

On March 31, 2004, four civilian contractors from the company Blackwater USA were ambushed and killed by insurgents in Fallujah, Iraq. Their bodies were burned and mutilated and two were hung from this bridge (pictured here in 2008).



ISLT/ESTEBAN VICKERS, USMC

Operation Vigilant Resolve: The First Battle of Al Fallujah

By LtCol Kenneth W. Estes
USMC (Ret)

Editor's note: The following article is from "U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004-2005: Into the Fray" produced by the History Division of the U.S. Marine Corps.

On March 31, 2004, insurgents ambushed four armed security contractors from the firm Blackwater USA. A mob gathered, desecrated the bodies, set them afire, and hung two of them from the nearby Old Bridge spanning the Euphrates River. Media outlets broadcast images of the hanging bodies, and the world saw shocking footage of charred and almost unrecognizable bodies as residents of the city cheered and danced. Less known was the cooperation of local Iraqis who helped the Marines of 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, recover the

remains of three victims that night and the fourth the following day. After a series of conferences with the White House and the Secretary of Defense, Lieutenant General Ricardo S. Sanchez, USA, commander of Combined Joint Task Force 7, directed the Marines to undertake immediate military action. On April 1, 2004, Sanchez's deputy director of operations, Army Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, promised an "overwhelming" response to the Blackwater deaths, stating that "we will pacify that city." In the midst of calls for vengeance, I Marine Expeditionary Force commander, Lieutenant General James T. Conway, and Major General James N. Mattis, 1st Marine Division commander, cautioned against rash action. In the Division's daily report, assistant Division commander, Brigadier General John F. Kelly, strove to temper the call for immediate offensive action. "As we review

the actions in Fallujah yesterday, the murder of four private security personnel in the most brutal way, we are convinced that this act was spontaneous mob action. Under the wrong circumstances this could have taken place in any city in Iraq," BGen Kelly wrote.

"We must avoid the temptation to strike out in retribution. In the 10 days we have been here, we have engaged the good and the bad in Fallujah every day, and have casualties to show for our efforts. We must remember that the citizens and officials of Fallujah were already gathering up and delivering what was left of three victims before asked to do so, and continue in their efforts to collect up what they can of the dismembered remnants of the fourth," he continued.

"We have a well-thought out campaign plan that considers the Fallujah problem across its very complicated spectrum.



Marines from 2d Bn, 1st Marines, set up a perimeter in the streets of Fallujah during Operation Vigilant Resolve.

or out of the city by younger males. Iraqi paramilitary personnel, at this time still considered to be reliable, manned seven of the checkpoints positioned as inner cordons, and Marines from 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, and 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, set up five outer checkpoints to complete the ring around the city. As this was occurring, the two Marine battalions began moving significant combat power to the northeast corner of the city, near the Jolan District. On April 3, LTG Sanchez issued his order for Operation Vigilant Resolve. The mission aimed to deny insurgents sanctuary in Fallujah and to arrest those responsible for the Black-water killings. The two Marine battalions moved into positions around the eastern and northern portion of Fallujah to seal the outer cordon of the city. The Marine and Iraqi positions continued to be fired upon and the friendly Iraqis soon fled. The Iraqi 36th Commando Battalion was subsequently dispatched to replace the fleeing Iraqi forces.

In his commander's comments of April 3, MajGen Mattis raised the difficulties of conducting offensive operations in Fallujah: "My intent is to then enter the city from two directions, which will draw fire from guerillas and put us in a position to exploit our own well considered and conditions-based operation. There are over 250,000 inhabitants in the city, the vast majority of whom have no particular love for the Coalition, but are also not insurgents," MajGen Mattis said.

"From a moral, ethical, legal, and military perspective, we will fight smart: We do not have to be loved at the end of the day, this is a goal that is no longer achievable in Fallujah, but we must avoid turning more young men into terrorists. We will also avoid doing what the insurgents, terrorists, and foreign fighters, and "Arab Street" all expect, and that is the thoughtless application of excessive force as if to strike out in retribution for the murders."

MajGen Mattis and his Division staff planned decisive operations to bring Fallujah under control while simultaneously



LTC HOWARD J. FARRELL, USMC

A Marine M1A1 Abrams main battle tank blocks access into Fallujah to isolate insurgents operating inside the city during Operation Vigilant Resolve.

This plan most certainly includes kinetic action, but going overly kinetic at this juncture plays into the hands of the opposition in exactly the way they assume we will. This is why they shoot and throw hand grenades out of crowds, to bait us into overreaction. The insurgents did not plan this crime, it dropped into their lap. We should not fall victim to their hopes for a vengeful response. To react to this provocation, as heinous as it is, will likely negate the efforts the 82d ABD paid for in blood, and complicate our campaign plan which we have not yet been given the opportunity to implement. Counterinsurgency forces have learned many times in the past that the desire to demonstrate force and resolve has long term and generally negative implications and destabilizes rather than stabilizes the environment."

LTG Sanchez' headquarters ordered immediate offensive action to re-establish freedom of maneuver in Fallujah on April 1. At I MEF headquarters, LtGen Conway directed MajGen Mattis to establish 12 checkpoints around the city using local Iraqi Civil Defense Corps and police personnel to prevent any movement into

"From a moral, ethical, legal, and military perspective, we will fight smart: We do not have to be loved at the end of the day, this is a goal that is no longer achievable in Fallujah, but we must avoid turning more young men into terrorists.

—MajGen James N. Mattis

Col John A. Toolan, left, the commander of RCT 1, and LtCol Willard Buhl, the commander of 3rd Bn, 1st Marines, discuss progress made by their forces during Operation Vigilant Resolve.

maintaining the counterinsurgency operations in nearby Ramadi and the rest of Al Anbar and north Babil provinces to prevent conceding any advantage to the insurgents.

His orders called for a four-phase operation to be implemented by Colonel John A. Toolan's Regimental Combat Team 1. In Phase I, the regiment would begin sustained operations in Fallujah beginning 1 a.m. on April 5 with a tight cordon of the city using two battalion-sized task forces in blocking positions and traffic control points on all motorized avenues of approach. This stage included raids against high value targets and the photography shop that printed the murder photos. Phase II entailed continuous raids against targets inside the city from firm bases established within northern and southern Fallujah. Messages concerning the operation would be broadcast informing citizens of measures necessary to protect themselves and families from harm and thanking the local population for their cooperation and for information



LCP1 JORDAN F. SHERWOOD, USMC

Toolan's estimation of the enemy's posture proved consistent with his expectations. The moves from north and southeast into the city each night drew immediate fire from insurgents, revealing their locations, and thus allowing the Marines to destroy them.



LCP1 KENNETH E. MADDEN III

Marines of 2nd Bn, 1st Marines, patrol the streets of Fallujah during Operation Vigilant Resolve in April 2004.

leading to the death or capture of insurgent forces. In Phases III and IV, Regimental Combat Team 1 would, at the moment of the commander's choosing, attack and seize various hostile sectors in the city, integrating and eventually turning operations over to Iraqi security forces.

Col Toolan ordered his two battalions, the regiment's supporting tank company,

assault amphibian company, and artillery battery into their battle positions in the early morning hours of April 5. The 1st Reconnaissance Battalion swept to the north and east of the city to target insurgents seeking to fire mortar rounds and rockets into Marine positions. Company D, 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, moved north to cover Highway

E1. Marines of Co B, 1st Combat Engineer Battalion, and Navy Mobile Construction Battalion 74 constructed a berm around southern Fallujah, further isolating the battle area.

As Co F, 2d Bn, 1st Marines occupied its position, insurgents engaged the 2nd Platoon and combat engineer detachment with RPG-type rocket launchers and

Although the combat operations in Fallujah garnered the most media attention in April 2004, intense fighting also took place in Al Anbar's capital, Ramadi, pictured here in 2008.



CPL JEREMY M. GIACOMINO, USMC

small-arms fire. An Air Force AC-130 gunship arrived on station and coordinated with the battalion for fire support. When the AC-130 had stopped firing, the Jolan District lay ablaze, and the enemy threat had disappeared.

With 2nd Bn, 2nd Marines blocking any escape to the south of Fallujah, the assault of the city commenced on April 6 with 2nd Bn, 1st Marines attacking the Jolan District in the city's northwest corner while 1st Bn, 5th Marines attacked west from its positions south of the cloverleaf connecting Highways E1 to 10 into the industrial Sin'a District. MajGen Mattis planned to pinch the insurgents from two directions, adding a steadily increasing pressure. The fighting in late March had determined that the enemy lacked the resolve and the fighting skill to stop advancing Marine rifle units. A progressive advance into the city would exploit insurgent weaknesses and lead to their wholesale collapse.

As Marines entered the city, Toolan's estimation of the enemy's posture proved consistent with his expectations. The moves from north and southeast into the city each night drew immediate fire from insurgents, revealing their locations, and thus allowing the Marines to destroy them. The Marine battalions attempted to integrate Iraqi Civil Defense Corps

troops into the blocking positions and new Iraqi Army units into Marine battalions as rapidly as possible. Marine commanders, Coalition authority representatives, and civil affairs officers advised the civil, tribal, and religious leaders about the situation. These locals predicted dire consequences if the Coalition continued to move into the city. But the Coalition's response to the city's leaders was that their predictions lacked credibility and that they bore major responsibility for the present conditions in Fallujah. The information operation campaign used public service announcements, handbills, and notifications to the mayor, city council, sheiks, and police. These announcements stated that a curfew would be imposed and enforced.

As operations proceeded, MajGen Mattis signaled his concern about I MEF's southern boundary because a revolt in Baghdad led by Shi'a cleric Moqtadre al-Sadr threatened I MEF's communications to the south and east. Elements of al-Sadr's militia (also termed the Mahdi Army) moved astride the Euphrates near al-Musayyib on the Karbala-Baghdad highway. Iraqi police managed to restore order, but the uprising remained a serious portent of the future.

By April 6, the inadequacy of Iraqi paramilitary forces could no longer be

denied. Most of the 2,000 Iraqi soldiers and police theoretically deployed to support the 1st Marine Division had deserted as soon as, or even before, the fighting began. Many of these Iraqi soldiers reportedly entered insurgent ranks. Only the 36th Iraqi Commando Battalion/Iraqi National Guard Battalion (400 troops with 17 U.S. Special Forces advisors) stayed the course, working alongside 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, in Jolan. The 506th Battalion of the Civil Defense Corps proved unsteady but useful at manning exterior checkpoints, but no other Iraqi soldiers served in this action.

On April 6, MajGen Mattis decided to order in an infantry battalion from Regimental Combat Team 7. At the same time, he expressed frustration with the Iraqi security force program: "A primary goal of our planning to date has been to 'put an Iraqi face' on security functions as quickly as possible. With three weeks on the ground, reporting and experience has indicated that all Iraqi civil security organizations—police, Iraqi Civil Defense Corps and border force—are generally riddled with corruption, a lack of will, and are widely infiltrated by anti-Coalition agents. In one case we have reporting that an entire unit located in Fallujah has deserted and gone over to the insurgent side. Their treachery has certainly cost us



DOD

Above: A number of captured weapons and munitions found and seized by Marines during vehicle inspections conducted throughout An Najaf Province were displayed before being destroyed in August 2004.

killed and wounded. There are a number of explanations for this turn of events, not the least of which is that until now the forces have been little more than a jobs program. We are only now asking them to man their posts, to step up and be counted, and it would seem many are either voting with their feet—or their allegiance.”

Starting on April 7, Regimental Combat Team 1 attacked continuously for 48 hours, killing and routing those insurgents who had stayed to fight. Fighting at times was at close range, no more than 25 meters at best. The Marines of 1/5 moved through the southeastern district sectors of the city proper and controlled 1,500 meters of Highway 10 west of the cloverleaf. 2nd Battalion, 1st Marines, continued attacking in its corner of the city, expanding to the south and west. A mosque gave special resistance to 1/5 with small-arms and rocket-launcher (RPG) fire, leading to a coordinated assault to seize it, killing one insurgent and taking three prisoners. Route E1 remained open for Coalition traffic to the north of the city. Late on April 7, the reinforcing battalion from Regimental Combat Team 7, 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, began to move from Al Asad Air Base to Fallujah, where it would join Regimental Combat Team 1 for the fight by the following afternoon.

The insurgents proved to be an adaptive force, using small three- to five-man teams,



In April 2004, units from Regimental Combat Team 7, commanded by Col Craig A. Tucker, right, were sent to Area of Operations Raleigh to relieve Regimental Combat Team 1 at Fallujah.

shoot-and-run tactics, and sniper fire revealing some skill. They also used indiscriminate mortar, artillery rocket, and handheld rocket-launcher fire at a safe distance from Marine positions. They displayed organized battle order and command and control using cellular phones, pigeons, and visual signals. Cached weapons and equipment in numerous locations

throughout the city allowed them freedom of maneuver.

Marines saw numerous cases of civilian observers cueing insurgents to their movements, thus exploiting the rules of engagement under which Coalition troops fought. In any case, after Marines achieved superior firepower, insurgents retreated and attempted to blend with the civilian pop-

SGT PAUL L. ANSTINE II, USMC

Marines from the 11th MEU participate in a joint raid with Iraqi Security Forces against the forces of Moqtada al-Sadr in An Najaf, August 2004.



ulace, allowing them to fight another day.

Supporting arms proved essential even when Marines engaged in close quarters combat. Lieutenant Colonel Eric Olson, commander of 2/1, characterized it by stating that “wave after wave of close air support aircraft: Air Force F-16C, and AC-130, Marine AH-1W Cobras and UH-1N handled the mission load.” Throughout the entire month of April, Battery A, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines, shot 30 counter-fire missions against insurgent mortar and artillery rocket positions, and fired 14 missions to support the infantry. In addition, Company C, 1st Tank Battalion, attached a platoon to each infantry battalion in direct support. Repeatedly, under steady RPG and small-arms fire, the M1A1 tanks rolled into enemy territory and demolished enemy personnel and equipment.

Combat in Fallujah demonstrated many unusual characteristics. Outside of the city’s industrial Sina'a District, residential buildings make up most of its more than 50,000 buildings. The brick or concrete homes typically are one or two stories high with flat roofs, enclosed courtyards, and perimeter walls. While some neighborhoods have a normal grid pattern, the Jolan District revealed twisted alleyways and jumbled streets, repeated to an extent in the industrial southeast.

The narrow streets and walled enclosures channelled attacking Marine rifle squads, but the enemy engaged in little street fighting, preferring to hole up and fight from ambush inside the houses themselves. By doing so, they avoided

exposure to Marines placed in overwatch, observation, and sniper positions. The walls of the typical house resisted grenade fragments, requiring each room to be cleared individually.

The windows typically were barred; doors, gates, and even internal barricades were reinforced, making some houses miniature forts, requiring multiple shots of multipurpose assault weapons, rockets, and tank guns to breach or reduce. The houses offered multiple entry and exit points at the front, kitchen, side, or rear, enabling insurgents to move easily through the residential areas. Their tactics frequently relied upon arms caches in many houses, enabling them to move unarmed between them in the guise of innocent civilians and then set up ambushes. After they were inside, Marines usually found the same layout: the front door opened to a small entryway with twin doors leading into two sitting rooms. Beyond these one encountered interior doors opening to the central hallway, where all first floor rooms led. In that hallway stood the typical stairwell to the second floor, containing more rooms and an exterior stairwell to the rooftop.

The increased security focus and operational tempo in the division’s zone fostered an additional operational planning effort to develop preliminary operations in

and around Fallujah to support the main effort. The intelligence analysis identified three key cities harboring and supporting enemy activities: Saqlawiyah, Karmah, and Jurf as-Sakhr. The staff made plans for combined operations in these cities. With Col Toolan and his staff focused on Fallujah, MajGen Mattis activated the Division’s alternate command group “Bravo.” Led by 1st Marine Division assistant commander, BGen Kelly, Division Bravo moved to north Babil Province and assumed command of the two infantry battalions there. These would play a key role in establishing a secure environment for the ongoing Arba’een pilgrimage, which brought hundreds of thousands of Shi'a faithful into Karbala. Some operational planning teamwork later occurred to conduct a relief in place by the Army’s 1st Armored Division, which was by then beginning to engage in operations to the south of Baghdad.

As Marines poised and repositioned for further operations on April 9, orders arrived from LTG Sanchez to cease all offensive operations in Fallujah. L. Paul Bremer III and the Coalition Provisional Authority had prevailed upon General Abizaid, head of Central Command, to order a cease-fire at the behest of the Iraqi Governing Council (IGC) in Baghdad. The halt was to allow IGC council repre-

The enemy engaged in little street fighting, preferring to hole up and fight from ambush inside the houses themselves.

Bremer met with the Council on April 8 and received the opinions of the Sunni members that Operation Vigilant Resolve amounted to “collective punishment” and that even more massive demonstrations of resistance and opposition were in the offing.



SSGT D. MYLES CULLEN, USAF

While the transfer of sovereignty from the Coalition Provisional Authority to the Iraqi Interim Government on June 28, 2004, occurred ahead of schedule, the country was far from stable or secure. U.S. Ambassador to Iraq, L. Paul Bremer III, right, was photographed shortly before departing Iraq after the transfer.

sentatives the opportunity to negotiate the enemy’s surrender. Politics brought Regimental Combat Team 1’s momentum to a stop. Marines received the order to cease offensive operations with some disbelief.

The insurgents’ use of information warfare played a role in the cessation of operations. Although the Marines of Regimental Combat Team 1 were achieving considerable gains, the insurgency was able to effectively employ the media to stir up opposition to the Coalition campaign. In addition to the insurgents’ surprising mobility and strength, the insurgents displayed an excellent grasp of information operations. Their propaganda reached television and radio stations, appeared on the internet, and spread through the streets by word of mouth. Some groups distributed fliers and videos alleging Coalition atrocities and insurgent successes. Arab satellite news programming, especially the ubiquitous Al Jazeera, highlighted the “excessive force” of the Marines of 1stMarDiv, making allusions to the Israeli actions in Palestine as further denuncia-

tion. With no Western press embedded with I MEF forces and the streets too dangerous for independent reporting, the media battlefield fell to the insurgents.

The Iraqi Governing Council caved in to pressures within and without its chambers. Three of its members resigned in protest, and five others threatened the same. Bremer met with the Council on April 8 and received the opinions of the Sunni members that Operation Vigilant Resolve amounted to “collective punishment” and that even more massive demonstrations of resistance and opposition were in the offing.

Bremer was already under pressure to deal with the al-Sadr revolt, and the British had criticized him for his heavy-handed approach in Fallujah. He also knew that the Abu Ghraib Prison scandals were about to become public knowledge. Thus, he probably decided to cut his losses. For him, the larger objective of returning sovereignty to the Iraqis by June 30 likely took precedence.

An uncertain siege continued for three

weeks. On April 8, 2004, the newly arrived 3rd Bn, 4th Marines launched an attack from Fallujah’s northeast, oriented southwest. As it took up the main effort, the other two battalions continued to reduce insurgent pockets of resistance. The enemy fired rockets and mortars from the city center but had by then lost all of its initial defensive positions. Not surprising to the Marine battalions, the insurgents remaining within the city limits tried to use the cease-fire to their advantage. Col Toolan tightened the cordon on the city to prevent the insurgents from withdrawing from the city and to block reinforcements. The 36th Iraqi Commando Battalion continued to fight alongside the Marines, distinguishing itself as the sole Iraqi unit to prove itself in combat. Meanwhile, the Iraqi 505th Battalion manned checkpoints under supervision on the outskirts of the city.

Captain Jason E. Smith led his Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Marines, through some of the heaviest fighting in the industrial area during the formal offensive operation. He returned to the offensive again on April 13. The insurgents surrounded the attached 3d Platoon, Co A, which lost an assault amphibious vehicle and took several casualties. Leading the rescue effort, Smith guided his convoy toward the smoke of the burning vehicle and then dismounted, racing to the first vehicles to lead his Marines to the trapped platoon. With total disregard for enemy fire, he coordinated attacks on the insurgents. Organizing a defensive perimeter and evacuating casualties, he supervised the recovery of the disabled tracked vehicle and coordinated the withdrawal as part of the rear guard.

Following the cease-fire, representatives from I MEF, the Coalition authority, and Iraqi organizations began to negotiate with the insurgents, but little progress was made. Marines had to defend themselves from repeated insurgent cease-fire violations. On April 25, LtGen Conway and MajGen Mattis met with former Iraqi Army generals to discuss the possible formation of a military unit in Fallujah. The negotiations produced the Fallujah Brigade, which gained the quick approval of the military chain of command. By April 28, the Fallujah Brigade had begun assembling, and on the 30th, a turnover led to the phased withdrawal of the 1stMarDiv from Fallujah.

Author’s bio: LtCol Kenneth W. Estes, USMC (Ret) is a 1969 graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and served in a variety of assignments throughout his Marine Corps career. Retiring in 1993, LtCol Estes is the author of several books and has a Ph.D. in history.

Reproduced with permission of copyright owner. Further reproduction
prohibited without permission.