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Turning Fallujah

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Introduction

Fallujah is a city that has taken on a tremendous amount of significance because of what happened there from April to December of 2004. It has become one of the touchstone battles of the Marine Corps involvement in Operation Iraqi Freedom because of the intensity of the fighting and the number of Marines and Sailors killed or wounded there. It is not a large city in either the space it occupies, or the amount of people that claim it as home. It is a compact, dirty, beat up town that always had a sinister reputation under the Saddam Hussein regime as a smuggling and black market center. This went very nicely with its additional claim to fame as the “city of Mosques” due to the large number of Mosques located within its’ boundaries. Its people have been known to be, and still very much are, very xenophobic as their general attitude seems to be “it is us Fallujans against the world.” This was directed not only at coalition forces, but also at any Iraqis who were not specifically from Fallujah. It is certainly not a place that will show up as a vacation hot spot any time soon. My personal involvement there started in December 2004 when I went out to Iraq on a Pre-Deployment Site Survey (PDSS). I was the Operations Officer for Regimental Combat Team (RCT) 8 and we would be replacing RCT 1 in February, 2005. It finished, at least for now, when I departed the area in October, 2007 as the commander of 2nd Battalion, 6th Marines (2/6) having just spent the previous 7 months in control of the city.

This paper is not an attempt to tell how we did everything right and solved the riddle of “turning Fallujah” from being a constant source of trouble and anxiety, to an example of what could be accomplished in Iraq given the proper COIN techniques. We did not do everything right and our success there, such as it was, could only be described as the culmination of years of dedicated struggle and effort on the part of thousands of Marines, Soldiers and Sailors, as well as members of the Iraqi security forces, many of whom were wounded or killed there. It was also a result of the fortunate coming together of several different events, all happening around the same time, which also happened to coincide with my battalion’s arrival in March, 2007. This paper will briefly provide what I know of the history of Fallujah from 2004-2007, the techniques we used as an RCT to try and maintain control of both the town and the surrounding area during 2005 and early 2006, some lessons learned that I took away from observing the units that operated underneath RCT 8 during that year (one of which was 2/6, but under a different commander), the preparations we made in 2/6 after I took over to be ready to return to Fallujah, and finally the specific steps we took to capitalize on the conditions we found when we arrived there in late March, 2007. I firmly believe that it was the preparations we made while training prior to the deployment that enabled us to recognize what was happening in Fallujah and turn it to our

advantage. We also developed an approach to turning Fallujah that resonated with the citizens of Fallujah to a degree and generated a level of success that well surpassed what we expected. It was an amazing experience and I feel privileged to have been a part of it.

Background

Fallujah in December 2004, during Operation Al Fajr (the Dawn), was a dark, haunted place. The smell of death was everywhere and RCT 1 was conducting mop up operations throughout a largely deserted city. The amount of destruction rivaled that of what I remember from Sarajevo in 1995. Most of the heavy fighting was over, but enemy snipers and small ambush elements were scattered in various places. These were the die-hards who refused to flee or surrender. Marines would go from building to building, clearing each one (which had already been cleared many times before) and would encounter these small groups of enemy. The encounters would be sharp, violent and short. If the enemy was not killed in the initial engagement, the Marines would pull back and blast the house with whatever was available – tank main gun fire, heavy machine guns, or in some cases, air delivered ordnance. The city infrastructure was a shambles as sewer and water lines had been ruptured, pumping stations destroyed, electrical lines cut, and transformers blown. Civil Affairs units were moving in along with Engineer units to try and begin the process of restoring the city to something that would support habitation. Plans were being laid for the reintroduction of the population, their humanitarian support, and the conduct of elections at the end of January, 2005. Needless to say, there was a great deal to see during our PDSS.

The RCT 8 planning effort focused on building off of the momentum achieved during Operation Al Fajr. RCT 1 had built a berm all around the city and established six Entry Control Points (ECPs) to control access to the city as its inhabitants returned. The elections of January, 2005 had not been overly successful since the Sunni population of the Al Anbar province (where Fallujah is located) had rejected the election and refused to participate in it. The small towns near Fallujah all had some enemy presence and the roads were pockmarked with former Improvised Explosive Device (IED) blast marks and craters. Each one was another potential IED as the enemy had a strong tendency to reuse IED sites.

The RCT 8 plan and subsequent campaign, which started in March 2005, involved a “Clear, Hold, Win, Won” approach which had been articulated by Sir Robert Thompson in *Defeating Communist Insurgencies*. The enemy was pushed out of each population center, and then measures were implemented to maintain a hold on that center and win over the population by providing Civil Affairs support, security, and the rejuvenation of local governance and business. The area could be considered to be “won” if the population was secure, providing cooperation against the enemy to coalition or Iraqi forces, and all was quiet. While these steps were occurring in a sequential fashion, RCT 8 forces, operating mainly from Camp Fallujah, would sweep through un-cleared areas to find weapons caches, keep roads clear of IEDs and disrupt enemy operations. Fallujah had already been cleared and the hold and win processes were already in motion. The towns of Karmah (Northeast of Fallujah), Saqliwiyah (Northwest of Fallujah), Ameriya and Ferris (directly South of Fallujah) were all cleared sequentially and the Hold, Win, Won processes were started for each. This was essentially what kept us occupied for 2005 and early 2006. The only major exceptions to this process were the constitutional

referendum in October, and the national elections in December, 2005. These entailed major planning efforts and security operations which resulted in successful elections as measured by a lack of violence and broad Sunni participation in both.

Lessons Learned

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

During the year that we were in the Fallujah area, we had eleven different battalions working for us at one time or another and some came in much better prepared to conduct COIN than others. Those units who were better prepared generally had much more involved leadership at every level, most of whom clearly understood the realities of COIN operations such as the fact that the enemy is rarely seen; attacks are generally short in duration and designed to cause casualties and frustration; the people are only trying to survive being caught between coalition forces and the enemy and therefore seem indifferent; and lashing out in frustration generates more enemies to fight. In addition, given the operating environment amongst the people of Fallujah, escalations of force where Iraqi civilians were injured or killed happened relatively frequently, and some units handled the results much better than others. The importance of this was that if the Marines thought that there would be a “witch hunt” with them as the focus if they pulled the trigger on an Iraqi civilian, then they would hesitate too long and potentially let a suicide bomber or vehicle in close enough to cause casualties and or damage to coalition forces.

Other observations were that units which were too defensive caused a decided reaction from the enemy. As the unit went into its defensive crouch, they ceded the initiative to the enemy with the result that enemy attacks increased significantly. Unfortunately, this only reinforced the crouched, defensive mentality. Units that stayed in their vehicles while on patrol had the most difficulty as they could not see what was going on around them well enough to effectively spot IEDs, and they were isolated from the population, so had no chance to win them over to gain their cooperation against the enemy. Lastly, Marines who were bored and frustrated through not understating why they were even in Iraq, or what they were specifically trying to accomplish, tended to come up with ways to entertain themselves, the majority of which were very counterproductive. This trend was amplified by the nearly ubiquitous presence of hand held video cameras amongst the Marines and the availability of the internet on the large bases where they could send their video clips in to YouTube, or other like sites.

Preparations

Upon my return to Camp Lejeune, North Carolina from Iraq, I began to prepare to take over 2/6. From my observations over the course of the previous year, several themes predominated. The

first was that I needed to co-opt the entire leadership chain into the appropriate way of conducting COIN. They had to understand that the supervision of their units was absolutely crucial to ensuring that we did the least amount of harm possible to begin with, and then built relationships with local Iraqis to win them over to our side. They had to understand that the keys to success were the Iraqi army and local Iraqi police forces becoming effective and successful. They had to keep their Marines from lashing out in frustration at the inevitabilities of COIN operations and focus on ways to outthink the enemy to get them reacting to us instead of us reacting to them. We had to balance aggressiveness (a natural Marine tendency) with caution to avoid falling into traps set by the enemy. We had to root out complacency and keep everyone occupied and focused throughout our time in the combat zone. All of these things seem to be common sense, but are much easier said than done. It takes dedicated leaders, most particularly at the fireteam, squad and platoon level. Unfortunately, these leaders are always the youngest and least experienced, with the fireteam leaders in particular having the least amount of training of anyone in the chain of command.

Upon taking over 2/6, my Sergeant Major, Executive Officer, Operations Officer and I formulated our “preparing the mindset” campaign plan to get the battalion prepared to return to Fallujah (where they had just operated from October 2005, to April 2006). The basic theme of the plan was relatively simple. We presented information to the leaders in the battalion, reinforced it through guided discussions, held other, related leadership discussions throughout the training period, and placed posters and signs throughout the battalion area, all of which presented aspects of the original theme. We took the time to answer their questions and address their concerns from the previous deployment. These were mostly related to escalation of force situations and tactics that they thought made them more vulnerable to enemy snipers. Aside from general tactics, we also had to get them to understand that the Iraqi army and police forces, as inept and corrupt as they seemed and often were, needed to be the focus of our effort. If we had leaders or Marines who were openly contemptuous of them, treated them poorly, or shunned any involvement with them, we would never be able to get them to improve. I would never say that we were able to achieve complete buy in from all hands, but enough of the battalion did so that when we went through Mojave Viper (the graduation exercise for all deploying units conducted at 29 Palms, CA), the evaluators specifically commented on the level of understanding and cooperation that existed in the battalion.

Back to Fallujah

Once deployed to Fallujah, we found a city where the security situation had deteriorated significantly. There were many reasons for this, only some of which involved the specific tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs) of the two battalions who had preceded us there. Al Qaeda in Iraq had a strong presence in Fallujah and given the symbolic nature of the city as a result of the 2004 fighting, sought to win it back and openly claim it. In addition, since the tribes did not have much influence in the city, the “Al Anbar awakening” which was gathering momentum to the West of the city, had not reached Fallujah, so it had no influence there. Ambushes, mortar and sniper attacks, and the ubiquitous IEDs predominated. Murder and intimidation against the Iraqi civilians and police were rampant. The city council was still functioning (they had been re-established in early 2005), but the previous two chairmen had been assassinated and new candidates for the position were scarce. The police had taken significant

casualties since they had been reestablished in 2005 and only came out of their headquarters in the center of the city in large groups to conduct raids. A new enemy tactic had also been introduced: suicide truck bombs that had chlorine gas mixed in to magnify the damage. One such attack against the headquarters of one of the Iraqi Army battalions in the city happened just as we were getting to Fallujah to start our deployment. With these things as background, all of which we had watched as we made our final preparations to deploy, we conducted the standard two week turnover with the unit we replaced, then ensured that they got out of the area safely and on their way home.

After observing the city and operating conditions for a week or so, we saw that things had already started to change prior to our arrival. A new police chief had been hired and he seemed to be very motivated to get out and fight the terrorists who were dominating the city. A new Iraqi Army brigade commander for those forces in the city had taken over and was very professional and dedicated. He had cleaned house amongst the officers in the brigade, getting rid of a good deal of dead weight. Also, a new mayor had been appointed by the city council and he was very anxious to regain control of the city. We also recognized that the approach used by coalition forces to that point in the city had to change. It resembled something little better than the arcade game of “whack a mole” and had made little progress towards ending the insurgency in Fallujah. Additionally, we saw that the city of Ramadi (30-40 miles West of Fallujah) had changed remarkably for the better since the last time we were in Iraq, so I sent my battalion XO out to observe what was being done there. He came back with the shell of a plan to restore security and turn the city over to the police that was based on the plan that had worked in Ramadi.

The plan which we formulated, gained approval of, then executed in Fallujah starting at the end of May 2007, consisted of breaking the city up into 11 precincts. One by one, a precinct would be swarmed by Iraqi Army and Police units backed up by 2/6 Marines. Cement barriers were placed around the precinct to restrict traffic entering and exiting the precinct to two openings, each guarded by Iraqi Police. A precinct headquarters was established and manned by all three forces. Local men were recruited from the precinct to form a neighborhood watch under the supervision of the police. Lastly, food bags (each of which could feed a family of 4 for several days) were distributed by the police while civil affairs teams made an assessment of the precincts infrastructure needs. These needs were then prioritized and addressed as quickly as possible. In a sense, it was a modified, more focused, version of “clear, hold, win, won”.

The effects of this plan were remarkable in how quickly they started to produce results. The cement barriers we emplaced heavily restricted traffic, which intimidated most insurgents. As stated earlier, if they could not flee in a car, they were very hesitant to conduct attacks. An additional factor in this traffic restriction plan was that just prior to kicking off the entire operation (which we named ALLJAH), a suicide car bomb had attacked a funeral procession in the city for an Iraqi that had fought Al Qaeda in Iraq to the west of the city and had been killed. Many civilians, to include a significant number of women and children were killed or injured. The Mayor declared that no civilian vehicles would be allowed to drive in the city anymore and it was strictly enforced by the police. It was gradually relaxed over the course of the ensuing summer, but a vehicle registration system was implemented, again by the police, for any vehicles desiring to operate in the city.

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

Many other measures were implemented also, but those mentioned above should be adequate to provide a snapshot of what was occurring in the city during the summer of 2007. The combined results of all of this were simply amazing. Police control was established to the point where the Iraqi Army, which had generally been an irritant due to their largely Shia make up, were able to redeploy out of the city entirely and be reassigned to another area well to the North of Fallujah. Iraqi police who had been afraid to wear their uniforms off duty, and in some cases even to return to their homes in the city for fear of assassination, were now considered public heroes and went to and from their homes in uniform. Violence in all forms dropped to unheard of lows. In the first five weeks of our deployment, we had experienced 3 KIA and 25 WIA. In the subsequent 4 months after the kick off of Operation ALLJAH, we experienced only two lightly wounded Marines. IED attacks were few and far between, and in many cases, those that were able to be emplaced by the enemy were getting reported as soon as they were laid. Whereas sniper attacks had been prevalent early in the deployment, when General Petraeus and Katie Couric visited in early September, we were able to take them and their entourage through a market area that had seen the worst of the sniper activity without incident. Coalition generals who had seen the bad old days of Fallujah and returned to visit marveled at what they saw. We marveled also. We had expected good results, but what happened as a result of ALLJAH well surpassed what we had expected. Everything mentioned above, coupled with many factors not mentioned, generated an almost snowball like momentum for success that we could only partially claim credit for. It also continued after we left as evidenced by an e-mail sent to me by the battalion commander who relieved us in Fallujah. He reported that over a month after we departed, he had sat under a canopy with the Mayor, Police Chief and many prominent Sheiks, right on the main street of Fallujah, to watch a parade honoring the Fallujah police. Whereas less than a year before, the police were afraid to go out on patrol or even return home at the end of their shift, they were now parading down the middle of the city and being feted by the community they were protecting and serving.

Conclusion

In summing up what has been presented in this paper, I think it is important to point out what did not work as well as what did work and may prove useful to other forces heading out to conduct COIN operations. Once again, this is not coming from the perspective that we did everything correctly. We did not. I think we learned from our errors and found a solution that worked specifically for Fallujah. It may or may not be applicable to other places and conditions. To start with what did not work, a reliance on vehicle patrolling, heavy handed conventional tactics, heavy force protection measures that kept the local population away from coalition forces, minimal reliance on Iraqi security forces (for a variety of reasons, some of which were valid), and a focus on just surviving the tour instead of trying to actually win, could all be said to be seriously detrimental to COIN operations. What eventually worked in Fallujah was a combination of measures that softened the conventional approach, got in close to the population to provide them a sense of personal and family security, got the Iraqi security forces heavily involved in much more effective ways, and gave everyone involved both a stake in the measures being taken, and a sense that real progress was being made. These are exactly the type of measures that would likely be more successful in other COIN environments. The idea of trying to do the least amount of harm to begin with is an ideal place to start.

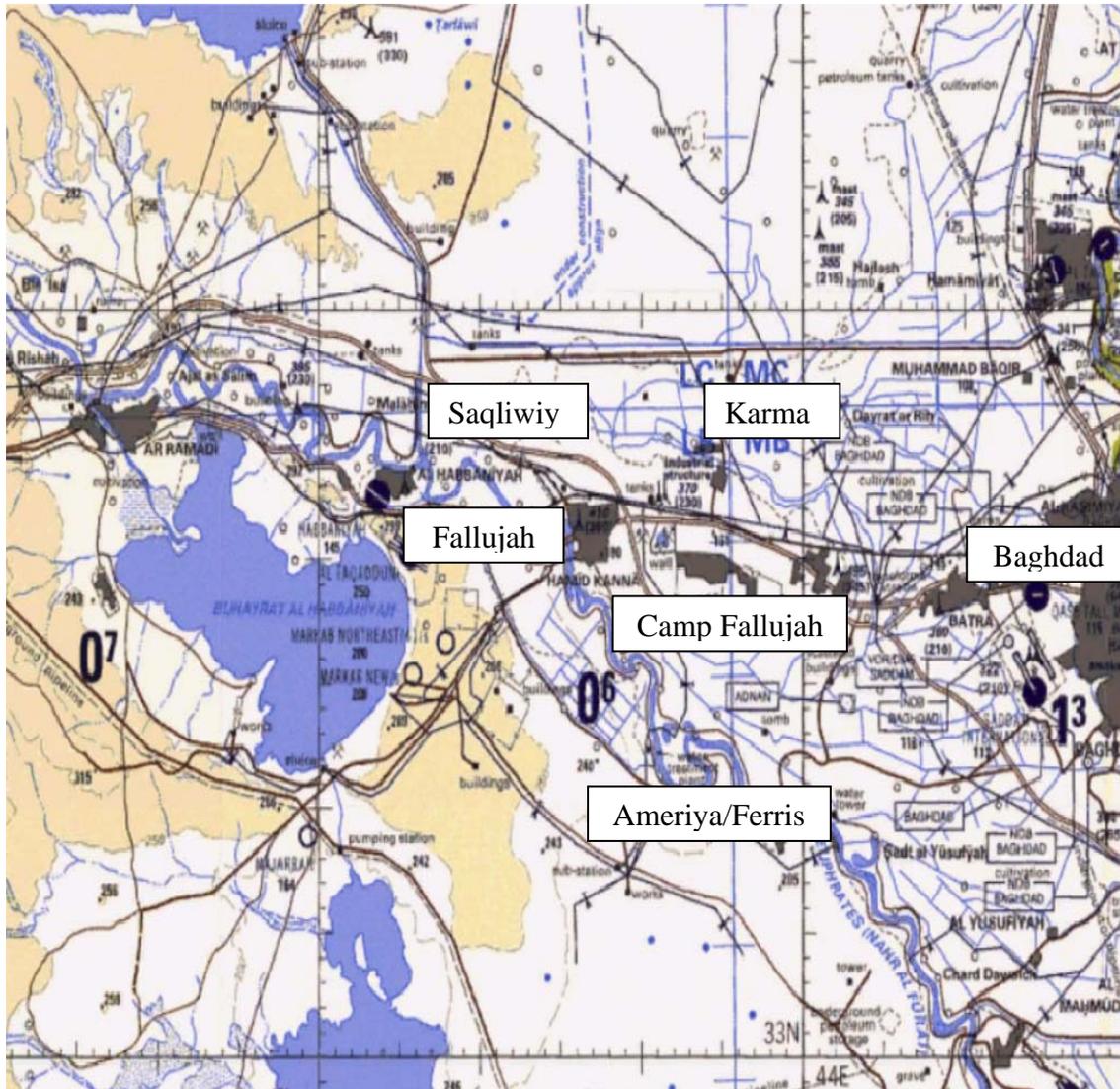
At the beginning of our tour in Fallujah, people went about their business quickly to take care of necessities and get off the streets to avoid becoming casualties. At the end of our tour, people were out playing volleyball and soccer on the streets, the city was taking pride in its appearance and their police, and reconstruction, or in some cases, new construction, was taking place all over the city. As we patrolled, on foot, through the city, you could feel the optimism and pride the citizens were taking in their city. Even though there were many expressions of gratitude from the citizens of Fallujah, what was most gratifying to me was when several Marines from my battalion who had been on the battalion's previous deployment to Fallujah observed that whereas on that previous tour they had seen no progress at all and lost many of their fellow Marines, on this deployment, they saw a tremendous amount of progress and had lost few fellow Marines. The sense that Fallujah had been turned and that maybe we would not have to keep coming back to Iraq was starting to take hold.

This paper is dedicated specifically to LCpls Dale Peterson, Jon Kirk and Walter O'Haire, and generally to the hundreds of other Marines, Soldiers and Sailors who gave their lives in pursuit of peace and stability in Fallujah, Iraq. They will never be forgotten.

Colonel William F. Mullen III, USMC, is the Director of the Marine Corps Tactics and Operations Group of the Marine Corps Air Ground Task Force Training Command. In July 2002 he reported to the J-3 Directorate of the Joint Staff in the Pentagon for duty as an Action Officer in the PACOM and then the CENTCOM sections of the Joint Operations Division. In May 2003, he was assigned as the Executive Assistant to the Deputy Director for Regional Operations until he returned to Camp Lejeune in June 2004 as the Plans Officer for the 2nd Marine Division. In October, 2004 he was assigned as the Operations Officer for the 8th Marine Regiment and deployed with them to Fallujah, Iraq from February 2005 to February 2006. In June, 2006, he assumed command of 2d Battalion, 6th Marines and returned to Fallujah, Iraq

from March to October, 2007. He was promoted to Colonel on 1 Oct, 2007 and reported to the Naval War College as a student in March, 2008 and graduated in March, 2009.

Map of the Fallujah Area



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