

Email from Iraq - 19 November 2004

From LtCol Dave Bellon USMC:

Dear Dad -

Just came out of the city and I honestly do not know where to start. I am afraid that whatever I send you will not do sufficient honor to the men who fought and took Fallujah.

Shortly before the attack, Task Force Fallujah was built. It consisted of three Regimental Combat Teams (RCT). Each Regiment consisted of a Light Armored Reconnaissance (LAR) Battalion, two Marine Rifle Battalions reinforced, and one Army mechanized infantry battalion.

RCT-1 consisted of 3rd LAR, 3rd Battalion, 5th Marines (3/5); 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines (3/1) and 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry (2/7).

RCT-7 was slightly less weighted but still a formidable force.

Cutting a swath around the city was an Army Brigade known as Blackjack. The Marine RCT's were to assault the city while Blackjack kept the enemy off of the backs of the assault force.

The night prior to the actual invasion, we all moved out into the desert just north of the city. It was something to see. You could just feel the intensity in the Marines and Soldiers. It was all business.

As the day cleared, the Task Force began striking targets and moving into final attack positions. As the invasion force commenced its movement into attack positions, 3rd LAR led off RCT-1's offensive with an attack up a peninsula formed by the Euphrates River on the west side of the city. Their mission was to secure the Fallujah Hospital and the two bridges leading out of the city. They executed these tasks like clockwork and smashed the enemy resistance holding the bridges.

Simultaneous to all of this, Blackjack sealed the escape routes to the south of the city. As invasion day dawned, the net was around the city. The Marines and Soldiers knew that the enemy that failed to escape was now sealed.

3/5 began the actual attack on the city by taking an apartment complex on the northwest corner of the city. It was key terrain as the elevated positions allowed the command to look down into the attack lanes. The Marines took the apartments quickly and moved to the rooftops and began

engaging enemy that were trying to move into their fighting positions. The scene on the rooftop was surreal. Machine gun teams were running boxes of ammo up 8 flights of stairs in full body armor and carrying up machine guns while snipers engaged enemy shooters. The whole time the enemy was firing mortars and rockets at the apartments. Honest to God, I don't think I saw a single Marine even distracted by the enemy fire. Their squad leaders, and platoon commanders had them prepared and they were executing their assigned tasks.

As mentioned, 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry joined the Regiment just prior to the fight. In fact, they started showing up for planning a couple of weeks in advance. There is always a professional rivalry between the Army and the Marine Corps but it was obvious from the outset that these guys were the real deal. They had fought in Najaf and were eager to fight with the Regiment in Fallujah. They are exceptionally well led and supremely confident.

2/7 Cavalry became our wedge. In short, they worked with 3rd Battalion, 1st Marines. We were limited in the amount of prep fires that we were allowed to fire on the city prior to the invasion. This was a point of some consternation to the forces actually taking the city. Our compensation was to turn to 2/7 Cavalry and ask them to slash into the city and create as much turbulence as possible for 3/1 to follow. Because of the political reality, the Marine Corps was also under pressure to "get it done quickly." For this reason, 2/7 Cavalry and 3/1 became the penetration force into the city.

Immediately following 3/5's attack on the apartment buildings, 3/1 took the train station on the north end of the city. While the engineers blew a breach through the train trestle, the Cavalry soldiers poured through with their tanks and Bradley's and chewed an opening in the enemy defense. 3/1 followed them through until they reached a phase-line deep into the northern half of the city. The Marine infantry along with a few tanks then turned to the right and attacked the heart of the enemy defense. The fighting was tough as the enemy had the area dialed in with mortars. 3/5 then attacked into the northwest corner of the city. This fight continued as both Marine rifle battalions clawed their way into the city on different axis.

There is an image burned into my brain that I hope I never forget. We came up behind 3/5 one day as the lead squads were working down the Byzantine streets of the Jolan area. An assault team of two Marines ran out from behind cover and put a rocket into a wall of an enemy strongpoint. Before the smoke cleared the squad behind them was up and moving through the hole and clearing the house. Just down the block another squad was doing the same thing. The house was cleared quickly and the Marines were

running down the street to the next contact. Even in the midst of that mayhem, it was an awesome sight of combat timing and efficiency. Any true warrior would stand in awe of these Marines.

The fighting has been incredibly close inside the city. The enemy is willing to die and is literally waiting until they see the whites of the eyes of the Marines before they open up. Just two days ago, as a firefight raged in close quarters, one of the interpreters yelled for the enemy in the house to surrender. The enemy yelled back that, "It was better to die and go to heaven than to surrender to infidels." This exchange is a graphic window into the world that the Marines and Soldiers have been fighting in these last 10 days.

I could go on and on about how the city was taken, but one of the most amazing aspects to the fighting was that we saw virtually no civilians during the battle. Only after the fighting had passed did a few come out of their homes. They were provided food and water and most were evacuated out of the city. At least 90-95% of the people were gone from the city when we attacked.

I will end with a couple of stories of individual heroism that you may not have heard yet. I was told about both of these incidents shortly after they occurred. No doubt some of the facts will change slightly but I am confident that the meat is correct.

The first is a Marine from 3/5. His name is Corporal Yeager. General Chuck Yeager's grandson. As the Marines cleared an apartment building, they got to the top floor and the point man kicked in the door. As he did so, an enemy grenade and a burst of gunfire came out. The explosion and enemy fire took off the point man's leg. He was then immediately shot in the arm as he lay in the doorway. Corporal Yeager tossed a grenade in the room and ran into the doorway and into the enemy fire in order to pull his buddy back to cover. As he was dragging the wounded Marine to cover, his own grenade came back through the doorway. Without pausing, he reached down and threw the grenade back through the door while he heaved his buddy to safety. The grenade went off inside the room and Cpl Yeager threw another in. He immediately entered the room following the second explosion. He gunned down three enemy all within three feet of where he stood and then let fly a third grenade as he backed out of the room to complete the evacuation of the wounded Marine. You have to understand that a grenade goes off within 5 seconds of having the pin pulled. Marines usually let them "cook off" for a second or two before tossing them in. Therefore, this entire episode took place in less than 30 seconds.

The second example comes from 3/1. Cpl Mitchell is a squad leader. He was wounded as his squad was clearing a house when some enemy threw

pineapple grenades down on top of them. As he was getting triaged, the doctor told him that he had been shot through the arm. Cpl Mitchell told the doctor that he had actually been shot "a couple of days ago" and had given himself self-aid on the wound. When the doctor got on him about not coming off the line, he firmly told the doctor that he was a squad leader and did not have time to get treated as his men were still fighting. There are a number of Marines who have been wounded multiple times but refuse to leave their fellow Marines.

It is incredibly humbling to walk among such men. They fought as hard as any Marines in history and deserve to be remembered as such. The enemy they fought burrowed into houses and fired through mouse holes cut in walls, lured them into houses rigged with explosives and detonated the houses on pursuing Marines, and actually hid behind surrender flags only to engage the Marines with small arms fire once they perceived that the Marines had let their guard down. I know of several instances where near dead enemy rolled grenades out on Marines who were preparing to render them aid. It was a fight to the finish in every sense and the Marines delivered.

I have called the enemy cowards many times in the past because they have never really held their ground and fought but these guys in the city did. We can call them many things but they were not cowards.

My whole life I have read about the "greatest generation" and sat in wonder at their accomplishments. For the first time, as I watch these Marines and Soldiers, I am eager for the future as this is just the beginning for them.

Perhaps the most amazing characteristic of all is that the morale of the men is sky high. They hurt for the wounded and the dead but they are eager to continue to attack. Further, not one of them would be comfortable with being called a hero even though they clearly are.

By now the Marines and Soldiers have killed well over a thousand enemy. These were not peasants or rabble. They were reasonably well trained, equipped and entirely fanatical. Most of the enemy we have seen have chest rigs full of ammunition and are well armed are willing to fight to the death. The Marines and Soldiers are eager to close with them and the fighting at the end is inevitably close.

I will write you more the next time I come in about what we have found inside the city. All I can say is that even with everything that I knew and expected from the last nine months, the brutality and fanaticism of the enemy surprised me. The beheadings were even more commonplace than we thought, but so were torture and summary executions. Even though it is an exaggeration, it seems as though every block in the northern part of the

city has a torture chamber or execution site.

There are hundreds of tons of munitions and tens of thousands of weapons that our Regiment alone has recovered. The Marines and Soldiers of the Regiment have also found over 400 IEDs already wired and ready to detonate. No doubt these numbers will grow in the days ahead.

In closing, I want to share with you a vignette about when the Marines secured the Old Bridge (the one where the Americans were mutilated and hung on March 31) this week. After the Marines had done all the work and secured the bridge, we walked across to meet up with 3rd LAR on the other side. On the Fallujah side of the bridge where the Americans were hung there is some Arabic writing on the bridge. An interpreter translated it for me as we walked through. It read: "Long Live the Mujahadeen. Fallujah is the Graveyard for Americans and the end of the Marine Corps."

After the fight in Fallujah, as I came back across the bridge there was a squad sitting in their Armored Vehicle. The Marines had written their own message below the enemy's. I am not going to rewrite it here, it is not something that Mom would appreciate, but it fit the moment to a T. Not far from the vehicle were two dead enemy laying where they died. Words do not do justice to the bravery and courage of the Marines and Soldiers that fought the battle of Fallujah.

Dave