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# Turning Fallujah

By WILLIAM F. MULLEN III

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**F**allujah has taken on tremendous significance because of what happened there from April to December of 2004. It has become one of the touchstone battles of the Marine Corps involvement in Operation *Iraqi Freedom* because of the intensity of the fighting and the number of Marines and Sailors killed or wounded. It is not a large city in either area or population. It is a compact, dirty, beat-up town that always had a sinister reputation, even under the Saddam Hussein regime, as a smuggling and black market center. Its people are known as xenophobic, their general attitude seeming to be “us Fallujans against the world.” This feeling is directed not only at coalition forces, but also at any Iraqis not specifically from Fallujah. The city will certainly not be considered a vacation hot spot any time soon.

My personal involvement there started in December 2004 when I went to Iraq on a Pre-Deployment Site Survey (PDSS). I was



Marine Corps M1A1 prepares to fire on insurgent stronghold during Operation *Al Fajr*

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the operations officer for Regimental Combat Team (RCT) 8, and we were to replace RCT 1 in February 2005. My involvement finished, at least for the time, when I departed in October 2007 as commander of 2<sup>d</sup> Battalion, 6<sup>th</sup> Marines (2/6), having spent the previous 7 months in control of the city.

This article is not an attempt to tell how we did everything right and solved the riddle of “turning Fallujah” from being a constant source of trouble and anxiety to an example of what could be accomplished in Iraq given the proper counterinsurgency (COIN) techniques. We did not do everything right, and our success there, such as it was, could only be described as the culmination of years of dedicated struggle and effort on the part of thousands of Marines, Soldiers, and Sailors, as well as members of the Iraqi Security Forces, many of whom were wounded or killed there. Success was also a result of the fortunate coming together of several different events, all happening around the same time, which happened to coincide with my battalion’s arrival.

This article briefly provides what I know of the history of Fallujah from 2004 to 2007, the techniques we used as an RCT to try and maintain control of both the town and the surrounding area during 2005 and early 2006, some lessons learned that I took away from observing the units that operated underneath RCT 8 during that year (one of which was 2/6, but under a different commander), the preparations we made in 2/6 after I took over to be ready to return to Fallujah, and finally the specific steps we took to capitalize on the conditions we found when we arrived in late March 2007. I firmly believe it was the preparations made while training prior to the deployment that enabled us to recognize what was happening in Fallujah and turn it to our advantage. We also developed an approach to turning Fallujah that resonated with the citizens there and generated a level of success that well surpassed what we expected. It was an amazing experience, and I feel privileged to have been part of it.

## Background

Fallujah in December 2004, during Operation *Al Fajr* (the Dawn), was a dark, haunted place. The smell of death was everywhere, and RCT 1 was conducting mop-up operations throughout a largely deserted city. The amount of destruction rivaled what I remember from Sarajevo in 1995. Most of the heavy fighting was over, but enemy snipers

and small ambush elements were scattered in various places. These were the die-hard who refused to flee or surrender. Marines would go from building to building, clearing each one (they had already been cleared many times), and would encounter these small groups of enemy. The encounters would be sharp, violent, and short. If the enemy was not killed in the initial engagement, the Marines would pull back and blast the house with whatever was available—tank main gun fire, heavy machineguns, or in some cases air-delivered ordnance. The city infrastructure was in

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shambles as sewer and water lines had been ruptured, pumping stations destroyed, electrical lines cut, and transformers blown. Civil Affairs units were moving in along with engineer units to begin restoring the city to something that would support habitation. Plans were being laid for the reintroduction of the population, their humanitarian support, and the conduct of elections at the end of January 2005. Needless to say, there was a great deal to see during our PDSS.

The RCT 8 planning effort focused on building off the momentum achieved during Operation *Al Fajr*. RCT 1 had built a berm all around the city and established six entry control points to regulate access to the city as people returned. The elections of January 2005 had not been overly successful since the Sunni population of Anbar Province (where Fallujah is located) rejected the election and refused to participate in it. The small towns near Fallujah all had some enemy presence, and the roads were pockmarked with improvised explosive device (IED) blast marks and craters. Each was another potential IED, as the enemy had a strong tendency to reuse sites.

The RCT 8 plan and subsequent campaign, which started in March 2005, involved a “clear, hold, win, won” approach that was articulated by Sir Robert Thompson in *Defeating Communist Insurgencies*. The enemy was pushed out of each population center, and then measures were implemented to maintain a hold on that center and win over the population by providing Civil Affairs support, security, and the rejuvenation of local governance and business. The area could be considered “won” if the

population was secure and cooperating with coalition or Iraqi forces against the enemy, and all was quiet. While these steps were occurring in a sequential fashion, RCT 8 forces, operating mainly from Camp Fallujah, would sweep through uncleared areas to find weapons caches, keep roads clear of IEDs, and disrupt enemy operations. Fallujah had already been cleared, and the hold and win processes were already in motion. The towns of Karmah (northeast of Fallujah), Saqliwiyah (northwest), and Ameriya and Ferris (directly south) were all cleared sequentially, and

the hold, win, won processes were started for each. This was essentially what kept us occupied for 2005 and early 2006. The only major exceptions to this process were the constitutional referendum in October and the national elections in December 2005. These entailed major planning efforts and security



Artillery shell converted into improvised explosive device

U.S. Marine Corps (Jonathan C. Knauth)

operations that resulted in successful elections as measured by a lack of violence and broad Sunni participation.

### Lessons Learned

As the campaign plan unfolded over the course of the year, I had many opportunities to go out on patrol and observe units in action. Enemy activity was light when we first got there in February 2005 but increased significantly throughout the year, with the exception of the two elections when everything was locked down and no driving was allowed (the enemy seemed attached to their cars and rarely conducted attacks if they could not get away by automobile). In getting around the RCT area of operations, I was able to make some general observations about what worked and what did not work with regard to COIN operations.

During the year we were in the Fallujah area, 11 different battalions worked for us at one time or another, and some came much better prepared to conduct COIN than others. The better prepared units generally had much more involved leaders at every level, most of whom clearly understood the realities of COIN operations, such as the fact that the enemy is rarely seen; attacks are generally short in duration and designed to cause casualties and frustration; the people are only trying to survive being caught between coalition forces and the enemy and therefore seem indifferent; and lashing out in frustration

generates more enemies to fight. In addition, given the operating environment among the people of Fallujah, escalations of force where Iraqi civilians were injured or killed happened relatively frequently, and some units handled the results much better than others. The importance of this was that if the Marines thought there would be a “witch hunt” with them as the focus if they pulled the trigger on an Iraqi civilian, they would hesitate too long, sometimes allowing a suicide bomber or vehicle in close enough to cause casualties or damage to coalition forces.

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Other observations were that units that were too defensive caused a decided reaction from the enemy. As the unit went into its defensive crouch, it ceded initiative to the enemy with the result that attacks increased significantly, which only reinforced the crouched, defensive mentality. Units that stayed in vehicles while on patrol had the most difficulty as they could not see what was going on around them well enough to spot IEDs,

and they were isolated from the population and so had no chance to win their cooperation against the enemy. Lastly, Marines who were bored and frustrated through not understanding why they were even in Iraq, or what they were specifically trying to accomplish, tended to come up with ways to entertain themselves, the majority of which were counterproductive. This trend was amplified by the nearly ubiquitous presence of hand-held video cameras among the Marines and the availability of the Internet on the large bases where they could post video on YouTube or other similar sites.

### Preparations

Upon my return to Camp Lejeune from Iraq, I began to prepare to take over 2/6. From my observations over the previous year, several themes predominated. The first was that I needed to coopt the entire leadership chain into the appropriate way of conducting COIN. Leaders had to understand that the supervision of their units was absolutely crucial to ensuring that we did the least harm possible to begin with, and then built relationships with local Iraqis to win them over to our side. They had to understand that the keys to success were the Iraqi army and local police forces becoming effective. They had to keep their Marines from lashing out in frustration at the inevitabilities of COIN operations and focus on ways to out-think the enemy in order to get *them* to react to *us* instead of us reacting to them. We had to balance aggression (a natural Marine tendency) with caution to avoid falling into enemy traps. We had to root out complacency and keep everyone occupied and focused throughout our time in the combat zone. All of these things seem common sense, but are much easier said than done. It takes dedicated leaders, most particularly at the fireteam, squad, and platoon levels. Unfortunately, these leaders are always the youngest and least experienced, with the fireteam leaders in particular having the least amount of training of anyone in the chain of command.

Upon taking over 2/6, my sergeant major, executive officer, operations officer, and I formulated our “preparing the mindset” campaign plan to get the battalion ready to return to Fallujah (where they had just operated from October 2005 to April 2006). The basic theme of the plan was relatively simple. We presented information to the leaders in the battalion, reinforced it through guided discussions, held other related leadership discussions throughout the training period,



Iraqis wait to receive medical supplies, water, and blankets from Iraqi Red Crescent workers

U.S. Marine Corps (Robert K. Blankenship)

and placed posters and signs throughout the battalion area, all of which presented aspects of the original theme. We took the time to answer questions and address concerns from the previous deployment. These were mostly related to escalation of force situations and tactics that the Marines thought made them more vulnerable to snipers. Aside from general tactics, we also had to get our personnel to understand that the Iraqi army and police forces, as inept and corrupt as they often were, needed to be the focus of our effort. If we had leaders or Marines who were openly contemptuous of them, treated them poorly, or shunned any involvement with them, we would never be able to get them to improve. I would not say that we achieved complete buy-in from all hands, but enough of the battalion got onboard that when we went through Mojave Viper (the graduation exercise for all deploying units conducted at Twentynine Palms, California), the evaluators specifically commented on the level of understanding and cooperation in the battalion.

### Back to Fallujah

Once deployed to Fallujah, we found a city where the security situation had deteriorated significantly. There were many reasons, only some of which involved the specific tactics, techniques, and procedures of the two battalions that preceded us. Al Qaeda in Iraq had a strong presence in Fallujah and, given the symbolism of the city as a result of the 2004 fighting, sought to openly reclaim it. In addition, since the tribes did not have much influence in the city, the Anbar Awakening, which was gathering momentum to the west, had not reached Fallujah. Ambushes, mortar and sniper attacks, and the ubiquitous IEDs predominated. Murder and intimidation of Iraqi civilians and police were rampant. The city council was still functioning (it had been reestablished in early 2005), but the previous two chairmen had been assassinated and new candidates for the position were scarce. The police had taken significant casualties since they were reestablished in 2005 and only came out of headquarters in the center of the city in large groups to conduct raids. A new enemy tactic had also been introduced: suicide truck bombs that had chlorine gas mixed in to magnify the damage. One such attack against the headquarters of one of the Iraqi army battalions happened just as we were arriving in Fallujah. With these events as background, which we had watched as we made our final

preparations to deploy, we conducted the standard 2-week turnover with the unit we replaced, and then ensured that they got out of the area safely and on their way home.

After observing the city and operating conditions for a week or so, we saw that things had already started to change prior to our arrival. A new police chief had been hired and seemed motivated to get out and fight the terrorists who were dominating Fallujah. The new Iraqi army brigade commander for those forces in the city was professional and dedicated. He had cleaned house among the officers, getting rid of a good deal of dead weight. Also, a new mayor had been appointed by the city council, and he was anxious to regain control of the city.

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We also recognized that the approach used by coalition forces to that point had to change. It was little better than the arcade game of “whack a mole” and had made little progress toward ending the insurgency. Additionally, we saw that the city of Ramadi (30 to 40 miles west of Fallujah) had changed remarkably for the better, so I sent my battalion executive officer to observe what was being done. He came back with the shell of a plan, based on what had

worked in Ramadi, to restore security and turn Fallujah over to the police.

The plan that we formulated, gained approval for, and executed starting at the end of May 2007 consisted of breaking the city into 11 precincts. One by one, precincts would be swarmed by Iraqi army and police units backed up by 2/6 Marines. Cement barriers were placed around the precinct to restrict incoming and outgoing traffic to two openings, each guarded by Iraqi police. A precinct headquarters was established and manned by all three forces. Locals were recruited to form a neighborhood watch under the supervision of the police. Lastly, food bags that could feed a family of four for several days were distributed by the police while Civil Affairs teams assessed the precinct’s infrastructure needs. These needs were then prioritized and addressed as quickly as possible. It was a modified, more focused, version of “clear, hold, win, won.”

The effects of this plan were remarkable in how quickly they started to produce results. The cement barriers restricted traffic greatly, which intimidated most insurgents. As noted earlier, if they could not flee in a car, they were hesitant to attack. An additional factor in this traffic restriction plan was that just prior to kicking off the entire operation (which we named *Alljah*), a suicide car bomb had attacked a funeral procession for an Iraqi who had fought al Qaeda in Iraq to the west of the city. Many civilians, including women and children, were killed or injured. The



Iraqi police officer provides security at district police station

U.S. Marine Corps (Brook R. Kelsey)

mayor declared that no civilian vehicles would be allowed to drive in the city anymore, and it was strictly enforced by the police. It was gradually relaxed over the ensuing summer, but a vehicle registration system was implemented, again by the police.

In addition to the traffic control measures, cleanup crews were hired city wide. Local artists were hired to paint cement barriers and put instructional signs on them with the result that complaints about the barriers were reduced significantly. City infrastructure projects that had been delayed or cancelled due to the violence were finished. Restoration of water and electricity services was given the highest priority and had the fastest positive impact on the lives of the average Fallujan. In each precinct, loudspeakers similar to those used on mosques were mounted on the precinct headquarters to play public service announcements, news, and the national anthem on a daily basis. An added benefit was realized when the national soccer team went to the finals of the Asia Cup. We had the game broadcast over the speakers, and the goodwill generated by this, coupled with the fact that the Iraqi team won, was enormous. Finally, local precinct councils were established, which allowed complaints to be voiced and issues specific to that pre-

cinct to be addressed with solutions developed and implemented by the inhabitants.

Many other measures were implemented, but those mentioned above provide a snapshot of what was occurring during the summer of 2007. The combined results of all of this were profound. Police control was established to the point where the army, which had generally been an irritant due to its largely Shia makeup, was able to redeploy entirely to an area well north of Fallujah. Police who had been afraid to wear their uniforms off duty or even to return to their homes for fear of assassination were now considered public heroes and went to and from their homes in uniform.

Violence in all forms dropped to unheard-of lows. In the first 5 weeks of our deployment, we experienced 3 fatalities and 25 wounded. In the 4 months after the kickoff of Operation *Alljah*, we experienced only two lightly wounded. IED attacks were few and far between, and in many cases those emplaced by the enemy were getting reported as soon as they were laid. Whereas sniper attacks had been prevalent early in the deployment, when General David Petraeus and Katie Couric visited in early September, we were able to take them and their entourage through a market area that had seen the worst of the

sniper activity without incident. Coalition generals who had seen the bad days of Fallujah and returned to visit marveled at what they saw now. We marveled also. We expected good results, but what happened as a result of *Alljah* surpassed anything we anticipated.

Everything mentioned above, coupled with many factors not mentioned, generated an almost snowball-like momentum for success that we could only partially claim credit for. It also continued after we left, as evidenced by an email sent to me by the battalion commander who relieved us. He reported that over a month after we departed, he sat under a canopy with the mayor, police chief, and many prominent sheiks right on the main street to watch a parade honoring the Fallujah police. Whereas less than a year before, the police were afraid to go out on patrol or even return home at the end of their shift, they were now parading down the middle of the city and being feted by the community they were protecting and serving.

Pointing out what did not work as well as what did might also prove useful for forces heading out to conduct COIN operations. Once again, we did not do everything correctly, but we learned from our errors and found a solution that worked specifically for Fallujah, which may or may not be applicable to other



U.S. Marine Corps (Jeremy W. Ferguson)

places and conditions. To start with what did *not* work, a reliance on vehicle patrolling, heavy-handed conventional tactics, heavy force protection measures that kept the local population away from coalition forces, minimal reliance on Iraqi Security Forces (for a variety of reasons, some of which were valid), and a focus on just surviving the tour instead of trying to actually win could all be said to be seriously detrimental to COIN operations. What eventually worked was a combination of measures that softened the conventional approach, got in close to the population to provide them a sense of personal and family security, included the Iraqi Security Forces in much more effective ways, and gave everyone involved both a stake in the measures being taken and a sense of real progress. These are the measures that would likely be more successful in other COIN environments. The idea of trying to do the least amount of harm to begin with is an ideal place to start.

At the beginning of our tour in Fallujah, people went about their business quickly to take care of necessities and get off the streets. At the end of our tour, people were out playing volleyball and soccer, the city was taking pride in its appearance and its police, and reconstruction, and in some cases new construction, was taking place all over. As we

patrolled on foot, we could feel the optimism and pride of the citizens. Even though there were many expressions of gratitude from the people, what was most gratifying to me was when several Marines who had been on the battalion's previous deployment to Fallujah observed that the situation had changed:

*whereas less than a year before, the police were afraid to go out on patrol or even return home at the end of their shift, they were now parading down the middle of the city*

whereas on that previous tour they had seen no progress at all and lost many of their fellow Marines, on this deployment, they saw tremendous strides and lost few of their peers. I gave them a synopsis of what the battalion had accomplished about midway through the deployment to reinforce our success and ensure they knew its full extent. The sense that Fallujah had been turned and that we might not have to keep coming back to Iraq was starting to take hold.

Lastly, while the history described here can only be considered a microcosm of what happened in Iraq from 2003 to 2009, it can serve as a potential example for current COIN efforts in Afghanistan. Every aspect that has been addressed by General Stanley

McChrystal in his guidance for operations in Afghanistan was what worked for us in Fallujah. Getting in close to the people and providing them with a sense of security caused them to begin to trust us and turn completely against the insurgents. Pushing the Iraqi Security Forces forward, the police in particular,

caused them to step up and take responsibility for their city. The beginnings of economic resurgence followed the reestablishment of adequate security, just as we are seeing in areas of Helmand Province today.

Operations in a COIN environment will continue to be frustrating and hard to measure, but when understood *and believed in* by the entire leadership chain, and then applied properly across the area of responsibility, they can have truly strategic effects. Fallujah was written off several times as hopeless by many people. Today, it can be offered up as one of several models for what can be accomplished given the right will and leadership. **JFQ**

**Citizens wait to be checked for weapons and identification before entering Fallujah through control point**



U.S. Marine Corps (Robert K. Blankenship)