

# The Battles of Al-Fallujah: Urban Warfare and the Growth of Air Power





## William Head

(Overleaf) An AC-130 firing chaff to confuse enemy radar. (All photos courtesy of the author, unless otherwise credited.)

## The First Battle for Al-Fallujah: Background

Before the United States and her allies invaded Iraq in the spring of 2003, Al-Fallujah was known only as a small city, forty-two miles west of Baghdad. Favored by the Iraqi strongman, Saddam Hussein, it was a Ba'athist stronghold populated by loyal Sunni supporters of the regime in the Iraqi capital. Soon after the incursion began, it made worldwide headlines when a Royal Air Force (RAF) jet aiming at a key bridge, unintentionally dropped two laser guided bombs (LGBs) on a crowded market in the heart of the city killing dozens of civilians.

From that time until the last American troops withdrew from Iraq in December 2011, Al-Fallujah became the main center of anti-Coalition violence. Perhaps it is not surprising that this city and region turned into the heart of pro-Hussein resistance during Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and was witness to the bloodiest battles of the entire Second Persian Gulf War. Indeed, in the three battles for control of the city between 2003 and 2005, Coalition forces lost roughly 150 killed and had 1,500 wounded. This in an area commonly called the Sunni Triangle and populated by Sunnis and Ba'athists who lost nearly everything when Saddam Hussein's regime fell.<sup>1</sup>

The determined resistance and the savagery that would characterize the upcoming battles for this small city on the periphery of the Iraqi state would surprise the Americans and bring into question the level of success they had in finally taking Al-Fallujah. The cost in lives also has left many questions as to how one should view these battles. In his poignant article, "Who Won the Battle of Fallujah?" Jonathan F. Keiler asks, "Was Fallujah a battle we lost in April 2004, with ruinous results? Or was it a battle we won in November?" He answers his own questions by saying, "The answer is yes. If that sounds awkward, it is because Fallujah was an awkward battle without an easy parallel in U.S. military history."<sup>2</sup>

In fact, many analysts have compared the destruction of buildings and the ferocity of the fighting to the U.S. struggle to retake Hue city during the Tet Offensive in 1968. In one regard, the comparison is apt since, as Keiler points out, "Enemy insurgents defending Fallujah were formidable because many of them were willing to fight to the death."<sup>3</sup> The same had been true of the Vietnamese insurgents during the earlier struggle. However, there were many differences in the two battles as

well, not the least of which was the skilled use of air forces at Al-Fallujah, especially during the second battle that lasted between November 7 and December 23, 2004. Of special note was the nearly obsessive effort to keep aerial attacks and artillery fire as precise as possible in Al-Fallujah.

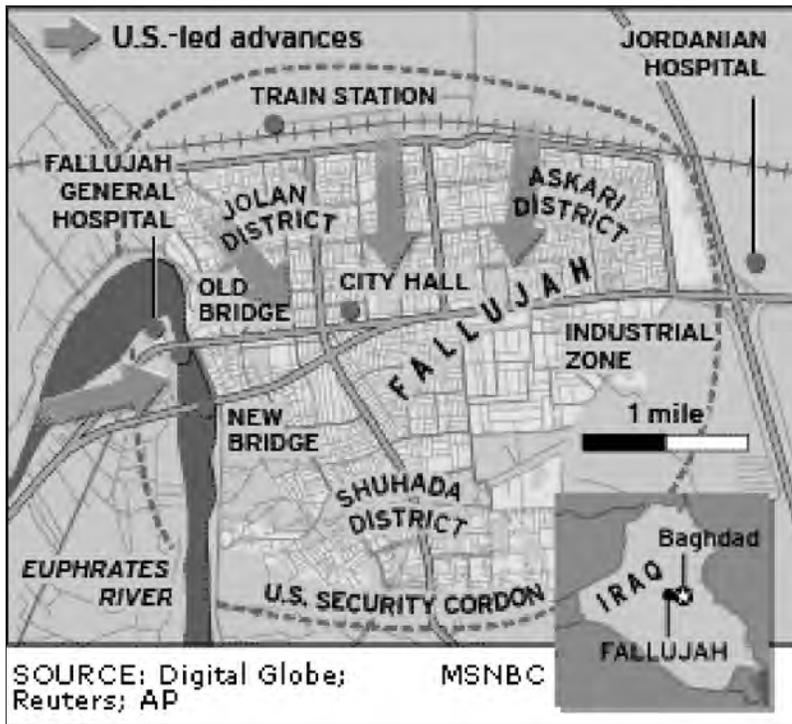
First Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) operations officer, declared that weapon precision was unprecedented. He also described how surgical air strikes employing LGBs and/or other forms of precision-guided munitions (PGMs) could "topple a minaret hiding snipers, without causing damage to an adjacent mosque." When asked to compare Al-Fallujah to Hue, he posited, "Is this like Vietnam? Absolutely not, Hue City . . . was leveled, and there wasn't precision targeting, and they didn't secure it in the amount of time that we've secured Al-Fallujah."<sup>4</sup>

One other important lesson to come from this controversial battle was the steady increase in the use of air power in urban combat. As I will discuss in detail later, traditional U.S. Army and Marine doctrine (developed in the wars of the twentieth century) had never really included the use of air forces. The first battle unfolded in the customary manner of urban combat. During the second, the effective use of aerial assets increased to a point where it altered the very theory of how to execute urban battles in the future. In February 2005, Lt. Gen. Thomas F. Metz, upon departing Iraq, wrote his Air Force counterpart, Lt. Gen. Walter E. Buchanan III, complimenting his air personnel on their vital role in the battle saying that without, "the prompt and sustained air support our land forces received," we would not have won the battle. He focused on the fact that air power from all services covered the skies of Iraq from 60,000 feet to the deck with all manner of aircraft ranging from Air Force fighters, gunships, and remotely-piloted weapons systems to Army and Marine helicopter gunships.<sup>5</sup>

To be sure, traditional air power roles and missions during Persian Gulf Wars focused on strikes against what could best be described as strategic targets, such as, Command and Control (C<sup>2</sup>)bridges, communications nodes, and electric grids. While tactical roles such as close air support (CAS) and vehicular attacks increased over time even this was often more cheaply executed by helicopter gunships using "hell-fire" missiles, than fixed-wing aircraft using 500-pound bombs. However, this all changed with the advancements in precision-guided ordnance

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Map of Fallujah.

**WITH PRESIDENT GEORGE W. BUSH'S DECLARATION OF "MISSION ACCOMPLISHED," VIOLENCE IN AL-FALLUJAH WAS GROWING INTO WHAT WOULD PROVE TO BE THE TWO BLOODIEST BATTLES OF THE ENTIRE WAR**

and high tech targeting lasers and weapons. These advances included highly sophisticated Intelligence, Surveillance and Reconnaissance (ISR) platforms, such as, Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAVs) combined with extremely accurate CAS targeting equipment on aircraft, such as, the AC-130.

One Associated Press article reported that there were at least twenty kinds of aircraft supporting ground troops during the second battle for Al-Fallujah. As the correspondent described it, "The skies over Fallujah are so crowded with U.S. military aircraft that they are layered in stacks above the city, from low-flying helicopters and swooping attack jets to a jet-powered unmanned spy drone that flies above 60,000 feet." To quote Air Force Lt. Col. David Staven, who headed the ground targeting process, "we call it the wedding cake. It's layered all the way up."<sup>6</sup> It was from this major battle, that ended in tactical success but only limited strategic achievement that the primary maxims of how to conduct urban combat evolved from the death and destruction to focus on the effectiveness and potential decisiveness of air power in urban combat environments.

### The Buildup to a Blood Bath

During the regime of Saddam Hussein, Al-Fallujah had thrived economically because many citizens were employed as police, military officials, and intelligence officers by the dictator's administration. As he fell from power, there was little sympathy for him in much of the rest of Iraq since most Iraqis considered Saddam to be an oppressive tyrant. It should also be noted that the city was one of the most religious and culturally traditional areas in Iraq.<sup>7</sup>

When the U.S. began its invasion of Iraq in

March 2003, it appeared that those living in the city would be pro-American. Indeed, after the Ba'athist's regime's collapse, the locals elected a nominally pro-American town council headed by Taha Bidaywi Hamed, who quickly restored law and order to Al-Fallujah. Given these events, Coalition leadership determined it was unnecessary to commit large numbers of troops to the region.<sup>8</sup>

All this changed on April 23, 2003, when 700 soldiers from the U.S. 82d Airborne Division entered Al-Fallujah, and 150 members of Company C occupied the Al-Qa'ida primary school. The occupiers soon established an evening curfew that offended many of those living in Al-Fallujah. Having already been sensitized by Allied air strikes that had killed citizens and destroyed property in the surrounding area, by April 28, tensions had grown to a critical level. That morning a crowd of 200 people gathered outside the school after curfew and demanded that U.S. troops leave the building, so the school could begin operations again. The situation soon escalated and the protesters became increasingly agitated. To disperse the growing mob, the soldiers fired smoke canisters. Instead of breaking up the crowd it only angered them more. According to U.S. forces, at this point, one of the protesters fired on the Americans who returned fire on the mass of people. Soon members of the 1st Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, and 82d Airborne Division were firing randomly into the crowd. When it was over, a minute later, they had killed seventeen people and wounded seventy others. No U.S. or Coalition casualties were reported.<sup>9</sup>

As embers from the clash smoldered, the Iraqis regrouped and, forty-eight hours later, initiated another protest in front of the former Ba'ath party headquarters denouncing the carnage of the 28th. Again, depending on the sources one reads, either American forces were fired on or simply fired without provocation. This time, soldiers from the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment fired into the crowd killing three more Iraqis. Over the next month, Iraqi protests grew larger and more belligerent. Fearing for their safety, on June 4, the 3d Armored Cavalry commander requested an additional 1,500 troops to help quell the growing resistance.<sup>10</sup>

In June, to put an end to drive-by attacks, U.S. forces began confiscating motorcycles and other vehicles from local residents. However, this did little to help matters. In fact, it only made them worse. Then, on June 30, a massive explosion ripped through an important local mosque killing the imam, Sheikh Laith Khalil, and eight other people. While later evidence suggested that anti-Coalition forces planted the bombs, many Iraqis accused the Americans of having fired a missile at the mosque. U.S. officials claimed the explosion had occurred accidentally when insurgents were constructing bombs.<sup>11</sup> The cruel irony was that two months after the war was supposed to have ended with President George W. Bush's declaration of "mission accomplished," violence in Al-Fallujah was growing into what would prove to be the two bloodiest battles of the entire war.

## From Bad to Worse

By the following year, with many Americans back home still expecting a final withdrawal of Coalition forces, the situation in Al-Fallujah was perched on the edge of all-out war. On February 12, 2004, insurgents ambushed a convoy carrying Gen. John Abizaid, commander of U.S. forces in the Middle East, and Maj. Gen. Charles Swannack, commander of the 82d Airborne. The insurgents fired Rocket Propelled Grenades (RPGs) at the vehicles from nearby rooftops. They were dressed as Iraqi Security Forces (ISF). No one really knew if they were ISF renegades or resistance fighters wearing stolen uniforms.<sup>12</sup>

Roughly two weeks later, rebels diverted Iraqi police to a false emergency near the outskirts of the city. With law enforcement personnel on a wild goose chase, insurgents attacked three police stations, the mayor's office and a civil defense base at the same time. In the end, seventeen police officers were killed, and eighty-seven detainees released. Any hope that peace and order might be established came to a disastrous end. To deal with the insurgents the 82d Airborne implemented a new procedure, within Al-Fallujah, which the media called "lightning raids." In these raids convoys, often led by Humvees or armed personnel carriers, sped through the streets of the city seeking out and destroying enemy-constructed road blocks which frequently concealed Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs). The abrupt nature of the actions caught the insurgents by surprise and allowed the U.S. forces to search homes, schools and other buildings for enemy personnel or arms stashes. Unfortunately, the process often caused property damage and led to shoot-outs with local residents, many of whom claimed not to be sympathetic to the pro-Saddam forces.<sup>13</sup>

By early March 2004, Al-Fallujah began to fall under the increasing influence of paramilitary factions. During this time, General Swannack's Army forces withdrew and turned over control of the Al-Anbar Province to the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force under the command of Lt. Gen. James T. Conway. It proved to be both an awkward and untenable situation for the Marines. It was one that was also beginning to slip away from U.S. control. With the Coalition forces facing increasing violence, Conway decided to withdraw all his troops from the city in order to regroup and retake what was becoming a hornet's nest of insurgency. At first, they made occasional incursions into the city in an effort to gain a foothold and then reinforce it. Each time they attempted this maneuver, they failed. As a result, they were reduced to sending patrols around the outer limits of what became known as Forward Operation Base "Volturno," which had been the home of Qusay and Uday Hussein, the deceased sons of the Iraqi dictator.<sup>14</sup>

### The Blackwater Tragedy

The breaking point came on March 31, 2004, when insurgents ambushed a convoy with four

American private military contractors traveling with it. The four were working for Blackwater USA, Arlington, Virginia, and were delivering food for the U.S. food caterers. Scott Helvenston, Jerko Zovko, Wesley Batalona, and Michael Teague, were killed by machinegun fire and a grenade thrown through a window of their SUV. Subsequently, a mob descended on their vehicle dragged the bodies out and set them on fire. In turn, they pulled their corpses through the streets before hanging them over a bridge that crossed the Euphrates River. During the Blackwater event, someone took photos and released them to the international news media. Even as this ghastly scene was unfolding five Marines were killed elsewhere in the area by a roadside IED explosion that ripped their vehicle in small pieces of scrap metal.<sup>15</sup>

The next day, photos of the Blackwater episode were released by various news agencies across the world. The horrifying pictures caused indignation in the U. S. and led to a decision by senior American officials to "pacify" the city. No longer would the U.S. continue less aggressive raids, humanitarian aid or try to work with local leaders. Now they would execute a major military operation to expel the insurgents from Al-Fallujah once and for all!<sup>16</sup>

When President George W. Bush saw the photos, he ordered immediate retaliation. It was an action that many analysts and Marines, over the intervening years have wondered about. Some have written articles and books questioning the presence of non-military American security personnel not just in a combat zone, but anywhere in Iraq. Some believed it a waste of 150 American, British, and Iraqi lives to try and retake the Iraqi hotbed to avenge four contractors who had no business being there.

In fairness to the President, much of the criticism is often just second-guessing. To be sure, it is hard to imagine that given the horrific nature of the death and mutilation of four Americans, no matter who they were, any occupant of the White House in any era would have failed to take action both from an ethical and/or a political stand point. In short, how could any U.S. President not take decisive action? Whatever the moral truth, action quickly began to root out the "bad guys."<sup>17</sup>

### The First Battle of Al-Fallujah Begins

On April 1, Brig. Gen. Mark Kimmitt, deputy director of U.S. military operations in Iraq, declared that the U.S. intended an "overwhelming" response to the deaths assuring the press, "We will pacify that city." Two days later, the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF) Command received a written order from the commander of the Joint Task Force ordering offensive operations against Al-Fallujah. The order was contradictory to the inclinations of the Marine commanders on the ground who wanted to conduct surgical strikes and raids against those suspected of being involved.<sup>18</sup>

One major reason for the Marines' concerns was that U.S. basic doctrine for ground warfare did

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Marines on patrol in Fallujah.

**URBAN COMBAT HAS BEEN A PART OF TACTICAL THEORY SINCE 500 BCE [ALTHOUGH] SUN TZU WARNED THAT "THE WORST POLICY IS TO ATTACK CITIES"**

not favor military operations on urbanized terrain (MOUT). While urban combat has been a part of tactical theory since 500 BCE, the great military thinker Sun Tzu warned that "the worst policy is to attack cities."<sup>19</sup> American ground forces armed with tanks and other tracked vehicles have always preferred to engage in combat on open plains, where their maneuverable weapons can dominate the battle field. It was not until 1944 that, out of sheer necessity, urban tactics began to appear in U.S. Army doctrine. During the Cold War most plans for conventional war in Europe involved sweeping movements on open plains to deal with a potential Soviet attack. As for the Marines, they are naval ground forces designed to forcefully assault and secure beach heads. In short, they are storm troops, not urban fighters. Yet, this was exactly the role they were asked to perform.

The Marines' concerns notwithstanding, on the night of April 4, 2004, U.S. forces launched a major assault in an effort to "re-establish security in Fallujah" by encircling it with more than 2,000 troops. By the next morning, American troops had blockaded the roads leading into the city and began making radio announcements and passing out leaflets telling residents to stay in their homes and identify the insurgents for their own safety. Soon, information filtered to the Marines that roughly twenty individual enclaves of enemy forces, armed with RPGs, mortars, heavy machineguns, and anti-aircraft weapons were well entrenched in the heart of the city. In addition, nearly a third of the city's population had fled leaving it in the hands of the insurgents. Considering this new information, the U.S. military began to have second thoughts about a direct assault.<sup>20</sup>

As a result, this first battle evolved into more of a siege that also touched off extensive fighting

throughout Central Iraq and along the Lower Euphrates River with several components of the enemy forces taking advantage of the situation to initiate attacks on various Allied units. One of the groups that emerged was the Mahdi Army of Shiite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr. To exacerbate the crisis, there was a simultaneous rebellion by the Sunnis in the city of Ramadi. Several foreigners were captured by rebel forces and either killed or held as hostages in an attempt to barter for political or military concessions. Even elements of the Iraqi police and Iraqi Civil Defense Corps turned on the Coalition forces or abandoned their posts.<sup>21</sup>

Gradually, the Americans tightened their hold on the city. They employed aerial night attacks by AC-130 fixed-wing gunships, scout snipers who killed more than 200 enemy fighters, and teams from Tactical Psychological Operations Detachment 910 who attempted to lure Iraqis out into the open for the Scout Snipers by reading scripts aimed at angering the insurgent fighters and by blasting heavy metal rock music over loud speakers. After three days of fighting, U.S. leaders estimated they had taken one-fourth of the city including several vital enemy defensive positions.<sup>22</sup>

Progress was complicated by the fact that, while Americans were decimating the enemy, they were often accidentally killing civilians as part of collateral damage or through misidentification. As a result, the Allies experienced growing criticism from within the Iraqi Governing Council. One representative, Adnan Pachachi, declared publicly that, "these operations by the Americans are unacceptable and illegal."<sup>23</sup>

Under growing pressure, at noon on April 2004 9, L. Paul Bremer, head of the U.S. Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), announced that U.S. forces would initiate a unilateral ceasefire, stating that they wanted to facilitate negotiations between the representatives of the Iraqi Governing Council and insurgents in the city. This would allow humanitarian supplies to be delivered to residents. Among the vital relief materials, was one major convoy organized by private citizens, businessmen, and clerics from Baghdad as a joint Shi'a-Sunni effort. The truce also facilitated the reopening of the Al-Fallujah General Hospital and the Jordanian Hospital closed during the siege. Iraqi hospital officials in Al-Fallujah reported that 600 Iraqis had been killed in the fighting and more than 1,250 people had been injured. Some declared that more than half of the dead were women and children. Predictably, Coalition sources disputed these claims and countered with fewer than 10 percent of these numbers; and that the vast majority of the bodies found were enemy fighters. U.S. officials insisted they were doing everything they could to minimize civilian deaths. General Kimmitt said insurgents were using Iraqi civilians as human shields and were firing weapons at U.S. forces from inside schools, mosques, and hospitals. During the ceasefire in Al-Fallujah, civilians were allowed to leave. Coincidentally, soldiers on both sides also took the opportunity to improve their positions within the city.<sup>24</sup>



Fallujah before the 2003 invasion

**ABU MUSAB AL-ZARQAWI ...EMERGED AS THE MOST FAMOUS ANTI-COALITION COMMANDER**

**COALITION FORCES CREATED CHECKPOINTS AROUND THE CITY [AND] EMPLOYED RECONNAISSANCE AIRCRAFT TO TAKE AERIAL PHOTOS...TO MAKE MAPS OF THE CITY**

### The Battle Resumes

Throughout the ceasefire, skirmishes continued. Anti-coalition forces used local mosques and schools to store weapons and fighters, and they constructed roadblocks in the city in preparation for renewed fighting. The enemy seized private residences forcing the owners to either flee the city or stay in their barricaded homes. On April 19, 2004, U.S. officials announced they had reached an agreement with local community leaders to defuse tension in Al-Fallujah. The agreement included conducting joint patrols by Coalition and ISF troops. The arrangement failed to last more than twenty-four hours. The next day, Sunni militants launched an attack on Marines patrolling the city. Employing heavy weapons, they soon convinced American leaders that Al-Fallujah city fathers had no power to persuade fighters in the town to turn in their weapons. Thus, the Marines prepared to move in with force to pacify the city.<sup>25</sup>

On April 27, 2004, enemy forces attacked Coalition defensive positions in Al-Fallujah, and Allied troops called in CAS attacks. One aircraft bomb hit a flatbed truck and sedan, setting off secondary explosions that resulted in a massive twenty-minute display that lit up the sky for miles around. The insurgents fled to a nearby building, and when Coalition aircraft fired on it, another series of huge secondary explosions resulted.

On May 1, claiming that they had finally broken enemy resistance, U.S. forces withdrew from Al-Fallujah. Officially, General Conway announced he had unilaterally decided to turn over any remaining operations to the newly-formed Fallujah Brigade commanded by former Ba'athist Gen. Jasim Mohammed Saleh. Conway said this force would be armed with U.S. weapons and equipment under the

terms of an agreement that would allow the Iraqis to complete the retaking of the city. Several days later, it became clear that Saleh could not be trusted. Indeed, Coalition intelligence had discovered that he had been involved in military actions against Shi'ites during Saddam Hussein's rule and intended to use his shiny new American weapons in this task again. To stop this potential conflict, U.S. leaders announced that Muhammed Latif would assume control of the Brigade. The entire effort proved to be a debacle. By September, the group had dissolved and handed over all the American weapons to the insurgents. This fiasco eventually led to the Second Battle of Al-Fallujah in November.<sup>26</sup>

### Preparations for the Next Battle

While the U.S. technically departed, in fact, between May and October, American forces remained nearby at Camp Baharia only a few miles from Al-Fallujah. Back home in the U.S., perceptions about the on-going conflict, which was supposed to be over, began to change. This enemy was a group of insurgents not an organized resistance being carried out by troops loyal to Saddam Hussein. Coalition officials had discovered, too late, that the reliance on Allied-supported local militia such as the Fallujah Brigade was risky at best. One U.S. analyst observed after the first battle, "The handwriting is on the wall. The Battle of Al-Fallujah was not a defeat — but we cannot afford many more victories like it."<sup>27</sup>

One person the battle brought into the public eye was Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, who emerged as the most famous anti-Coalition commander in Iraq. He became a particular target of the Allied forces because his troops had killed twenty-seven American military personnel in and around Al-Fallujah during the battle. Hundreds of Iraqi civilians and insurgents had died — most were buried in Al-Fallujah's former soccer stadium, which became known as the Martyr's Cemetery. As time passed, the city became a fortress filled with a maze of killing zones and hideouts from which the enemy planned to ambush Allied ground forces if and when they decided to retake the city.<sup>28</sup>

To prevent the defenders from being resupplied or insurgents from escaping, Coalition forces created checkpoints around the city. They also employed reconnaissance aircraft to take aerial photos that experts used to make maps of the city for use by attackers. U.S. leaders also assigned Iraqi interpreters to U.S. units. Throughout the days leading up to the actual assault, the Americans executed surgical air strikes and periodically fired artillery barrages designed to deplete the enemy's numbers and morale. There were 13,500 American, Iraqi, and British shock troops in place to carry out the attack. Of these numbers 6,500 were U.S. Marines and 1,500 U.S. Army personnel. Approximately 2,500 Navy sailors played a support role. Officials organized U.S. force into two Regimental Combat Teams: Regimental Combat Team 1 included the



Fallujah during the second battle

**WITH THE PREVALENT LOW INTENSITY CONFLICT... MENTALITY INUNDATING THE CORPS, THERE HAS DEVELOPED A MINDSET THAT SMALL AND LIGHT IS GOOD, AND BIG AND HEAVY IS BAD. THE TRUTH BE TOLD, SMALL AND LIGHT EQUATES TO WEAK AND DEAD**

3rd Battalion/1st Marines, 3d Battalion/5th Marines, Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 4 and 23 (Seabees) as well as the U.S. Army's 2d Battalion/7th Cavalry. Regimental Combat Team 7 was comprised of the 1st Battalion/8th Marines, 1st Battalion/3d Marines, the U.S. Army's 2d Battalion/2d Infantry and 2d Battalion/12th Cavalry. Of the total, roughly 2,000 Iraqi troops were supposed to participate in the assault. Last, but not least, 850 members of the famed 1st Battalion of the British Black Watch battalion took part in the encirclement of, and assault on, Al-Fallujah. Ground forces were supported by CAS from Coalition aircraft and Marine and Army artillery battalions.<sup>29</sup>

Both the Army leaders and 1st Marine Division Commander Maj. Gen. Richard F. Natonski realized as they planned for the second battle was that they needed tanks and, later, they also needed air cover; lots of it! Natonski's regimental Combat Team-1 (RCT-1) commander, Col. Michael Shupp, went further saying "we saw that we needed more combat power to thwart the enemy and their defenses. We didn't have enough heavy armor to go in there with us, . . ." Indeed, a decade earlier Marine Maj. Dennis W. Beal had declared, "With the prevalent Low Intensity Conflict (LIC) mentality inundating the Corps, there has developed a mindset that small and light is good, and big and heavy is bad. The truth be told, small and light equates to weak and dead."<sup>30</sup>

#### Enemy Forces

In April, Al-Fallujah had been defended by about 500 "hardcore" and 2,000 "part time" insurgents. In November, *Time Magazine* determined that the number of insurgents had grown to 3,000-

4,000. One reporter for the *New York Times* estimated roughly the same number were present but believed that many enemy fighters, especially their leaders, fled before the actual attack began. According to one ABC News correspondent, by September 24, 2004, he had been told by a senior U.S. official that they estimated the enemy strength to be nearly 5,000 mostly non-Iraqi insurgents. He also reported that this same official had declared their primary goal was to capture Abu Musab al Zarqawi who was supposed to be in Al-Fallujah.<sup>31</sup>

Ominously, for the Coalition, not only had the number of enemy present increased, but Iraqi insurgents and foreign Mujahideen fighters had built formidable fortified defenses throughout the city. They dug a labyrinth of tunnels and trenches, prepared spider holes and planted an extensive number and variety of IEDs. Within many of the abandoned homes in Al-Fallujah, the insurgents placed several large propane bottles, gasoline drums, and ordnance, wired to a remote trigger they could detonate when Coalition troops entered the buildings. They blocked streets with "Jersey" barriers behind which they could attack unsuspecting Allied forces entering a house or neighborhood. The enemy had a variety of advanced small arms much of which had been given to them in April by the U.S. who thought they were friends. These included M-14s, M-16s, body armor, uniforms, and helmets.<sup>32</sup>

To make matters worse for the Marines assault units, the enemy had placed cleverly disguised booby traps in various buildings and vehicles, including wiring doors and windows to grenades and other ordnance. Anticipating U.S. designs to take control of the roof tops of high buildings, they bricked up stairwells to the roofs of many buildings, creating paths into prepared fields of fire which they hoped the Americans would try to enter. Final intelligence reports predicted that Allied units might encounter Chechens, Libyans, Syrians, Iranians, Saudis, Filipino Muslims as well as Iraqis—mostly Sunnis. These reports anticipated that most of Al-Fallujah's civilian population had fled the city, thus, reducing the potential for non-combatant casualties. They believed that 75–90 percent of the population of 300,000 had departed.<sup>33</sup>

It was a battle that most, Coalition (especially U.S.) leaders and combat troops realized would be difficult and bloody. The troops themselves worried out loud that many might not make it out alive. With nearly six months to prepare, the rebel forces inside Al-Fallujah had had time to build formidable defenses. To quote one official report, "American forces entering the city would face a bewildering array of improvised explosive devices (IEDs), vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VBIEDs), mines, roadblocks, strong points, and well-constructed fighting positions." Worse, "Many of the insurgents were foreign Islamic extremists who were more than willing to die." Besides, they were convinced that since "they had stopped the Marines in April," they could attain "victory" again.<sup>34</sup>

Between early May and late October, representatives of the interim Iraqi government, headed by



Clearing buildings in Fallujah is a dangerous business.

Prime Minister Iyad Allawi, continued negotiations with the rebels in a desperate effort to end the conflict peacefully. It proved to be a futile gesture. On October 30, 2004, U.S. officials initiated airstrikes against suspected militant pockets in Al-Fallujah even as they prepared for a major ground operation to root out insurgents in what had become an enemy stronghold. Airpower would play a major role in the second part of the struggle.

#### **If at First You Don't Succeed, "Try, Try Again!"**

In November 2004, one of the most significant battles of OIF took place in this city whose name would soon go down in U.S. military history alongside Khe Sanh, Guadalcanal, Antietam, and Bunker Hill. The fight to gain total control of the city of Al-Fallujah in early-November has been seen as infamous and heroic. The bitter resistance faced and the hard fought victories have made it a name to remember among historians and military personnel. Designated Operation *Phantom Fury*, it officially lasted from November 7 to December 23, 2004, and, as detailed above, was spearheaded by both U.S. Marine and Army elements and British troops of the famous "Black Watch" battalion.<sup>35</sup>

It was a fight in which Coalition, especially U.S., air power played a significant role. Close Air Support weapons systems played the greatest role, particularly gunships such as the AC-130s which participated almost totally at night for fear of being attacked by highly accurate surface-to-air missiles (SAMs). It was tactical standard operating procedure for the gunships and had been since the Vietnam War. The bitter and bloody fighting in and around the city caused some ground commanders to complain that keeping one of the most powerful ground-support weapons out of the fight in daylight

was forcing them to fight with "one hand tied behind their backs."<sup>36</sup> However, risking one of these scarce and important assets was something that the Air Force was loathe to do after losing one during the First Gulf War.

According to respected air power expert Rebecca Grant, even though "the public focus" was on the land war, "coalition air forces were deeply involved in urban 'stability' operations." In fact, the November 2004 sweep of the Iraqi town of Al-Fallujah became "the benchmark for airpower in urban joint force warfare."<sup>37</sup> Many analysts agreed that Al-Fallujah became a model of modern urban-warfare and its "resolution." It was combat in the most bitter and arduous definition of that term. Once President George W. Bush declared "mission accomplished" in OIF, the next phase focused on what military leaders called "stability operations." The doctrine underwriting this phase of operations evolved from Army experiences in Panama (Operation *Just Cause*) and Southeastern Europe (Operation *Allied Force*) in which they concluded after a regime change they would have to pacify and stabilize the invaded nation under a new indigenous and hopefully democratic regime. By the next century, most Army officials saw this as a key final step for future military missions.<sup>38</sup>

Specifically, "stability operations" combined defensive and offensive operations with support processes to form the key aspects of the new combined-arms doctrine. Army planners developed this new doctrine in four phases. The first two dealt with preparations and planning followed by Phase III, "Decisive Combat Operations and Phase IV, "Stability Operations." In previous cases, Phase IV had been relatively easy to implement mainly because the local populations were generally supportive of the U.S. and glad to see the end of the dictatorial regime of the overthrown government. Iraq proved to be much more difficult. In fact, it was a bloody test that created formidable demands on Allied ground forces and vital air forces. To quote Dr. Grant, "Fallujah marked the unveiling of an urban-warfare model based on persistent air surveillance, precision air strikes, and swift airlift support. Together, these factors took urban operations to a new and higher level."<sup>39</sup>

#### **Operations *Phantom Fury* and *Al-Fajr***

Department of Defense officials originally designated the tactical operation to secure Al-Fallujah *Phantom Fury*. Later, the Minister of Defense in the new Iraqi government renamed it Operation *Al-Fajr*, an Arabic term for "dawn." Iraqi officials promised their American counterparts to expect about 2,000 ISF troops to fight with the Allies, but as the jump off date approached, Gen. George W. Casey Jr., the commander of Central Command (CENTCOM) and senior U.S. commander in Iraq, had to admit he did not really know how many Iraqis would participate. With or without their so-called allies, Coalition forces finally launched their assault late on November 7, 2004.

**U.S. AIR POWER PLAYED A SIGNIFICANT ROLE. CLOSE AIR SUPPORT WEAPONS SYSTEMS PLAYED THE GREATEST ROLE, PARTICULARLY GUNSHIPS**



Firing on an enemy position.

**ON NOVEMBER 9, THE ALLIES BEGAN INTENSIVE AIR STRIKES WHICH DEVASTATED SEVERAL MAJOR BUILDINGS AND THE TRAIN STATION PRIOR TO U.S. TROOPS MOVING INTO SOUTH AL-FALLUJAH**

One key factor in making this attack was the need for the U.S. to regain control of the city from insurgents in preparation for national elections scheduled for January 2005. In one regard, this seemed to make sense in a Clausewitzian manner if “war is an extension of diplomacy and politics.” In Al-Fallujah this mattered little since of the population of 300,000 civilians, 75-90 percent had fled.<sup>40</sup>

Led by U.S. Marine assault units, the Allies quickly captured two strategic bridges and a hospital situated on a peninsula formed by the Euphrates River, which U.S. intelligence believed led to an enemy fall back zone if they were expelled from central Al-Fallujah. Later, evidence suggested that the insurgents were using the hospital as a propaganda center broadcasting false information on the number of civilian casualties. As the American and British advance proceeded, the Iraqi 36th Commando Battalion took charge of Al-Fallujah General Hospital in order to provide medical services to injured civilians. The use of this unit would have later consequences since it was mostly a “political” unit comprised of individuals from the five major Iraqi political parties. In fact, the only competent personnel were Kurds. Among some of the Kurds, the U. S. enthusiasm for their support led them to hope, indeed, believe that after the conflict, the Americans would support their efforts for an independent Kurdish state.<sup>41</sup>

One major problem the Allies faced from the very beginning was the aforementioned maze of tunnels under and through the city which the enemy used either to go from weapons cache to weapons cache or to escape hopeless situations. The most frustrating aspect of these tunnels was that many were under mosques and schools. The Coalition was reluctant to attack schools, and international law protected mosques from attack unless

it could be absolutely proved they were being used for military purposes.<sup>42</sup>

As the attack began, Iraqi Prime Minister Ayad Allawi declared a national state of emergency to stem violence which had erupted elsewhere just prior to the assault on Al-Fallujah. In the city itself, he imposed a twenty-four-hour curfew on all residents who were warned not to carry weapons. With American forces having cordoned off the city, no one was allowed access which was a discernible difference from the previous April when the enemy exploited the all too loose blockade to infiltrate personnel and supplies into the city.<sup>43</sup>

On November 9, the Allies began intensive air strikes which devastated several major buildings and the train station prior to U.S. troops moving into south Al-Fallujah. Throughout the campaign, ground forces received abundant support from a combination of highly accurate CAS and artillery fire as they began to enter the city’s maze of streets and alleys. Coalition forces frequently reported observing secondary explosions during air and artillery strikes which evidence suggested were explosions of weapons caches. By 1700 hours, the Marines had cut all the electrical power in the city and were making steady advances into the northeastern part of Al-Fallujah. As nightfall came, they had pushed into the center of the city about 800 to 1,000 yards, and set up defensive positions in preparation for resuming the offensive. On the western side of the city, Allied units ran into heavy fire which slowed their advance. Having to root out the enemy in house-to-house fighting also caused their advance to be more protracted. Reports from the battle areas indicated that the enemy still had ease of movement in some parts of the city. At the end of the day, American officials announced the capture of thirty-eight insurgents, four of whom were foreign fighters. Two Marines died in a bulldozer accident.<sup>44</sup>

That same day, leaders of the Iraqi Islamic Party, the major Sunni political faction, denounced the attack on Al-Fallujah and withdrew from the interim government. The Sunni clerics of the Muslim Scholars Association, which represented 3,000 mosques, called for a boycott of the January 2005 national elections. To make matters worse, that afternoon, one of Prime Minister Allawi’s cousins, the man’s wife and daughter-in-law were kidnapped in Baghdad and threatened with execution unless he ended the assault on Al-Fallujah.<sup>45</sup>

The following day, Marine leaders reported that they held 70 percent of the city, which included the mayor’s office, several mosques, a commercial center, and other major civic objectives. Employing PGMs, the Allies continued targeted airstrikes on buildings that held insurgent forces. American officials publically proclaimed that Coalition troops had taken the neighborhood of Jolan in northwestern Al-Fallujah with less resistance than expected. The paucity of opposition continued as U.S. forces seized and crossed Al-Fallujah’s main east-west highway. American units in the southwestern parts of the city, specifically in the neighborhoods of Resala and Nazal, reported heavy resistance.



Iraqi civilians flee Fallujah.

**BY THE 12TH, COALITION OFFICIALS COULD ANNOUNCE THEY HAD TAKEN 80 PERCENT OF THE CITY AND BELIEVED THEY WOULD HAVE TOTAL CONTROL OF AL-FALLUJAH WITHIN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS**

General Casey predicted that fighting would increase as the Coalition drove through the outer ring of defenses into the heart of the city where insurgents were expected to leave myriad IEDs. Many Allied soldiers reported receiving fire from schools and mosques, often by women and children.<sup>46</sup>

As the assault surged forward, new reports confirmed earlier speculation that the enemy was hiding arms under mosques in the city. Lt. Gen. Thomas Metz, the commander of foreign military operations in Iraq, announced that many of the mosques searched housed munitions and weapons. Specifically, the U.S. Marines' 7th Regimental Combat Team (RCT) along with the 5th Battalion, 3rd Brigade of the Iraqi Army seized Al Tawfiq Mosque. In turn, the Iraqi Police Service's Emergency Response Unit took the Hydra Mosque supported by the 2d Battalion, 1st Brigade of the Iraqi Intervention Force and U.S. Marines from the 7th RCT. American marines and soldiers, supported by Iraqi Security Forces, captured the Muhammadia Mosque in one of the biggest clashes of the Al-Fallujah campaign. Later, it was confirmed that the insurgents were using this mosque as a command and control center. A convention center across the street from the mosque was also captured in addition to two ancillary facilities in which weapons, munitions and IED-materials were hidden. Eight marines were killed in that operation as well as dozens of insurgents.<sup>47</sup>

On November 11, 2004, some of the more sobering events took place. First, Allied forces uncovered what Maj. Gen. Abdul Qader, the local Iraqi forces commander, called "slaughter houses," lined in black cloth, where terrorists made video footage showing hostages being berated and killed. Later, that same day, two Marine Super Cobra attack helicopters

were hit by ground fire and forced to land in separate incidents near Al-Fallujah. The crews were not injured and were eventually rescued. By the end of the day, American forces had totally secured the Jolan neighborhood and turned it over to Iraqi forces. This area had been the main headquarters of the insurgents.<sup>48</sup>

By the 12th, Coalition officials could announce they had taken 80 percent of the city and believed they would have total control of Al-Fallujah within forty-eight hours with full pacification being reached within a week. The imminent victory had already cost the lives of eighteen Americans and five Iraqis. All told, 164 U.S. and Iraqi troops had been wounded, with an estimated 600 insurgents killed. They also reported that the insurgents had been pushed into the southern part of town. In addition, 151 enemy troops were detained by coalition troops. An additional 300 individuals who had negotiated surrender from within a mosque that day were soon moved in with them. According to one report, Allied units continued to move in a southeasterly direction from Highway 10 into the Resala, Nazal and Jebail areas. One main concern was the existence of sleeper cells that might pop up once the initial Coalition assault ended.<sup>49</sup>

By November 13, American officials claimed they had achieved control of most of the city, and a house-to-house mop up sweep was about to commence. In turn, the Iraqi national security adviser reported that more than 1,000 insurgents had been killed in fighting in Al-Fallujah, with an additional 200 captured. As promised the mop up operation began two days later, on the 15th, with leadership estimating it would take four to six days. This process was made more difficult by the extensive subterranean tunnel labyrinth under the city that focused on a large bunker filled with munitions. Most of the tunnels were protected by numerous IEDs and booby-traps. To conserve American lives, troops normally entered the houses over the tunnels after tanks smashed through the walls or sappers used explosives to blast open the doors. In nearly every case, the Marines discovered large weapons caches. As this grisly process unfolded, Coalition aircraft continued to provide CAS and reconnaissance support for Marines attacking buildings throughout the city.<sup>50</sup>

In the meantime, the Iraqi Red Crescent continued to complain they were unable to deliver food, water and medical aid to civilians in the city. Instead, their trucks went to the surrounding villages where tens of thousands of displaced civilians camped in tents to escape the conflict. One cruel irony was that, in spite of the public criticism of the Americans for not letting supplies into Al-Fallujah, to have done so would have risked the lives of the relief personnel and prolonged the campaign. Indeed, most of the supplies were from the U.S. as were the vehicles. Worst of all, leadership announced on November 16, that the U.S. death toll had increased to thirty-eight and the Iraqi's to six. A total of 278 Americans had been wounded. Estimates placed the enemy death toll at 1,200.<sup>51</sup>

MANY DIED ON BOTH SIDES IN THE MAJOR BATTLE OF OIF, WHICH TOOK PLACE AFTER "VICTORY" HAD BEEN DECLARED. ONLY RECENTLY HAVE EXPERTS... BEGUN TO EXAMINE THE ROLE OF AIR POWER IN THIS BLOODY ENGAGEMENT

Throughout the remainder of the month, sporadic fighting continued at an ever decreasing level, with Allied forces eventually conducting a search-and-cordon operation in and around Al-Fallujah — mostly in the north. The action resulted in the detention of seventeen fighters who were transferred to Abu Ghuraib Prison for further questioning. The final skirmish occurred on December 23. It cost the lives of three U.S. Marines and twenty-four insurgents. By the end, Operation *Phantom Fury* had the ignominious distinction of being the bloodiest battle of the Iraq or Second Persian Gulf War.<sup>52</sup>

As one official history admitted even though the battle had been an Allied victory, it had been fraught with problems, including, “communications, equipment, breaching operations, intelligence, and perception issues.”<sup>53</sup> The same report concluded that, “The second battle of Al-Fallujah proved costly for U.S. forces. Although casualties were light compared to urban combat in the past, seventy Americans were killed and over 600 wounded.”<sup>54</sup> There are others who would argue that all of this was a needless exercise in futility considering that within less than a year they had to perform the entire thing over.

The White House announced that Al-Fallujah had been taken, which they translated as a great victory. But what kind of victory was it? Some suggested that with more victories like this one the U.S. could not afford to win the larger war. Jonathan F. Keiler, in the *Naval Institute Proceedings* of January 2005, simply asked, “Was the battle of Al-Fallujah a victory or a defeat? . . . That, “The Marine Corps’ military operations in urban terrain doctrine recognizes that tactical success does not necessarily translate to strategic victory.” He concluded with an ominous warning, “It is hard to say whether the drawn-out process of securing that medium-sized Iraqi city was a one-time event or the beginning of a trend. I hope it is the former.”<sup>55</sup>

Of course, this evaluation came very soon after the battle concluded and during a time when many American analysts, historians, politicians, military leaders, and citizens remained hopeful that the Iraqi adventure had been justified and might still come to a positive conclusion. Since then, both these notions have been thoroughly eroded. It is also important to realize that most of this initial scrutiny focused on the ground engagement since so many died on both sides in the major battle of OIF, which took place after “victory” had been declared. Only recently have experts like Dr. Grant and others begun to examine the role of air power in this bloody engagement both from the standpoint of how it performed and if it should have played a larger role? This next section examines these questions and others regarding how Allied air forces were or should have been employed at Al-Fallujah.

### The Role of Air Power

From the time that Allied forces first invaded Iraq in March 2003, until they departed on December 18, 2011, the main battles had involved

urban warfare. This should not be surprising since roughly 75 percent of Iraqis live in the sixteen largest cities in the country. While the first phase of OIF focused on ending Saddam’s regime and eventually capturing him, the fighting itself did not end on May 1, 2003 when President Bush declared “mission accomplished.” In the north, the Baathists and Sunni Muslims who had dominated the government and army under the toppled dictator continued to resist. As noted, by March 2004, this resistance had coalesced in Al-Fallujah. In the two battles that followed, combatants confronted all the classic features of urban warfare. Standard procedure for taking a town or city had always prescribed the use of ground forces, while aerial attacks had normally occurred after a ground assault had failed or ground to a halt such as in the case of the World War II Battle of Caen.<sup>56</sup>

As Dr. Grant said, “Commanders engaged in urban warfare long have regarded airpower as a blunt instrument. In battles from Stalingrad in the 1940s to Grozny in the mid-1990s, airpower’s primary purpose was to turn buildings into rubble — and fast.” Air Force leaders were caught in a conundrum over how to approach their role once the conflict in Al-Fallujah began. What they discovered but has largely been ignored was that, “Fallujah marked the unveiling of an urban-warfare model based on persistent air surveillance, precision air strikes and swift airlift support. Together, these factors took urban operations to a new and higher level.”<sup>57</sup>

The first battle for Al-Fallujah manifested itself when insurgents ambushed and killed four U.S. contractors on March 31, 2004 and, later that day, five soldiers with an IED a few miles north of the city. American leadership reasoned that these horrific killings demanded retaliation against those specifically responsible for them. As a result, on April 4, some 1,300 members of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Force, under General Conway initiated Operation *Vigilant Resolve* in an attempt to locate those responsible for the slayings and draw out other insurgents. Prominently featured in this manhunt were AC-130 gunships which targeted specific sites designated by Marines calling for precision air strikes against buildings sheltering terrorists or insurgents. This effort ended in utter frustration due to political pressures from the interim Iraqi government’s leaders. Indeed, “This abortive April foray . . . was no pitched battle of army on army. The key to the strategy lay in isolating insurgent leaders and strong points inside the city.” The key component had been airpower and not ground power.<sup>58</sup>

The impact of air power manifested itself since it not only covered the withdrawal of coalition ground forces but also continued to fly ISR, CAS and interdiction sorties during the period between the two battles. As the air war expanded, Gen. Richard B. Myers, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff (JCS), remarked that the AC-130 gunships and fixed-wing aircraft attacks had produced devastating results. He concluded, “There were a lot of

AS COMBAT UNFOLDED IN AL-FALLUJAH, "THE AIR COMPONENT PROVED IT COULD DO QUITE A LOT TO TARGET THOSE ENGAGED IN DOOR-TO-DOOR THUGGERY"

enemy [fighters] that died there." In spite of the clear signs of success by air power, many ground commanders remained convinced that only ground units could carry out urban assault missions. To this end, they normally never called for CAS from AC-130s unless nighttime conditions were perfect. They might call on fighter aircraft with PGMs in the daytime as a last resort.<sup>59</sup>

During the ensuing seven months prior to the Second Battle of Fallujah, the air component played an ever expanding role in the intensifying search for prime insurgency targets in Al-Fallujah and other cities. These efforts came more and more to rely on constant ISR efforts employing both air and space assets. During this phase of the conflict, air planners had assiduously analyzed and interpreted the data they had gathered while simultaneously applying their efforts to bolstering overall political goals of the campaign. As a result, they kept a steady and measured process of air attacks underway even though the ground assaults had stopped. Throughout, they targeted repeated attacks against sites believed to be the hideouts of enemy leaders such as al-Zarqawi. General Ryan admitted, "There was never any delusion that airpower was capable of stopping door-to-door thuggery." Still, he believed that hitting these kinds of targets was like cutting back the "leaves and branches" if not hitting at the roots.<sup>60</sup>

As combat unfolded in Al-Fallujah, "the air component proved it could do quite a lot to target those engaged in door-to-door thuggery" since the "combination of persistent ISR and on-call strike aircraft was nothing short of stunning." New aircraft, like the MQ-1 *Predator* UAV, was only beginning to demonstrate the total impact of its sensors and shooter technology. During the weeks prior to the second assault, this UAV and other aerial platforms not only located high value targets with uncanny accuracy, but their ability to "hunt for insurgents soon evolved into successful battle space shaping" All this climaxed in early fall when "a series of pre-planned strikes took out key insurgent targets—and did so with great precision." In one case, a *Predator* located and followed a vehicle carrying weapons and ordnance as it parked under a carport in one of the city's compounds. Once given permission to fire, it launched a Hellfire missile into the parked vehicle destroying it without damaging the nearby house.<sup>61</sup>

The main attack on Al-Fallujah began in the late night hours of November 7/8 and lasted, officially, for eight days. Throughout, aircraft hit pre-planned targets, such as barricaded insurgent sites, then shifted to on-call response. As intermittent fighting continued throughout the remainder of the year strike sorties across Iraq increased with weekly ISR sorties alone reaching 161 and peaking at 379. In the end, the major advantages that Allied airpower afforded were: total air dominance; layered twenty-four-hour support; joint integration, especially employing AC-130 CAS; strafing by gunships and fixed-wing fighter platforms such as the F-15; sustained and accurate ISR coverage; suc-

cessful first-strike capability; ability to make immediate follow-on attacks; state-of-the-art airlift and medevac capabilities; and the most up-to-date PGMs and other ordnance such as the GBU-38 Joint Direct Attack Munitions (JDAM). Based on the advantages provided only by air power, a new urban warfare model evolved out of this conflict. It was a paradigm that provided a margin of safety and superiority for forces on the ground while also taking the pursuit of major urban targets to a new level of proficiency through persistent use of such air power roles as ISR and on-call strike.<sup>62</sup>

### The Role of the Fixed-Wing Gunship: Critics and Supporters

During OIF, as had been the case during Operations *Desert Shield/Storm*, the most popular air asset for those on the ground proved to be the AC-130H, and later, AC-130U fixed-wing gunships. Most of the Army ground commanders around Al-Fallujah in 2004 argued that since ground forces were taking heavy casualties in close combat and the AC-130s were so effective the latter should take the risk to provide them CAS during daylight hours. These critics seemed to have forgotten the consequences of even minimal daylight on the "Spirit 03" during operations in *Desert Storm* on January 31, 1991. It was not that the Army did not like the AC-130s. One Army officer said, "The AC-130 — what a great platform. When it's flying, the insurgents are killed by the buckets. However, they will not fly during the day In Fallujah we had a better time during periods of darkness, and in the day [we] experienced difficulties because of the absence of the AC-130."<sup>63</sup>

As gunship crews explained to their brothers on the ground the AC-130s electro-optical and infrared sensors were best employed at night. Human targets on the ground stand out on screens inside the specially fitted cargo airframe, which the shadows and clutter of daytime eliminated. On the other hand, the gunship has a large profile, flies in predictable orbits and is slow to maneuver out of harm's way. While C-130 cargo aircraft flying tactical supply missions routinely fly daytime missions, they seek to avoid threat areas rather than linger right over them. CENTCOM Deputy Commander Lt. Gen. Lance L. Smith, USAF, noted, "If the situation absolutely required the AC-130 to operate during daylight hours, then it was used that way." He also assured *Inside Washington Publishers* that, "Both the commanders and crews will do whatever is necessary to best support the troops on the ground, given the total complex of systems available." Naturally, the AC-130 crews agreed with that assessment saying, "Obviously, we've surged aircraft in support of current operations. "There's...twice as many [in Iraq] as four months ago." This was correct since, by late 2004 there were at any one time, as many as twelve gunships in the Area of Responsibility (AOR) as opposed to the six that had originally been deployed. This was true even with demands for AC-130 services still



MQ-1 Predator.

**IF THE AC-130S CAN PROVIDE A UNIQUE CAPABILITY WITH PERSISTENCE AND PRECISION, WHY WOULDN'T WE USE THEM?**

**LATER... HUNDREDS OF... SA-7s, -9s, -14s AND -16s WERE DISCOVERED IN CACHES ALL OVER IRAQ**

urgently being sent to Washington by forces in Afghanistan.<sup>64</sup>

From 2003 to 2011, one of the biggest concerns for AC-130s was the threat of man-portable air defense systems or MANPADs. As these weapons proliferated, the risk to the AC-130s increased at a similar rate. As Smith noted, "To effectively employ its weapons ... the AC-130 has to fly within the envelope of a number of enemy [MANPADs and anti-aircraft artillery], which this enemy has in quantity." He concluded, "Even if it could survive — 'a big if' it would either constantly be moving out of its orbit to avoid threats, or [it would] incur combat damage resulting in the system being unavailable for long periods of time due to repairs." To the ground troops, the spectacular results of gunship's 105mm were much appreciated as was the rapid rate of fire of the AC-130's 40 mm cannon whose ordnance can pierce thin-skinned vehicles. The U model could engage two targets simultaneously and with its enhanced survivability, increased stand-off range, armor protection and electronic countermeasures, it executed nearly all the handful of daytime missions flown in dire emergencies. Most daylight CAS was flown by aircraft like the A-10 attack aircraft or F-16 fighters which employed internal guns and/or bombs/rockets to attack enemy positions. However, while they were more agile, their inability to loiter over the target limited how long they could support ground forces.<sup>65</sup>

Throughout this period of insurgency, unlike the other attack aircraft, the AC-130 was in very short supply, having only eight H models and 13 U models—although four more of the advanced Spooky versions were in production and expected by 2006. Of course, one of the main disadvantages was the fact ground forces wanted the gunships and not everyone could have them. Senior leadership was

not inclined to risk these high-demand/low-density (HD/LD) assets. Some ground commanders criticized such caution. One Army officer at Al-Fallujah complained that, "Instead of sticking it out and supporting the Marines [and] soldiers in the day with the best ISR [intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance] and air strike platform, they leave the area." As a result, our troops fighting in very complex and difficult terrain are left to less efficient and less agile air platforms." The truth was that AC-130 pilots and crews were always willing to jump in the fight to protect their comrades on the ground. Some even argued that MANPAD threats were relatively low given the higher altitudes at which they fly. Still, official policy restricted such daytime missions. This caution should not be sneered at considering that the loss of one gunship would cost 14 young lives and one of only 21 gunships.<sup>66</sup>

Some critics like Army Col. David Hunt, a former Green Beret, declared that: "It's not the captains and the majors flying these missions. They're the bravest of the brave! The generals are making a statement, 'We'll tell you how best to use our airplanes.'" He went on to say, "The problem is AFSOC's [standard operating procedures], routine and legacy of not flying during the day." "They are frankly ignoring the intelligence and actual capabilities of the insurgent." Others went so far as to declare that most SAMS in Iraq "topped out in a range below the AC-130s normal operating altitude, but 'these insurgents [also] are operating with old, worn-out equipment.'" They concluded, "I've seen these MANPADs, and I have not found one that was in very good working order. All these factors make the risk well within the margins to fly during the day." Hunt declared that, "The Air Force is still trying to protect [the gunships] from the rocket-propelled grenades and the SA-7s, [and] the truth is the Air Force will care more about their flying platforms than the infantry and special forces and Marines on the ground. If a guy on the ground says they want the AC-130, they should get it — now."<sup>67</sup>

In response one senior Air Force leader replied that, "These are critical HD/LD assets that are not easily replaced!" However, he went on to say, "But given the other risks we are taking there with folks on the ground, if the AC-130s can provide a unique capability with persistence and precision, why wouldn't we use them?" Even with such bravado noted, the truth was that dozens and, later, hundreds of Soviet/Russian-made SA-7s, -9s, -14s and -16s were discovered in caches all over Iraq where the insurgents were strongest. In retrospect we now know that the enemy had many more where these came from and were just waiting to deploy them against the slow flying Spectres/Spookys. As one Air Force officer later pointed out, "You cannot exactly predict what threat will be present." Besides, from the beginning of OEF in 2001 to this very day, SOF aircrews have taken "huge risks" with the AC-130s in Iraq and Afghanistan almost "always" agreeing to come to the aid of their fellow Americans.<sup>68</sup>

As one might expect, this was not the first time

An AC-130 close up.



**SOME ARMY OFFICERS HAD CRITICIZED THE AIR FORCE FOR WITHDRAWING AN AC-130 FROM ROBERTS RIDGE DURING OPERATION ANACONDA IN AFGHANISTAN**

**WHEN [THE THREAT] CATCHES UP WITH YOU, IT CAN BE DISASTROUS**

this kind of debate had percolated to the surface. The daylight loss of 14 AC-130H crew members during action near Al-Khafji, Saudi Arabia, during the 1991 Persian Gulf War caused most Air Force special operators to be uneasy about committing their assets to daytime battles. Some ground personnel privately made it seem they are scared. However, this was a valid lesson, and there is a great deal of difference between being brave and fool-hardy. It is worth noting that in March 2002, some Army officers had criticized the Air Force for withdrawing an AC-130 from Roberts Ridge during Operation *Anaconda* in Afghanistan after an overnight battle in which friendly troops were under intense fire. The fact is the AC-130 was engaged for more than two hours and was running low on fuel. No backup gunship was sent due to daytime restrictions. As one former AFSOC commander said, "There are certainly times when they can fly in the daytime [however] it's just that when [the threat] catches up with you, it can be disastrous." Besides, as some ground commanders admit and most airmen already realize, it is up to senior commanders to appraise the big picture and utilize their assets prudently. After all, a threat always seems "most intense to the guys in the foxhole," and soldiers tend to get attached to a particular platform. To quote General Smith, "taking stock of the bigger picture, commanders can provide capability around the clock for a sustained period of time by taking advantage of all the strengths of all the weapon systems available and employing them accordingly."<sup>69</sup>

To quote Mike Klausutis, a highly experienced special operations expert, "The AC-130 is arguably the single best CAS platform to support troops in contact in night engagements. It can find and attack targets at night when other assets like the A-10

and F-16 are not nearly as effective." All these aircraft have their strengths, and balancing the platform to use under any given circumstance in order to provide around-the-clock coverage is the essential issue.<sup>70</sup>

### **The After Effects**

Officially, during the second battle for Al-Fallujah, the U.S. suffered ninety-five killed and 560 wounded, while insurgents had 1,350 killed and 1,500 captured. Civilian deaths were put at 800. Of a total population of 300,000, more than 200,000 civilians were displaced by the combat that totally destroyed nearly 40 percent of the city. In fact, the structural damage was lessened by the accuracy of air power assets such as the AC-130. So many of the casualties came in the earliest moments of the offensive when, in an effort to avoid collateral damage Marines attempted to wind their way through the narrow streets that became perfect spots for ambushes and ideal killing zones. To stop the loss of life, commanders moved their forces at night when the AC-130s could provide CAS. More importantly, they gave up on sparing homes and civilian lives since the enemy was using them to shield their forces. The Second Battle of Fallujah proved the great virtues of the AC-130s and made it clear that to keep this most effective weapon should continue to be employed, potentially in more modern versions, in future conflicts.<sup>71</sup>

One article on the battle summed up the role of the gunships saying, the AC-130U gunship demonstrated its great value to the boots on the ground. Its precision fire support from the sky both day and night suppressed fortified and moving insurgent targets. The sophisticated fire control system with massive amounts of ammunition on board gives

AL-FALLUJAH, OFTEN REFERRED TO AS THE "CITY OF MOSQUES," WAS OFFICIALLY HOME TO 133 MOSQUES PRIOR TO THE FIGHTING. AFTERWARD, SOME REPORTS DECLARED THAT 60 HAD BEEN DESTROYED

AC-130U the ability to provide a steady CAS without the need of FAC unlike other fixed-wing aircraft. Ground units only needed to provide both friendly and target positions, and the gunship took it from there. Different cannons on the AC-130U provided more choices of weaponry with smaller blast radii than bombs; hence they had lower risk of damage to friendly units and civilians.<sup>72</sup>

In simple terms, the battles for Al-Fallujah, especially the second one, proved to be the bloodiest involving American troops since the Vietnam War. Some experts went so far as to compare it to the Battle of Hue or Marine assaults in the Pacific during World War II. Specifically, the Allies had 107 killed and 613 wounded during Operation *Phantom Fury*. The United States forces had fifty-four killed and 422 wounded in the initial invasion in November and, as noted, by December 23, when the operation was officially declared to be over, the numbers had increased to ninety-five killed and 560 wounded. In turn, British forces had four killed and ten wounded in two separate attacks in the outskirts of Al-Fallujah. Iraqi allies suffered eight killed and forty-three wounded. While there were never official figures based on an actual count, most estimates placed the number of insurgents killed at 1,200 to 1,500, with some numbers as high as 2,000 killed. Coalition forces captured around 1,500 insurgents. The Red Crescent/Cross reported that 800 civilians had been killed during the fighting.<sup>73</sup>

To quote Jonathan Keiler, "despite the superb performance of Marines and soldiers in Fallujah there is reason for concern. The 476 U.S. casualties represent about 8 percent of the total assault force, a low but not insignificant loss for less than two weeks of combat. Of equal concern had to be the fact that roughly 45 percent of those wounded in the operation were returned to action." The Defense Department also reported that the initial OIF assault, between March 19 and April 30, 2003, led to 109 killed and 426 wounded. The casualty numbers during the Second Battle of Fallujah came close to that total.<sup>74</sup>

While the city itself suffered terrible damage to homes, mosques, city services, and businesses, it was not nearly as bad as previous urban battles such as Stalingrad or Hue, mainly due to the extensive use of precision airpower. Al-Fallujah, often referred to as the "City of Mosques," was officially home to 133 mosques prior to the fighting. Afterward, some reports declared that 60 had been destroyed. The destruction was certainly predictable since, according to American military sources, 66 were used by the insurgents as arms caches and weapon strongpoints. These same accounts also claimed that of the roughly 50,000 buildings in Al-Fallujah, between 7,000 and 10,000 were destroyed and about half of the buildings still standing showed significant damage.<sup>75</sup>

Displaced persons also proved to be a major issue. Prior to Operation *Vigilant Resolve* in March-April 2004, most estimates placed the population at around 300,000. By the end of Operation *Phantom Fury*, more than 200,000 civilians were labeled by

Iraqi authorities as "internally displaced persons" who either never returned or only came back reluctantly. At first, the Allies were loath to allow people back into the city. It was not until the end of December 2004, that residents, after undergoing a biometric identification process, were allowed to return if they wore their identification cards at all times. By the end of March 2005, with reconstruction moving along at snail's pace and mostly consisting of clearing away rubble, most estimates put the number of returning inhabitants at 30 percent.<sup>76</sup>

As for the battle itself, no one can call it any more than a limited success. By September 2006, U.S. Marine Corps official reports concluded that while Al-Fallujah itself remained generally pacified, Al-Anbar province, which included Al-Fallujah was under "total insurgent control." Worse, "insurgent attacks gradually increased in and around the city and although news reports were often few and far between, several reports of IED attacks on Iraqi troops were reported in the press." Of special note was a suicide car bomb attack carried out on June 23, 2005 against a convoy, which killed six Marines and wounded thirteen others. Less than eight months after the bloodiest battle of the Iraq war, insurgents were again able to operate with impunity and in large numbers. As result of mounting violence around Al-Fallujah and in nearby Ramadi, a third offensive began in late September 2006 and lasted until mid-January 2007. In what became known as the "Third Battle of Fallujah" the enemy fought the Americans to a stalemate during what Iraqis called "the Great Sunni Awakening." After four years of bitter fighting, the U.S. formally turned Al-Fallujah over to the Iraqi Provincial Authority and the Iraqi military forces. From every logical point of view, these battles had been a disappointment for Coalition forces.<sup>77</sup>

### Some Good Things Did Come from the Battles

In spite of these criticisms of the Allied efforts at Al-Fallujah, there were positive aspects and results, too. The January elections did take place as scheduled and were mostly successful in their execution and the subsequent transition of power to a relatively democratic sectarian government. General Casey later remarked that, "The military and civil side had to work together . . . and this one team, one mission had to include the Iraqi Government. We set out to help make . . . this Interim Iraqi Government successful." To him the Second Battle of Fallujah facilitated the January 2005 elections, and, he concluded, "I don't believe that the elections would have come off if there was still a safe haven in Fallujah. I'm absolutely convinced of that. . . . It was one of the things that caused them to step up and vote and make a choice, and on the 30th, they did!"<sup>78</sup>

Lt. Gen. Lance L. Smith, CENTCOM Deputy Commander, echoed Casey's words when he pointed out that, "Besides being a safe haven for leadership command and control, Al-Fallujah was a center for



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making IEDs that were being produced and used in other parts of the country to attack the Coalition.” I should add they were also being used to disrupt preparation for the January 2005 elections. Dr. Grant concluded in her article on Al-Fallujah that, “There was no doubt the second battle for Fallujah was a necessary one. Many of the estimated 2,000 insurgents in the city were killed and their sanctuary eliminated.”<sup>79</sup> That is to say, at least for the time being and long enough to hold elections.

#### **The Controversy over Using White Phosphorous**

One last controversial aspect of the struggle for Al-Fallujah was the U.S. use of white phosphorous artillery rounds. While an extremely volatile issue that requires a great deal of evaluation on its own merit, there is not enough room to discuss the usage in detail. Still, it cannot be ignored in any discussion of Al-Fallujah. White phosphorus is an effective smoke producing agent in combat, especially when used as an artillery round. It burns rapidly to create a smoke bank to hide the movement of one’s troops from the eyes of the enemy. Over the past century, the use of such agents in artillery shells and/or smoke grenades has become increasingly common. It can be used by infantry, mortars, tanks, artillery, and other armored vehicles. The negative side of its employment is that phosphorus is toxic in itself and white phosphorus can function as a particularly terrifying incendiary weapon since it burns quickly and at very high temperatures. It can easily set cloth, fuel and ammunition on fire and it is very difficult to extinguish because water is not very effective. While it is not illegal to use under the international Chemical Weapons Convention, its results, when used against humans, is so gruesome that it is used infrequently in cases where civilians are close to military targets.<sup>80</sup>

Throughout the second battle for Al-Fallujah in November 2004, while the U.S. employed white phosphorus they were reluctant to discuss it with

the media for obvious reasons. Even so, word of its usage filtered back to Western Europe and the U.S. At first, it was no big deal, then, on November 8, 2005, the one year anniversary of the start of the Second Battle of Al-Fallujah, Sigfrido Ranucci of Italy’s RaiNews24 released a gratuitous documentary entitled *Fallujah, The Hidden Massacre*. It was completely one-sided and designed to create public outrage and increase the number of viewers. It proved to be effective and very embarrassing to America. A week later, Defense Department spokesperson, Lt. Col. Barry Venable, publically confirmed the use of white phosphorus against well entrenched “enemy combatants.” However, he denied that civilians had been targeted. In spite of concerns expressed by the Iraqi government the situation soon began to cool off. On November 30, 2005, General Peter Pace not only admitted its use but called it a “legitimate tool of the military.” He explained that it was not a chemical weapon but an incendiary, and its use against enemy combatants was perfectly legal. The force of this statement seemed to defuse the matter at least in the U.S.<sup>81</sup>

#### **One Special Shining Light**

While the battles for Fallujah had been a bitter pill for the U.S. to swallow, there was one success story. In general, air power and specifically AC-130s had proven their worth both with their ability to search and destroy enemy assets in an urban environment as well as being able to devastate insurgent forces in open and hidden positions. Most U.S. ground forces, especially the Marines, found particular comfort from gunship support during the insurgency phase of OIF, during which U.S. Marines faced most of their fighting in urban settings. They favored the gunships because of their accurate and sustained firepower, time on station, and advanced optics.

According to one Marine Corps report, the Marines on the ground liked that, “the AC-130s car-

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ried a lethal mix of firepower that varied slightly depending on whether it is an AC-130H Spectre, or AC-130U Spooky model.” The report noted that, “both models are equipped with a L60 40mm Bofors cannon capable of firing up to one hundred rounds per minute as well as a M102 105mm howitzer capable of shooting six to ten rounds per minute.” In addition, they reported that the Spooky models are equipped with 25mm GAU-12 “Equalizer” Gatling-type guns capable of firing four or six thousand rounds per minute. The report went on to reiterate that, “The primary missions for the AC-130 are close air support, air interdiction, and armed reconnaissance. Other missions include perimeter and point defense, escort, landing, drop and extraction zone support, forward air control, limited command and control, and combat search and rescue.” The report also focused on the fact there was a proposal on the table to retrofit all the existing H models with 25mm guns to allow them to fly at higher altitudes to avoid shoulder-fired SAMS which had begun to populate the battlefield during OIF and after. Not only did the author recount the virtues of the AC-130s but recommended that they be upgraded whenever possible to allow them to continue serving the Marines as they had in the past. This report is of interest because, in spite of the controversy, AC-130s had, as they had in every other previous war, won the respect of those fighting on the ground. It was not so much the Air Force, albeit they believed in the gunships, who wanted more and better gunships but those who served in the services for which the AC-130s worked so hard.<sup>82</sup>

The measure of any leader, especially a military leader, is his or her ability to embrace lessons obtained from past experiences, most often mistakes. This does not suggest they should be tied to past circumstances but, instead should posit how not to make the same mistake and how to anticipate what the future will bring. No fact is truer than military secrets being the most fleeting. This means that flexibility and constant concern for the men and women being asked to go in harm’s way is the greatest talent these leaders can possess. In the case of the AC-130s, operational tempo was so high during the years from OAF to the end of the Iraqi surge that learning lessons seemed to take a back seat to committing assets as quickly and effectively as possible. However, in the last few years, there have been efforts by some visionary Air Force leaders and some very innovative contractors and civil servants to not only upgrade the gunship’s lethality

but its survivability. During this time we witnessed the full flowering of the AC-130.<sup>83</sup>

### Some Final Observations

Ever since the last U.S. combat forces withdrew from Iraq in December 2011, Americans have been seeking some solace from this generally misguided adventure that was probably never necessary. Some even have suggested that OIF was concocted for political reasons mired in an arrogance of power. While that is an issue to be debated at another time and in another place, it must be noted that once the Coalition engaged the Iraqis in March 2003 to decapitate the government of the “Stalinist dictator” Saddam Hussein, the goals of OIF were supposed to be the discovery and dismantling of his so-called “Weapons of Mass Destruction” (WMDs). The ancillary goal was to topple Saddam Hussein and his government in order to allow the Iraqis to rebuild their government and nation. After President George W. Bush landed on the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln* on May 1 and declared “mission accomplished,” the goals seemed to become obscured. It was during this “pacification” or nation-building phase that the unrest and turmoil in the western regions of Iraq were fomented. It was in Al-Fallujah that they bore their bitter fruit. It was during the apparently never ending struggle for control of this little city of questionable strategic and tactical significance that the bloodiest battle of OIF took place. This multi-faceted struggle cost hundreds of lives, displaced thousands of civilians and left many Americans as frustrated as they had been a generation before with Vietnam.<sup>84</sup>

At least in this case, some positive lesson should have been learned with regard to the ever expanding role of air power on and above the modern conventional battle field. Before Al-Fallujah few, if any, believed air assets played any role in urban warfare. The various roles these weapons systems performed in Al-Fallujah not only proved their worth but also caused many enlightened thinkers to wonder how many more roles they could have played. If this alone was the outcome of these conflicts, then it was a costly lesson indeed. However, if we can learn these lessons to the extent that we can limit the number of young men and women who we might have to send in harm’s way in future battles such as this one then, perhaps, those who paid such a precious price and their families and loved ones may be able to rest a little more peacefully. ■

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