

Fallujah: Battle for Iraq's 'City of Mosques'

The Iraq War's Battle of Fallujah in November 2004 was the fiercest urban fighting for U.S. Marines and soldiers since Vietnam's Battle of Hue

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Fighting a fanatical, dug-in enemy in the maze-like infrastructure of his own city has often proved disastrous to armies throughout the history of warfare. But the Battle of Fallujah in November 2004 during the Iraq War could be considered a textbook urban assault by U.S. Marines and soldiers.

Lessons learned over 18 months of combat in Iraq crystallized the objectives of U.S. commanders determined to take control of Fallujah — the hotbed of Iraq's insurgent activity. Those in charge were not taking any chances.

"In the last days of Najaf, in August [2004], when we stayed in the fight for 72 hours straight, we realized he [the enemy] did not have the endurance to fight 24 hours a day, day after day," said Lt. Gen. Thomas F. Metz, commander of military operations in Iraq. "When we started this one, we decided we would not let off, that we would press on over the first couple of days, deep into the city, and throw him on the defensive. It really paid off."

The battle was decisive. The military estimated that between Nov. 8-25, 2004, 10,000 U.S. soldiers and Marines and 2,000 Iraqi troops killed some 1,200 to 1,600 insurgents. They also found 26 bomb factories, 350 arms caches, several chemical weapons labs and eight hostage houses and torture/execution chambers in Iraq's "City of Mosques."

But it was bloody for U.S. troops as well. According to the Pentagon, the 71 U.S. fatalities in the battle accounted for 52 percent of American deaths in November 2004 — the deadliest month for GIs in the Iraq War.

Preparing for the attack, Air Force planes pounded Fallujah's industrial section in the southeast with air strikes for weeks before the offensive.

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The two main assault forces — Regimental Combat Team 1 (comprising 3rd Bn., 5th Marines; 3rd Bn., 1st Marines; 3rd Light Armored Recon Bn.; and the Army's 2nd Bn., 7th Cav, 1st Cav Div.) and Regimental Combat Team 7 (made up of 1st Bn., 8th Marines; 1st Bn., 3rd Marines; and the Army's 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf., 1st Inf. Div.) — formed up in the desert north of the city prior to the invasion.

Before the actual battle began, Navy SEALs and Marines from 2nd Force Recon seized Fallujah's main hospital and two bridges spanning the Euphrates River in the extreme west end of the city. Commanders wanted to avoid inflated claims of civilian casualties that could have emanated from the hospital, which had occurred during an offensive in the spring.

The bridges were obvious strategic objectives. The "Old Bridge" connected the hospital with the city and was the site where insurgents hung the bodies of U.S. contractors kidnapped and executed in March 2004. The "New Bridge," slightly to the south, carries Highway 10 — the city's main east-west thoroughfare — into Fallujah.

At dawn on Nov. 8, the two combat teams swept down from the northern limits of the city. RCT 1 attacked the western section of the city, while RCT 7 fought its way through the city's eastern neighborhoods toward the industrial area.

An Army brigade covered the southern city limits while Air Force gunships and helicopters pounded targets from the sky.

The ultimate intent for U.S. commanders was to drive the enemy into a killing zone in the Shuhada neighborhood in the southern part of the city. Before that, though, GIs had to fight through to Highway 10 — dubbed Phase Line Fran by the troops.

'The Enemy is Willing to Die'

Evidence of the ferocity of the fighting in the Jolan neighborhood in the city's northwest section was the plight of an eight-man squad from 1st Pltn., A Co., 2nd Bn., 7th Cav. By Nov. 13, after five days of fighting, only two of the eight men were still standing. Five had been wounded and one, Sgt. José Velez, had been killed, shot in the neck while providing covering fire for his squad members to rescue a wounded soldier.

"This all happened in less than three or four minutes," recalled squad leader Staff Sgt. Carlos Santillana. "It was just a mad minute of hell."

For both soldiers and Marines, the house-to-house fighting was intense and nerve-wracking work.

"The fighting has been incredibly close inside the city," wrote Marine Lt. Col. Dave Bellon, intelligence officer for RCT 1, in an email message to his father on Nov. 19. "The enemy is willing to die and is literally waiting until they see the whites of the eyes of the Marines

before they open up.”

To illustrate the fanatical nature of the enemy, Bellon noted that during a particularly fierce firefight, an interpreter yelled for trapped insurgents to surrender. The enemy yelled back that it was better to die and go to heaven than to surrender to infidels.

“This exchange is a graphic window into the world that Marines and soldiers have been fighting in these last 10 days,” he wrote.

‘We Have Work to do Now’

Fighting was no less intense in the eastern sector. A major firefight erupted at the green-domed Muhammadia Mosque in northern Fallujah on the second day of battle. Insurgents had been using the mosque as a command center, and U.S. troops had to fight off a counterattack after taking the building.

According to a New York Times reporter who accompanied B Co., 1st Bn., 8th Marines, “Mortar shells and rocket-propelled grenades began raining down on Bravo Company the moment its men began piling out of their troop carriers just outside Fallujah.”

The Muhammadia Mosque was directly in the unit’s path to the south. Four of its Marines were wounded and one, Sgt. Lonny D. Wells, was killed in the fight to take the building. A member of the unit explained the motivation for many of the young Marines.

“I’m not going to be one of those people who gets old and says, ‘I wish I had done this. I wish I had done that,’” Cpl. Chad Ritchie said. “Every once in a while, you’ve got to do something hard, do something you’re not comfortable with. A person needs a gut check.”

In only eight days of fighting, Ritchie’s 150-man B Company suffered 36 casualties, including six dead.

Soldiers of RCT 7 had it rough as well. 1st Lt. Edward Iwan, of A Co., 2nd Bn., 2nd Inf., 1st Inf. Div., was killed Nov. 12 when an RPG “hit him in the torso, ripping his body apart,” according to an article by Knight-Ridder correspondent Tom Lasseter. A Company commander Capt. Sean Sims told Lasseter, “It’s tough. I don’t know what to think about it yet. All of this will be forever tainted because we lost him.”

Tragedy struck A Company the next day when Sims himself was killed while clearing a house of insurgents. Lasseter wrote that Sims’ men found him “lying on the kitchen floor, his blood pouring across dirty tile.”

If it was a shock for some of the younger soldiers under Sims’ command, many of whom had not experienced combat, it was hard to tell from their reaction. Twenty-year-old Spc. Sheldon Howard, after learning of Sims’ death, told his platoon mates: “We have work to do

now. We'll talk about this later. Get ready to go."

'Some Will Hide Within the City'

As quickly as infantry troops and Marines secured areas of the city, engineers from both services and Navy Seabees went to work rebuilding it. Part of their duties included the grisly and dangerous task of removing dead bodies of insurgents, some of which had been booby trapped with explosives.

Overall, casualty figures for U.S. troops were lower than expected for the type of brutal house-to-house fighting they encountered. Marine Lt. Gen. John F. Satler, commander of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, noted he was "terrifically pleased" with the operation and proclaimed that "Fallujah is no longer a terrorist sanctuary."

But while the precision with which the Marines and soldiers took the city was remarkable, other commanders believe it was just another step in a long journey in bringing democracy to Iraq.

"Some of the enemy will be able to escape," one officer said. "Some will hide within the city. Afterward, insurgents from other areas can move into the city and 'reseed' the area with violence."

To prevent this, Marines of Regimental Combat Team 6 launched Operation Alljah in June 2007. The strategy divided the city into "precincts" managed by Iraqi policemen and supported by the Marines. The plan helped stabilize and secure the city, and a headquarters building in each precinct offered residents basic services.

The U.S. withdrew all its troops from Iraq on Dec. 18, 2011, officially ending the war. In 2014, ISIS fighters captured Fallujah and held it for two years. The Iraqi army took back the city in May 2016.

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