, "OK."

"As we grabbed him and prepared to lower him over the side of the trac commander's hatch, we could hear the pings of rounds hitting the trac and the crack of rounds going over and around us," said Sagredo.

When Ayres rolled over the side, his web gear got caught on a small bolt sticking out of a steel cage where trackers put their food, ammo and fuel. From his waist up, Ayres was exposed to enemy fire.

When Sagredo tried to lift Ayres, the web gear ripped, and the lieutenant's body fell into Sagredo's arms.

As he was setting up defensive positions inside the house, Garcia was informed that Cpl Kolm's body still was trapped inside the burning vehicle.

Cpl Romero volunteered to provide

suppressive fire for Garcia to retrieve the remains of their fallen comrade.

Again, with complete disregard for his own safety, Cpl Garcia ran though a hail of enemy bullets while Cpl Romero laid down suppressive fire.

Despite intense heat and flames, Garcia tried to clear the passageway, but there was no way to get to the gunner's body.

With .50-cal. rounds cooking off, AT-4 antitank rockets on fire and flames beginning to burn through his gloves, Garcia reluctantly gave up.

"If I had stayed, there would have been two dead Marines in the trac," Garcia said.

Garcia's Bronze Star Medal citation reads, "Only after it was impossible to remain aboard the burning vehicle did Corporal Garcia return to the house."

Cpl Romero returned to the house. He refused medical attention and engaged enemy forces until he ran out of rifle ammunition.

Romero's Bronze Star Medal citation reads, "He then grabbed a pistol from a wounded corpsman and helped repel an enemy assault against the house."

Hospital Corpsman Third Class Sergio Villegas, the Navy corpsman assigned to 2d Plt, had second-degree burns to his body and shrapnel in one of his legs, but

he, too, refused medical attention until he treated Ayres.

While Villegas tended to other Marines who had been wounded, Garcia changed pressure dressings on Ayres' right leg and then dragged him into an interior room where he wouldn't be hit again by RPGs that were penetrating the walls of the house.

"I was pretty much out of it," said Ayres, "but I remember them dragging me from room to room. I felt like they were trying to mop the floor with me," the lieutenant said, laughing.

The fight began about two o'clock in the afternoon. As the hours passed, insurgents pressed the fight. LCpl Cesar O. Hernandezlopez killed one of them and wounded another coming through the courtyard. Cpl Romero shot another insurgent as he ran past the kitchen window.

"Thank goodness this house had bars on the windows, or we might have had some unwanted guests," said Romero.

Sagredo thinks one of the ricocheting rounds pierced a propane line in the kitchen, causing gas to spew all over the floor. Fearing an explosion, Garcia dragged Ayres into a bathroom and laid him on prayer rugs.

Between a Rock and a Hard Place

If SSgt Sagredo was going to die, he had determined he wasn't going to die in that house. He was going to die moving toward Alpha Co to the east.

Only one problem: 1stLt Ayres was badly wounded and would have to be



Marines of "Red Cloud," the 1/5 quick reaction force that shot its way in to rescue the remnants of 2d Plt, Co A, 1/5 on April 13, were (front row, from left) Sgt David C. Gettemier, Sgt Timothy R. Cyparski, Cpl Francisco Martinez Jr., LCpl Gabriel I. Billie and (back row, from left) Sgt Shawn E. Smith, Sgt Latu L. Puloka, Sgt Joseph W. Sharpe III, 1stLt Joshua L. Glover, SSgt Daniel Santiago, Cpl Christopher B. Moss-Warrington and Sgt Lamar H. Dolby. (USMC photo courtesy of 1stLt Joshua M. Palmer)



The Bravo, 1/5 command group of 1stSgt Scott Vandeven (seated with the rifle), 1stLt Jon McGaughey (seated with his back to the camera) and Capt Jason Smith (seated with his back toward the wall) had headquartered near the action but quickly moved forward to more closely influence the rescue of the leathernecks of 2d Plt. (Photo courtesy of 1stLt Jon T. McGaughey)

carried. He was too heavy to carry to friendly lines on the run. So Sagredo gave up his plan to break out and concentrated on maintaining radio communications with his company XO.

"Once when I was on the roof, insurgents on the roof of the house next door hurled grenades at me," said Sagredo, who took his radio operator, LCpl Anthony F. Ewers, into the courtyard in front of the house. They stayed there until three RPGs exploded above their heads. But Sagredo told the XO that his squad was trapped in a house and in danger of being overrun.

"I told him our trac was on fire and that we were hunkered down in a house about 150 meters south of the burning vehicle. I informed him I had one KIA [killed in action], one urgent and two routine wounded. I also said all 203s [40 mm rounds] had been expended. All SAWs were dry, and we were down to our last two magazines," said Sagredo, who also

gave McGaughey a general idea of where they were located based on terrain features. The platoon sergeant could not provide grid coordinates because the lieutenant's tracking device and maps had been destroyed in the fire.

Conserve Ammo

SSgt Sagredo spread the word that his Marines were to fire only two rounds at a time and to have a target in sight when they pulled the trigger.

Sagredo didn't give McGaughey any idea how long he could hold out, but the XO realized that insurgents already had penetrated the perimeter and were lobbing grenades onto the roof of the house.

Just when it looked like they were about to be overrun, one of the Marines in the house, Cpl Jason Palafox Jr., screamed, "I hear tanks!"

SSgt Sagredo and Cpl Romero could not hear them. In fact, they couldn't hear it thunder; RPGs exploding over their

heads had blown their eardrums.

Sagredo looked out a window in the front of the house and saw an M1A1 tank go clanking by. Behind it came three more main battle tanks, blowing gaping holes in enemy ranks with their 120 mm main guns and .50-cal. heavy machine guns.

"I only saw one tank go by my positions," said Sagredo. "I didn't know there were three more out there." Sagredo also didn't know that his company commander, Captain Jason E. Smith, who led the relief column, was about to come charging through the courtyard.

"Red Cloud" to the Rescue

The quick reaction force (QRF) that got the 911 call was in no mood to mess around.

"We had been beaten up pretty badly earlier that morning," said 1stLt Joshua L. Glover, who commanded the battalion's mobile reaction force made up of



Marines from Weapons Co.

First Lt McGaughey, who had been talking to SSgt Sagredo, gave Glover a grid of the friendly lines and where he thought 2d Squad was located. But it was only a guess.

With a couple of amtracs, four tanks, and six humvees from Weapons Co and three medical vehicles, Glover set out to find the missing Marines. Capt Smith rode in one of the medical humvees at the back of the column along with First Sergeant Scott A. Vandeven.

"Once we got to the grid, it was obvious we weren't in the right place," said

Glover. There were apparently two columns of black smoke rising from Fallujah. One was from the Bravo trac that was burning, the other from trash. Once Glover realized the second column of smoke on the horizon was where the Deadly Deuces were hunkered down, Glover started heading that way.

When Capt Smith noticed the column was not moving as fast as it should, he grabbed his radioman's rifle and ran to the head of the column where he took control of the situation.

Smith ran down the street ahead of the tanks, firing at insurgents as he went.

Into the Eye of a Hurricane

"We fought hard to get down there," said Glover. The QRF must have been a sight for sore eyes when it came charging through the courtyard.

Capt Smith was the first Marine to reach the house, only to find himself staring down the rifles of SSgt Sagredo and Cpl Palafox.

"We distributed fresh mags to the Marines in the house, helped load their wounded, hooked an amtrac to the burning vehicle and dragged it back to friendly lines," said Glover.

Normally, a vehicle that was melting would have been blown in place, but the gunner's body still was inside it, and Smith told the battalion he was prepared to stay in Fallujah until recovery assets could be pushed to him. As it turned out, some industrious Marines were able to jury-rig a trac that pulled the burning vehicle back to friendly lines. They count-

After six hours of fierce combat, the tables had turned on the enemy in Fallujah, but the enemy didn't immediately retreat in the face of superior firepower.



STILL: JON T. MCGAUGHEY

Cpl Koreyan D. "Kary" Calloway stepped in front of him and took a bullet fragment in the forearm.

The eight wounded Marines were in good hands. Before deploying to Fallujah, everyone in the Deadly Deuces became certified medical aid men, and they put that training to use.

The "Fighting Fifth" lost 11 Marines killed in combat and hundreds wounded, some scarred for life. Despite his severe injury, Ayres remains in the Marine Corps and has been accepted into the Degree Completion Program.

"I lost a good friend over there, and a lot of my Marines got hurt," said Sagredo. "The lieutenant and I deployed to Iraq with 38 Marines, including ourselves, but when we finished the deployment, only 26 of us were combat effective." Sagredo's best friend, SSgt William M. Harrell, was fatally wounded by a sniper on April 8, 2004, in Fallujah. Harrell also was a platoon sergeant in Bravo Co.

Bad Taste

After fighting hard in Fallujah for 21 days, the Marines were ordered to pull back. SSgt Sagredo wanted to walk out of Fallujah with his head held high. Instead, he and his Marines were hustled out of town.

"It wasn't like it is in the movies," lamented Sagredo.

The blazing amtrac (below) did not give much hope to the fast-moving QRF leathernecks, but they forged through the enemy resistance to succeed in extracting all the Marines of the 2d Plt and also retrieve the amtrac. (Photo by LCpl Victor E. Didra) After the battle, the remaining members of 2d Squad (left) stood in the bow of the amtrac that carried them into combat: (from left) LCpl Jeff B. Starr, Private First Class Ricardo Nava, LCpl William D. Morrow, LCpl Abraham McCarver, LCpl Daniel C. Gearinger, LCpl Cesar O. Hernandezlopez, LCpl Artem Vasilenko, Cpl Jason Palafox Jr. and SSgt Ismael Sagredo.

ed at least nine RPG holes in the vehicle.

After six hours of fierce combat, the tables had turned on the enemy in Fallujah, but the enemy didn't immediately retreat in the face of superior firepower. They stood their ground and died by the dozens. Intelligence estimated more than 100 bodies were found close to the house. More lay sprawled in the street and two nearby alleys. When the battle ended, Sagredo had one round in the chamber of his rifle and three left in the magazine. Romero had a couple of rounds left and the same for Garcia and McCarver.

Eight of the Marines in 2d Squad, 2d Plt were wounded. But Sagredo wasn't one of them. He had cheated the Grim Reaper three times: once atop the burning trac when bullets were bouncing off the trac commander's turret, again on top of the roof when an enemy grenade exploded 10 feet away and a third time in the hallway leading to the kitchen when

When 1st Bn, 5th Marines returns to Iraq in early 2005, SSgt Sagredo also will return, but he's been reassigned to Alpha Co. The only regret Sagredo has is leaving his wife and child again.

"We knew we'd be going back," said Sagredo, "because we have some unfinished business there."

Author's note: On Sept. 13, 2004, LCpl Mathew D. Puckett, the young Marine who drove his AAV through a gauntlet of fire in Fallujah, was killed in Al Anbar province. Puckett was assigned to the 3d Assault Amphibian Bn, First Marine Division, I MEF. Both he and Cpl Kevin T. Kolm have a place of honor at the Assault Amphibian School Battalion at Marine Corps Base, Camp Pendleton, Calif.

Editor's note: 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 Operation Iraqi Freedom I, maintained contact with the Marines of the battalion and their families while the unit was deployed in OIF II and continues a close, supportive relationship.

