

10 YEARS AGO

Operations Vigilant Resolve and Al Fajr— The Liberation of Fallujah

By Robert J. Sullivan and Ann Todd Baum

With more than 250,000 residents, Fallujah—known as the “city of mosques”—is the second-largest city in Iraq’s largely unpopulated Anbar province.

In 2004, the area was a stronghold of the insurgency—a hotbed of malcontents, smugglers, criminals, unemployed civil servants, former soldiers, radical foreign fighters and organizations affiliated with al-Qaida. Fallujah served as a sanctuary for the insurgents: a secure forward operating base from which they could launch attacks and then return to rest, rearm, refit and plan. One senior Marine considered Fallujah a “cancer” that had to be eradicated so that successful local elections could be held in 2005.

The I Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF) deployed to Anbar in March 2004 as part of Multi-National Force West to carry out stability and reconstruction operations, taking over from the U.S. Army’s 82nd Airborne Division.

On 31 March 2004, insurgents ambushed four American contractors, brutally killed them and hung their bodies from a bridge in Fallujah. Emotions ran hot, and the coalition command ordered I MEF to take immediate and decisive offensive action to deny insurgents continued sanctuary in Fallujah and to arrest the perpetrators of the killings.

Operation Vigilant Resolve commenced

on 3 April. Regimental Combat Team (RCT) 1 from the First Marine Division ordered two battalion-level task forces to block all roads around the city and to conduct raids. Marine combat engineers and U.S. Navy Seabees constructed a berm to seal off the city’s southern approaches.

On 6 April, two battalions, later joined by a third, assaulted the city to seize hostile sectors. Ground forces headed into a warren of roughly 50,000 buildings, each one a veritable bunker of thick brick perimeter walls, against an estimated 2,000 insurgents. Insurgents were organized, heavily armed, agile and adaptive. Close air support from the Third Marine Aircraft Wing (MAW) and the U.S. Air Force provided essential airpower. Marine tanks,

A U.S. Marine Corps M1A1 main battle tank from 2d Tank Bn, attached to 3d Bn, 5th Marines, 1stMarDiv, fires into a building during a firefight with insurgents in Fallujah, Iraq, during Operation Al Fajr.



U.S. Marines with 1st Bn, 8th Marines remain at the ready on a street corner during a security and stabilization operation in Fallujah. (USMC photo)

amphibious assault vehicles (AAVs) and artillery were on the attack. Marine reconnaissance units swept north and east of the city. An Iraqi commando battalion advised by U.S. Special Forces also fought alongside RCT-1.

Within a few days, accusations of “excessive force” were reported by the media. Political pressure led the U.S. government to halt the offensive on 9 April with a cease-fire in place until the operation concluded at month’s end. The I MEF lost 27 Marines killed and 90 wounded.

Sporadic insurgent attacks increased in opposition to the Iraqi interim government and against the Marines, as did internecine fighting among tribal militias and extremist factions. The situation in Fallujah deteriorated through the summer and into the fall of 2004. The hastily formed Fallujah Brigade, a force of locals organized to conduct security operations, was ineffective. Insurgents tightened their grip again over the city’s population through intimidation, brutality and murder. Many residents fled.

The 1stMarDiv resumed planning for a second multiphased combat operation in Fallujah named Operation Al Fajr (Dawn). The First Force Service Support Group and I MEF Engineer Group constructed camps and created a forward supply point—an “Iron Mountain” with 15 days’ worth of ammunition (both U.S. and Soviet), spare parts, fuel, water and rations. Division units shaped the battlefield with raids, searches, indirect fires and close air support, and information operations.

On the evening of 7 Nov. 2004, I MEF commenced attacks on insurgent command and control and defensive positions. The 3d MAW and joint aircraft, including U.S. Air Force AC-130 gunships, carried out devastating air attacks. On the ground, Marine and U.S. Army artillery and mortars hit planned targets. Task Force Light Armored Reconnaissance, consisting of Marines, U.S. Army soldiers and an Iraqi commando battalion, isolated the city from the west, while the U.S. Army’s Black Jack Brigade (2d Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division) closed the city in the east and south.

On 8 Nov., both RCT-1 and -7, including Iraqi units, attacked from the north through the city and achieved tactical surprise. Each RCT had armor-heavy units from the U.S. Army, Task Force (TF) 2-7 and TF 2-2 that proved invaluable in the urban fight.

The fighting was intense, close and personal. Units used the night to take advan-



tage of superior night-fighting capabilities and utilized unmanned aerial vehicles for targeting and reconnaissance. The 1stMarDiv secured its initial objectives in five days. Insurgents dissolved into small groups to fight, but they could not match the attackers’ leadership, training and morale. Search and attack operations continued into December to remove pockets of resistance and booby traps and to find weapons caches.

Other units critical to the success of Al Fajr included combat engineers, explosive ordnance disposal teams, tanks, military police, AAVs, air/naval gunfire liaison company teams, Navy SEALs and linguists. Attack aviation from all U.S. mili-

tary services and Special Operations Command participated. Combat forces not involved in the assault on the city, including a battalion from the British Black Watch Regiment, supported the division elsewhere in Anbar province. The victors used complementary warfighting capabilities, one chain of command, advances in technology and a unifying vision to free the city from the insurgents.

On 23 Dec., the city reopened. U.S. Navy Seabees and civil affairs groups worked day and night to prepare the city for the residents’ return, restoring essential services and critical infrastructure. Humanitarian distribution sites were established to provide supplies, and enemy



Soldiers from 2-7 Cavalry, 2d BCT, 1st Cavalry Div carry a wounded soldier from Apache Troop to a chopper from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 268 during medevac operations in Fallujah, 12 Nov. 2004.



Above: Leathernecks, assigned to 3d Platoon, Co I, 3d Bn, 5th Marines, 1stMarDiv and armed with 5.56 mm M249 squad automatic weapons, M-4 carbines and an AT-4, rest inside a building while waiting for tank support in Fallujah during Operation Al Fajr.

Right: An armored bulldozer uses its front-loading blade to knock over buildings and power lines in Queens, a small city south of Fallujah, during Operation Phantom Fury.

bodies were located and removed for proper disposition. Friendly forces manned checkpoints to search for returning insurgents or criminals. Contractors hired residents to clean and rebuild the city. Iraqi power companies restored power.

With the arrival of Election Day, 30 Jan. 2005, Fallujah's residents voted in droves for the candidates of their choice. The cost for Fallujah's freedom was heavy: 82 Americans were killed in action, 76 of whom were Marines, and more than 800 were wounded in action. Estimated insurgent casualties were 2,000 killed and 1,200 captured. The I MEF was awarded the Navy Unit Commendation for its actions from 2 Aug. 2004 through 1 Feb. 2005.

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The staff of the National Museum of the Marine Corps (NMCC) is producing temporary exhibits on significant topics to be included in the Final Phase galleries to inform the visitors of the content in the future galleries. Additionally, the staff

will include graphics of the progress to the new galleries and recent donations. A Fallujah reunion is being planned for September 2014 at the NMCC.

Authors' bios: Robert J. Sullivan, a retired Marine lieutenant colonel artillery officer, is a curator at the National Museum of the Marine Corps, and Ann Todd Baum is an intern there.

