

The taking of Fallujah:

Early insights and observations

Ian Bostock

Located around 65km west of Baghdad and quite concentrated for the size of its population (approximately 3km wide by 3.5km long), is the city of Fallujah. The city became a no-go area for US forces when an April 2004 operation, fought over three weeks by around 2000 US Marines, was prematurely called off by Washington due to outcries from Sunni and Shiite Iraqis over unconfirmed reports of civilian casualties.

In the months that followed it became the centrepiece of Sunni resistance and quite probably the nerve centre for insurgent activities across the whole of Iraq. On 8 November 2004 US forces returned in strength to retake Fallujah, or more correctly, to 'assist' Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in eliminating insurgent elements and return a form of recognised official governance to the city.

By broadcasting its intentions to launch an attack on the city (in order to allow its residents to leave before operations began) the interim Iraqi government and US commanders inevitably presented insurgents with the choice of either staying to prepare their defence or escaping to fight another day. Some insurgents, it was acknowledged, had been able to flee to safety, including the alleged insurgent mastermind Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Up to 80 per cent of the city's 300,000 residents are believed to have fled ahead of the assault.

Operation Phantom Fury took just six days to take control of the city, which was officially declared liberated after seven days of fighting. Of the 20,000 US troops that had massed outside the city since mid October, at least 10,000 of these entered the city on 8 November, supported by around 2000 coalition-trained ISF troops. Most of the Marines deployed for the operation did not take part in the first assault on Fallujah in April. This time, US forces had control of 70 per cent of the city inside three days, but were still encountering isolated pockets of resistance as of 21 November.

As Commander 1st Marine Division Major General Richard Natonski told journalists on 15 November: 'We had the green light this time and we went all the way. We learned we can't do it piecemeal. When we go in, we go all the way through.'

Building from 7 November, the preliminary bombardment of Fallujah was conducted by artillery and air strikes, and targeted known command posts, fortified positions, street barricades and safe houses using coordinates and information provided by various intelligence sources. It started to intensify shortly before jump off time. By 5pm on the first day (8 November), all electrical power to the city had been cut off.

According to the commander of US forces in Iraq, General George Casey, the expectation was that the insurgents would probably fall back from an outer ring of defences and withdraw toward the city centre, leaving a vast minefield of improvised explosive devices (IED) to slow the progress of US forces.

The cordon around Fallujah was much tighter this time than in April, when numerous gaps in US lines were

Aerial firepower

USMC F/A-18D Hornets operating out of Al Asad successfully used the GPS-guided, all-weather Joint Direct Attack Munition (JDAM) to destroy different target types found in Fallujah. These included 2000lb GBU-31 JDAMs with the Mk 84 warhead for soft targets and the BLU-109 'bunker buster' warhead for hardened and/or buried targets. Where reduced collateral damage was desirable (for instance, in confined residential areas), 500lb GBU-38 JDAMs with the Mk 82 and BLU-111 warheads were used. The 1000lb GBU-32 JDAM with Mk 83 and BLU-110 warheads was also dropped.

The US also used armed UAVs, with at least one MQ-1 Predator firing a Hellfire air-to-ground missile to destroy an anti-aircraft gun.

exploited by insurgent gun runners to keep fighters supplied with ammunition and weapons. The borders with Syria and Jordan were also sealed, allowing trucks carrying food and emergency supplies only to pass through. All roads into and out of Fallujah and the provincial capital of Ramadi, 48km to the west, were also shut down

In addition to resistance inside the city itself, the insurgents reportedly planned to harass US lines from the rear and flanks and commence a wave of attacks in other cities to divert US attention and resources away from the main game in Fallujah.

US forces wrested the city from insurgents house-by-house, building-by-building; clashing with small groups of enemy, some as many as a dozen strong, in often protracted firefights. Reports indicate entire squads (section equivalent) of Marines, complete with full packs, were seen jumping from rooftop to rooftop during the fighting. Fighting was so close at times that Marines were at risk from shrapnel when calling in air strikes and artillery fire support. The possibility that troops might find hostages in buildings that they entered forcefully added another layer of uncertainty to the fighting for US troops.

A lot of the fighting was against small teams of insurgents employing predominantly shoot-and-scoot tactics rather than set-piece battles, popping up to fire RPGs and machine guns and then disappearing down alleyways, between buildings or behind cover. They continued to fight in small groups without much coherence. At least one truck was intercepted on a road carrying an RPG and a mortar. Overall, resistance was not as fierce as expected. US forces clearly made maximum use of combined arms teams.

Some US Army elements that penetrated ahead of the main force on the opening day's assault found themselves isolated for a short period from the main force, whereupon they took fire from snipers concealed in the honeycomb of masonry buildings and rubble surrounding them.

Often search and destroy operations were reactionary, as US forces generally only knew of the whereabouts of the enemy once they had been fired upon. Unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV) often vectored sniper-hunting teams to a specific location, whereupon whole buildings were targeted.

Enemy small arms, sniper and RPG fire came from rooftops, mosques (of which there are at least 200 in Fallujah), cemeteries, water towers, warehouses and apartment complexes. Contrary to the laws of war many mosques were used by the insurgents as command centres or for other warlike purposes. One such mosque saw several M1A1 Abrams main battle tanks (MBT) called in to fire at least eight 120mm rounds into its perimeter, followed by a dozen 155mm rounds from USMC M-198 towed howitzers.

US forces found it very difficult to locate insurgent snipers in buildings as they could effectively hide in the back of a room, able to pin down US troops without giving away their own position. By standing back 1.5–2 metres from the window in a darkened room, or one in heavy shadow, the muzzle flash was very hard to pick up even with thermal imaging gear. Because of this, vast

quantities of ammunition were expended by US troops trying to kill snipers.

Overwhelming displays of firepower by US forces were not limited to 'digging out' enemy snipers. To get at insurgents holed up in two three-story buildings along Highway 10, for instance, Marines called in two air strikes, which dropped 500lb bombs, an artillery strike which delivered some 35 rounds of 155mm projectiles, 10 rounds from the 120mm main armaments of M1A1 Abrams MBTs and an estimated 30,000 rounds from individual small arms.

Fire from rockets [RPGs], mortars and assault rifles would lash out at the Americans from seemingly deserted buildings until heavy return fire destroyed them one by one, leaving only smoking ruins. Then the firing would start from another direction.

(New York Times, 9 Nov 2004)

Entry to buildings was gained via the time-honored tradition of kicking the door in or with shotguns (probably firing slug rounds), door charges and sledgehammers.

On day two of the operation, USMC Hornets and AH-1W Cobra and US Army AH-64 Apache attack helicopters targeted insurgent strongholds and raked the streets with 20mm and 30mm cannon fire and 70mm unguided rockets just one or two blocks ahead of the advancing Marines. USAF AC-130 Spectre gunships were also used, targeting insurgent positions with 105mm howitzer and 25mm and 40mm cannon fire.

US Army M2/M3 Bradley infantry fighting vehicles and USMC LAV-25 8x8s used their 25mm cannons to kill and flush out insurgents behind cover, hardened structures and earth berms. HMMWVs (High Mobility Multi-purpose Wheeled Vehicles) equipped with M134D Miniguns firing at 3000 rounds per minute—a ground weapon system relatively new to the USMC inventory—were used extensively where available; responding to sightings of the enemy by blanketing a whole area with 7.62mm fire.

Artillery bombardments and air strikes were often halted during the night to avoid hitting friendly forces that may have taken up positions along the forward edge of the battle area. Secondary explosions that followed air strikes or artillery bombardments generally indicated that stocks of ammunition or explosives had been hit.

UAVs, artillery spotters and ground controllers tracked insurgents from above and ground level, co-ordinating and directing air strikes and artillery bombardments. UAVs relayed live video footage back to command centres for disseminating to Marines on the ground. To combat this, the insurgents attempted to disguise their movements and often used sheets or rugs hung between buildings or across alleys under which they could scurry unseen from above.

The mere perception that UAVs were overhead watching their every move at all times in all areas, irrespective of whether that was actually the case, was a key psychological tool used by US forces, and had the desired effect of modifying the modus operandi of insurgents at the tactical level. As part of dedicated psychological operations, US

forces made use of trucks playing various sounds and AC/DC tunes at full volume to irritate the insurgents.

Attached to USMC units and armed with AK-47 assault rifles, ISF troops were tasked mostly with clearance and security operations in conjunction with US Marines once fighting in the immediate vicinity had ceased. The ISF troops were particularly valuable in being able to instantly recognise insurgents and the nationality of individuals without hearing them speak and were preferred when a mosque had to be cleared.

Estimated to have been 2000–3000 strong, the insurgents in Fallujah are thought to have comprised remnants of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath Party and its military wing; foreign jihadis; Sunni fundamentalists; local tribal fighters; al Qa'eda operatives; agents from neighbouring countries; and criminal elements.

Insurgents appeared to prefer staying fluid, moving around the city to reinforce positions as they were attacked by US forces. It is not clear whether this indicated planning and organisation or its opposite. Tactics used by the insurgents include attempting to coerce US troops into ambushes, and classic hit-and-run, shoot-and-scoot tactics, although a number fought from well-prepared trenches. A small number were mounted in civilian vehicles (sedans and pick-ups). As an apparent deception tactic, some insurgents were found wearing Iraqi National Guard uniforms, prompting US troops to consider any Iraqi troops not seen with US soldiers to be hostile.

During night fighting, the insurgents fired red and blue flares to temporarily blind those US troops using night-vision equipment (NVE), giving them a chance to change positions or withdraw. Many insurgents initiated contacts in the dimly lit hours around dawn and dusk, where the weak natural light offset their opponent's heavy use of NVE.

The challenge is that the battlefield is three-dimensional. Not only do you have to look in front of you and behind you, but also above you and below you, even subterranean.

(USMC Captain, *New York Times*, 8 Nov 2004)

Aptly described as a warren of debris and rubble-strewn streets, the city concealed extensive tunnel systems used by the insurgents to dart between safe houses out of sight of UAVs on watch overhead. US forces located a bunker with reinforced interconnecting tunnels, which led to stores of ammunition and weapons, including an anti-aircraft gun (which presumably could also have been used in the ground-to-ground role if required), bunk beds and a truck.

In a 10-day period, a single Marine unit found 91 weapon caches and 431 IEDs in just one sector of Fallujah. The commercial–industrial Sinai neighbourhood in the south of the city, with its auto repair garages, workshops and light engineering shops, was found to conceal innumerable weapon caches and bomb-making facilities.

Some insurgents appeared to be better equipped than others and were wearing flak jackets; a number wore vests packed with explosives. On numerous occasions, insurgents appeared not to have suffered from a shortage of ammunition, with reports citing tens of thousands of rounds incoming at US troops from heavily defended positions. Insurgents also made prodigious use of mortars, both makeshift and conventional, with one Marine foot patrol in search of weapon caches turning up no less than 200 mortars of various calibres.

Insurgents often waved white flags to signal their surrender, but as US troops approached would pick up weapons again and open fire. Black flags were used as a means of communicating and to call forth fighters to mass for an attack and concentrate fire on US forces.

Loudspeakers were used by the insurgents at mosques throughout the city to encourage their comrades, blaring 'Prepare for jihad!' and 'God is great!'.

In almost every single mosque in Fallujah we have found an arms cache. We have found IED-making facilities. We have found fortifications. We've been shot at by snipers from minarets.

(Maj Gen Richard Natonski,
Commander 1st Marine Division)

As expected, booby traps were prolific. Walls were set with explosives and entire buildings laced with booby traps, particularly around traditional entry points such as doors and windows. IEDs were everywhere and the threat they posed ever-present, with many found buried in the ground, concealed in debris, car hulks etc.

As late as 12 days after the start of operations, reports indicated that Marines were engaging insurgents who had earlier escaped the city and then re-entered it by swimming across the Euphrates River to the west and into the previously die-hard insurgent district of Jolan in the northwest sector. One group of insurgents were intercepted fleeing the city by boat and were killed by armed helicopters.

An estimated 1200–1600 insurgents had been killed in Fallujah by 16 November. Some 500–550 insurgents were captured, including 10 Iranians, a Saudi, a Sudanese, an Egyptian and a Jordanian.

At time of writing, 54 US and about 10 ISF personnel had been killed. This total includes two Marines who drowned when the bulldozer they were driving overturned into the Euphrates River. At the height of the fighting, hospital staff at the US military's Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany received 69 wounded US personnel on 10 November and 102 wounded on 11 November. By 25 November US wounded in Fallujah totalled 850. ♦

Ian Bostock is an independent defence analyst and the Australian correspondent for Jane's defence magazines. He is also on the Board of Directors of the ADA.