

◀ **A rifleman with 3rd Plt. watches** as an Amtrak fires on a building from which insurgents fired seconds earlier. The Marines entered Fallujah Nov. 8 for Operation Al Fajr to oust all insurgents. The first of the company's three objectives was to establish a foothold in the city; the second was to clear the Al Tawiq mosque. A suspected insurgent stronghold; and the third was to clear the Muhajareen mosque, another suspected insurgent stronghold.

Photo by Sgt. Clinton Firstbrook



Newfound Respect

A Combat Correspondent's Tale of the Battle for Fallujah

On Nov. 8, 2004, 28 other Marines and I were cramped inside an Amtrak when two mortar rounds landed next to our position. Flashes lit the inside of the vehicle. Marines who were standing fell, several screaming they were hit. Sparks floated to the floor and blood from the Marine beside me ran down my flak jacket. I wondered what had I gotten myself into.

Four months earlier my life was different. I worked in the Community Relations office at the Pentagon. I wore my service uniform every day and only broke out my cammies for field day. I answered phone calls, faxes, and e-mails from people who had questions about the Marine Corps. My main job was handling Marine Corps band requests. It was an administrative job, but not too bad. Stress for me was waiting for a late shuttle bus.

When the call came for combat correspondents to deploy to Iraq, I raised my hand. It's hard to explain why, now. I just wanted to be a part of what was going on over here. Six months later I was working at the Combined Press Information Center in Baghdad, traveling around the country writing stories on all of the services stationed in Iraq. I saw my fair share of mortar attacks and convoy patrols, but never any real combat.

A week before we entered Fallujah, I was assigned to I Marine Expeditionary Force to report on 1st Marine Division during the impending Operation Al Fajr.

I was attached to Charlie Company's third platoon, in 1st Battalion 3rd Marine Regiment. Running around with a camera the size of a football doesn't really allow you to blend. I heard jokes as soon as my boots hit the

ground. The first question I was asked was, "Are you a photographer?" then "Seen any combat?"

As the days went by I attended every brief and training exercise I could. I wanted to know exactly where I'd be placed when we got into the thick of things. I'm a P.O.G., person other than grunt, and proud of it. But I didn't want to do anything stupid when rounds were going down range.

I was assigned to first squad, third fire team as the fourth man. They were a tight group of guys who did everything together and understood why the "higher ups" wanted me on this mission. They answered every question I asked. They spent countless hours with me each day going over tactics so I'd know what to do and how to react in certain situations.

None of the extra training prepared me for that first night in the Fallujah.

When the Amtrak doors opened and everyone ran out, I didn't even think of taking pictures. I ran right behind someone and jumped down right next to him. All I wanted to do was find cover. Two members of my fire team were medevac'd right then and there. I was left to fend for myself along with the remaining Marine from my fire team. I just looked to the guys beside me and did what they did.

My legs started shaking uncontrollably as we loaded up again to head for the breach point. I tried to hide it, but I know whoever was sitting next to me felt it. I grabbed a railing in the opening of the Amtrak to steady myself and put my hand in a pool of blood. I knew exactly what it was and tried to wipe it off. I didn't want to think about what had just happened.

The breach point was a few hundred meters from the city. It was a moonless night and I could barely make out the Marines running in front of me. We trekked through



▲ **Sgt. Clinton Firstbrook signed on the dotted line Aug. 31, 2000 – his eighteenth birthday – and was shipped to recruit training June 10, 2001. Since his arrival in Iraq and his experiences in Fallujah, his outlook on life has changed, he said. "The little things I would run into that used to get to me no longer bother me. Compared to what I could be dealing with, they aren't important in the least."** *Official Marine Corps photo*



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ankle-deep mud and stumbled over holes and ditches hidden in the shadows of our night vision goggles. We made our way to the point where we were to infiltrate the city. I was still shaken up, but I pushed forward.

At the edge of the city, all was quiet except for the prayers emanating from an insurgent-held mosque. We were the first platoon from 1/3 to enter Fallujah and the enemy was unaware of our presence. We sneaked down a street lined with broken down buildings. We looked for a place to establish a foothold – our first objective. While part of the platoon looked for a house from which to base our operations, the rest of us bounded in fire teams to the first intersection. Lying prone behind a mound of dirt beside two other Marines, I could make out our second objective; the mosque held by insurgents.

We were only there for a minute or two when shouts in Arabic filled the air. I couldn't see anyone, but I knew they were out there waiting.

Then it happened. Barrel flashes from AK-47s in every direction from our position sprayed tracer rounds over our heads. Our battle for Fallujah had started and I was nowhere near ready for it.

During a lull in gunfire we pulled back to a safer position. Not being able to see everything and having rounds bear down on my position, plus the mortar incident earlier, was too much. I thought I was going to die.

> Marines with 3rd Plt. provide security as a squad runs back from a resupply mission picking up ammunition, food and water Nov. 15. While most in the Corps dressed in their best and attended birthday balls, these Marines celebrated the 229th Marine Corps birthday in desert cammies fighting insurgents on the streets and rooftops of Fallujah.

Photo by Sgt. Clinton Firstbrook

I'm a P.O.G. What am I doing here on the frontlines? I don't belong here. These thoughts echoed in my mind as each second passed and I made them well known. I didn't care. I wanted out of there and back in the rear.

To my surprise I wasn't laughed at or mocked. The other Marines told me not to worry; they were going to watch my back. They said they were just as scared. But I didn't see their fear. None of them faltered or hesitated while doing their jobs. I watched as they ran through a hail of bullets, diving behind a makeshift wall of cinder blocks to lay down cover and suppressing fire for other members of their squad.

I respect all Marines because they earned the title just as I did, but that night I gained a newfound respect for infantrymen.

My fear melted away with the night sky. Things that happened only hours before seemed unreal – like I was watching a movie. During the weeks that followed I fed off the strength of the Marines around me, and the patrols and firefights hardly bothered me. I was still nervous every time we went in to clear a house, but I felt different somehow.

I hope the history books depict Fallujah as they should, describing the heroic acts and sacrifices of the Marines who took part in the operation. In time some of my memories might fade, but I will never forget the Marines of Charlie Company who fought alongside me. I wouldn't be here if it wasn't for them. They are the reason I can tell my story. **M**



▲ When Marines with C Co. encounter an obstacle in Fallujah, they call for an assault team to clear the way. Cpl. Steven Ullom, assault section leader, scans the area as Lance Cpl. Evan Fernandez, an assault gunner, fires a second round from his MK-153 SMAW rocket launcher into a suspected insurgent stronghold Nov. 18. "Being able to send a rocket into an enemy stronghold and watch the explosion is the favorite part of my job," said Fernandez. Photo by Sgt. Clinton Firstbrook



Fallujah – A Historical City Steeped in Unrest

FALLUJAH IS THE CURRENT HOTBED OF UNREST in the campaign to stabilize and rebuild Iraq. But, for most of its history, the now bloody city was small and relatively unimportant commercially.

Today, about 285,000 people live in the city, located northwest of Baghdad on the Euphrates River. It is in the Al Anbar Province in a region called the Sunni Triangle, because of its large Sunni Muslim population.

The city was founded in the 4th century and was overshadowed by other cities within the Abbasid Caliphate Empire.

In the late 13th century as part of the Ottoman Empire, it was a minor stop on one of the roads through the desert from Baghdad.

Great Britain invaded the country during World War I as part of the campaign against the Ottoman Empire. Britain retained control of Iraq when the Ottoman Empire collapsed, and installed a king of non-Iraqi descent as the ruler.

By 1914, the road from Baghdad to Fallujah was one of only two main roads through Iraq; the other led from Mosul to Mardin in Turkey. In 1920, more than 10,000 Iraqis and 1,000 British soldiers died during a rebellion within the city. By 1947, the city's population was only about 10,000 but with Iraqi independence and an influx of petroleum oil wealth the city began to grow.

However, it was not until 1979, the beginning of Saddam Hussein's rule, that Fallujah became important. It was home to many of Hussein's government employees and supporters and many senior Ba'ath Party officials. Recognizing that Fallujah was home to a strong Wahhabi Muslim base that could have potentially challenged his control, Hussein controlled Fallujah by creating factories and light industry, and retaining the ruling sheikhs under his financial control.

When the Hussein regime fell in 2003, Fallujah, then governed by pro-American mayor Taha Bidaywi, experienced little looting or insurgent activity.

In recent months, however, Fallujah has not been quiet or peaceful. Militant Sunni Muslims, former Republican Guard troops, and other insurgent elements make their presence felt and combat periodically interrupts daily life.

Insurgents infiltrated into Fallujah by direct, well-maintained highways leading to the porous borders with Syria, and Jordan, making it an ideal

base of operations to mount operations against Baghdad and U.S. forces at the Baghdad airport.

The March 31, 2004, killing of four American contractors led to heavy fighting between Coalition forces – including Marines – and insurgents. Six weeks of conflict led to a truce that turned security of the city over to a "Fallujah Brigade" of former members of the demobilized Hussein army. The Fallujah Brigade soon collapsed and insurgents again operated from Fallujah. By November Marines returned to the city for Operation Al Fajr intent on ousting all insurgents.

Since then, more than 77 Marines have been killed in the Al Anbar Province.

To date, in this "city of mosques," so named for the more than 200 mosques in the city and surrounding areas, more than 90 Americans have been killed; only Baghdad has had more casualties. **M**



A Broader Look at Iraq by the Numbers*

- 97** - Percent of Iraqis are Muslim
- 60-65** - Percent of Iraqi Muslims are of the Shi'a sect
- 32-37** - Percent of Iraqi Muslims are of the Sunni sect
- 19.2** - Median age of the population
- 68.26** - Life expectancy of the population
- 7.84** - Million labor force (est. 2004)
- 40.4** - Percent of the population considered literate**

* Information gathered from the CIA World Factbook.
** Defined as 15 or older and can read and write.

Infographic by Seth Sirbaugh, Bates Creative Group

