

Fallujah:

Close combat in complex terrain

Paul Monk

Every war is ironic because every war is worse than expected. Every war constitutes an irony of situation, because its means are so melodramatically disproportionate to its presumed ends.

Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*

Fighting in Stalingrad...represented a new form of warfare, concentrated in the ruins of civilian life...German infantrymen loathed house to house fighting. They found such close quarter combat, which broke conventional military boundaries and dimensions, psychologically disorienting...It possessed a savage intimacy which appalled their generals.

Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad:*

The Fateful Siege - 1942-1943

The battle of Fallujah, in November 2004, vividly described by Patrick O'Donnell in his book, *We Were One: Shoulder to Shoulder with the Marines Who Took Fallujah*, was a pivotal and paradoxical moment in the Iraq war. Saddam Hussein had been overthrown a year and a half earlier, but it required brutal house to house urban combat against thousands of *mujahedeen*, armed with the latest infantry weapons on the world market, to subdue the city. The battle has a wider significance, though. It demonstrated both the prowess of American combined-arms tactics and the kind of fighting which may be necessary in many theatres, on different scales, in the years ahead. There are lessons here regarding how we are equipping the Australian Army.

The central paradox of Fallujah was that, although the US Marines and their Iraqi allies overwhelmed the *mujahedeen*, the battle was not represented as a victory in the world's media. In this respect, it was rather like the 1968 Tet offensive, at the height of the Vietnam War. Tet was a crushing defeat for the Communists, who had rashly chosen to confront the US military directly. Yet it was, paradoxically, seen by many as evidence that the US could not win in Vietnam. Fallujah, similarly, was widely represented as an indictment of the American campaign in Iraq.

Not the nature of the enemy and the necessity of rooting them out of Fallujah, but the damage caused by the fighting and a single incident which appeared to put the Marines in a bad light were the big stories at the time. That incident was

one in which a Marine shot and killed a wounded *mujahedeen* in a mosque on the ninth day of the battle (16 November). I vividly recall watching a report of the incident on television at the time, with a British journalist's voice-over saying that it discredited the whole American campaign in Iraq.

The commentary was more stunning than the incident. It showed no comprehension of how the war was being fought by the other side. The *mujahedeen* had fortified scores of mosques, hospitals and schools in Fallujah and fought in such a manner as to make observance of the Laws of Armed Conflict exceptionally difficult and dangerous for the Americans. Yet this incident was held to discredit the American war effort. The enemy had dug into the city over months, building berms, trenches and bunkers, in defiance of all efforts by the Iraqi provisional authorities to negotiate their withdrawal. Yet the damage done to the city, in taking it, was blamed on the Americans.

Patrick O'Donnell is a military historian who got himself 'embedded' with one of the combat units that spear-headed the assault on Fallujah: the 1st Platoon, Lima Company, of the 3rd Battalion (the 'Thundering Third'), 1st Marine Regiment. His book provides a useful account of the battle and its background. It also offers a striking description of the use of combined-arms tactics, including tanks. Those tactics and the use of tanks have some relevance to the ongoing debate in Australia about the utility of the Abrams tanks purchased for the Army.

O'Donnell paid his own way to Iraq to witness the battle for Fallujah first hand, because he believed that the media were ignoring 'the sterling performance of our men in battle'. He felt this would be 'the tipping point of the war' and wanted to see it for himself, not read about it afterwards. O'Donnell witnessed the battle at close quarters and has written a graphic account of both the Marines who went into the city and the ferocious urban fighting they were involved in.

As another military historian, Max Boot, has remarked in his book *War Made New: Technology, Warfare and the Course of History 1500 To Today*, 'the battle of Fallujah was a conventional fight in which the US advantages in armour, air power and artillery could be brought to bear even in an urban environment.' It did not, of course, prove to be the tipping point in the war, because the enemy in Iraq rarely chooses to stand and fight in this manner. Enemies can choose to do so,

however, and the battle of Fallujah is a dramatic illustration of what it can take to defeat them when they do.

Fallujah is one of the cities which have become associated with the war in Iraq, even among those whose knowledge of Iraq is hazy. If you are uncertain of the geography of Iraq, think of it as consisting of Kurdistan to the north east, Anbar province and the Syrian Desert to the south west and Mesopotamia, the land of two rivers, in the middle. Fallujah lies almost exactly in the centre of the country, half way up the Euphrates from the Persian Gulf and due west of Baghdad, on the middle Tigris. In between them lies Abu Ghraib.

In fact, the various cities which have become bywords in the course of the war lie along the two great rivers. From Basra in the far south, near the Persian Gulf, upstream along the Euphrates lie Nasiriyah, Najaf and Karbala, then Fallujah and Ramadi. The Tigris runs via Kut to Baghdad, then on to Samarra, where Saddam ran his training camps for terrorists and a number of his WMD programs in the 1990s; to Tikrit, his nearby home village of Auja, and Mosul, in the far north, in Kurdistan.

Fallujah is a far smaller city than Baghdad, with some 300,000 inhabitants as of the beginning of the war in 2003. It has long been a way-station on the ancient road from Baghdad to Amman. It has also, for many generations, been a centre of Sunni Islamic fundamentalism, rooted in the teaching of the 18th Century Saudi cleric Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab. In the struggle over the remaking of Iraq, therefore, it was always going to be a city both pivotal and symbolic.

Gathering storm

It was not, however, a centre of resistance to the American forces in April 2003. Anti-American elements only gathered there gradually in the year after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein. They set up a Shura, or Islamic Council, imposed harsh *shari'a* law and brutally suppressed anyone who opposed them. The killing of four American civilian contractors there, in March 2004, led to an initial attempt to suppress hostile forces in the city in April 2004. After several weeks, due to international political sensitivities about counter-insurgency measures, this operation was halted.


A group of officers of the former Iraqi army undertook to maintain order in the city. Instead, they colluded with Sunni jihadists who poured into the city and turned it into a major stronghold of anti-American terrorism. It became the capital for al Qa'eda chieftain Abu Musab al-Zarqawi's avowed campaign to enforce Sunni theocratic rule on the country and to prevent the creation of a democratic state. This was a direct and violent challenge to the Iraqi provisional authorities and it had to be broken.

For months, both Washington and the Iraqis in Baghdad dithered about whether or not to send the Marines into Fallujah. In the meantime, the jihadists fortified it, turning scores of its mosques into defensive redoubts, built bunkers street by street and stockpiled weapons and ammunition. A veritable international brigade of jihadists arrived during these months to fight in Iraq. It was later determined that there

were fighters of eighteen different nationalities, including Jordanians, Saudis, Syrians, Chechens, Malaysians, Indonesians and Filipinos in Fallujah during the battle.


The Marines had been doing training drills throughout these months for what they call MOUT – Military Operations in Urban Terrain. MOUT involves the use of combined-arms effects – infantry, engineers, indirect fire support from artillery or air-based assets and direct fire support from armoured vehicles, especially tanks. There was a particular emphasis on drilling the infantry to work with tanks. Close co-ordination between infantry and tanks was crucial to MOUT, as the Russians had learned to their cost in the first Chechen war, in the early 1990s. The 'Thundering Third' had been told it would be expected to spearhead any assault on Fallujah. Training with tanks was, therefore, regarded as crucial.

By the end of October 2004, there were believed to be anything up to 10,000 jihadists in Fallujah. Much of the civilian population had fled, both detesting the terrorising rule of the foreign jihadists and fearing the looming American onslaught. The Coalition assembled six battalions for its assault, led the enemy to expect the main attack from the south, but struck hard from the north. For all their arms caches and fanatical resistance, the *mujahedeen* were swiftly and relentlessly outfought.



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Clearing Fallujah

The 1st Platoon, accompanied by O'Donnell, experienced twelve days of hand to hand, house to house urban combat. Of its forty five members, fewer than twenty survived the battle unscathed. Seventy Marines were killed in the battle and more than 700 wounded. Of the jihadists, reports indicate somewhere between 2000 and 3500 were killed, with another 2500 captured. This was not an environment for the uncommitted. 'Most of the reporters assigned to the assault units bugged out and returned to headquarters as soon as the battle started,' O'Donnell writes. He stayed the course and his writing reflects the shock and emotion of the experience.

The Marines of the 1st Platoon and other members of Lima Company emerge as individuals in the course of O'Donnell's narrative and in a number of cases they die violently and suddenly. He describes the deaths with a laconic realism redolent of nothing so much as Homer's descriptions, in *The Iliad*, of warriors, youthful and fiercely alive one moment, speared through the throat the next and dying; their heels drumming on the ground.

It is difficult to convey either the intensity or the logistical complexity of MOUT in Fallujah. O'Donnell makes the point, however, that the aerial bombardment of the city before the Marines went in was minimal, compared with the massive bombardment to which island redoubts were subjected before Marine landings in the Pacific during World War II. This was a political directive, designed to minimise collateral damage or civilian casualties. Clint Eastwood, in his film *Letters From Iwo Jima*, captures some of the terrifying intensity of air and naval bombardment to which that Japanese occupied island was subjected in what John Dower famously dubbed a 'war without mercy'.

In Fallujah, the real battering ram was the Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles of the Army's 2nd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment. These fearsome combat platforms ploughed through the enemy's outer defences and disrupted the rear areas behind them, opening the way for the Marines to move in. The tanks detonated IEDs, cut booby trap wires, flattening anything and killing anyone that resisted. 'For the muj, engaging an Abrams tank was pointless,' O'Donnell remarks, 'because most of their RPGs could not penetrate the Abrams's composite armour.' Recent advances in improvised explosive devices (IED), of course, have been designed to overcome the formidable armour of the Abrams.

After the tank assault came lethal house to house fighting, because only infantry could take control of the terrain. Indirect fire support from high tech smart bombs and artillery, could not be used ahead of the infantry, because the tanks were there. The tanks themselves, which, as O'Donnell observes, are 'the most useful weapons for supporting infantry in urban combat' were in short supply. Consequently, 'Lima Company

had the difficult assignment of rooting muj fighters out of buildings using only small arms and grenades.'

'Theolan, the headquarters of the jihadis in Fallujah, was a defender's paradise', O'Donnell records. 'For months, Fallujah's defenders had been converting homes into fighting positions. The bunkers were connected by a series of 'mouse holes', man-sized holes knocked through walls, which allowed the enemy to move men from one area to another undetected. The concrete and stone buildings provided excellent cover and concealment, and the strong walls absorbed coalition ordnance. A typical Fallujah city block was about 100 by 200 metres long, with about one hundred stone or concrete houses. The Marines had to clear every building on the block.'

It is in this brutal work that O'Donnell's Marines were killed. In an assault on one of many buildings that had to be cleared, Staff Sergeant Michael van Daele and one of his ablest Marines, Sergeant William James, 'a man respected for his courage under fire and for always being "at the tip of the spear"', burst in through the door, encountered three enemies with AK-47s and RPGs and gunned them down.

They then came to an interior door. 'James took a step and crossed the door's threshold. As soon as his boot touched the floor, his head violently snapped backward, and his body fell right in front of Van Daele.' He had been hit in the left eye and the whole back of his head had been blown off. In one fluid motion, Van Daele 'grabbed the back of James's flak vest with one hand, shooting with the other' and dragged his body to safety.

In another assault, shortly afterwards, a squad of Marines moves into a building and O'Donnell reports, '(Lance Corporal Nicholas) Larson moved in first and caught one right in the jugular as he unloaded his magazine into the muj. As he fired, he caught one right in the jugular...'. The squad got pinned down and one of them, Private First Class Nathan Wood 'heroically charged toward the room containing the muj, spraying them with his M-16 and hurling a grenade through the door.' His heroism cost him his life, but the rest of the squad were able to pull back and call in rocket fire to suppress the enemy bunker.

Perhaps the most stunning moment is when O'Donnell himself witnesses the fall of 22-year old Lance Corporal Michael Hanks, whom the reader has known from the start of the book and who has seemed bullet proof. The moment, he says, 'replays endlessly in my mind's eye.' Hanks was providing cover for his wounded squad commander, Sergeant James Conner, from behind a wall. Suddenly, there was a massive burst of fire from the building they were assaulting. 'Then I heard someone yell, "He's gone! Corpsman! Hanks is fucking gone!" Michael Hanks's bloody head was lying next to my boot.'

'There were still a lot of bullets flying, but for a second everyone stopped. The moment seemed to last for an eternity. Then everyone snapped back into action by the Platoon

Conner told the tankers where to fire. "That house right there needs to go away." It did, in short order.

commander (First Lieutenant Jeff Sommers)'s orders. Sommers decided to avoid any further casualties by bringing in tank support. He barked, "Get Hanks. Get him outside. A tank will fucking level this."...A tank arrived to provide fire support. Despite the blood spurting out of his arm, Conner told the tankers where to fire. "That house right there needs to go away." It did, in short order.

A classic example of combined-arms action took place when the 3rd Platoon, Lima Company, was ambushed not far from the al Qa'eda headquarters and had to fight a day long battle to survive. Pictures from a Dragon Eye, a small, state of the art UAV reconnaissance platform, revealed that up to 150 *mujahedeen* had surrounded the platoon. They were within fifty metres of the Marines, which made it difficult for indirect fire support to protect them. Yet artillery was called in, since otherwise the platoon would have been overwhelmed. Late in the day, air strikes were called in and tanks arrived, at last. The tanks destroyed the enemy's bunker complex and the platoon was able to extract itself from the fight.

The 'discipline' of the enemy was something that left a lasting impression on the Marines, according to O'Donnell. They would wait for the Americans to enter a building and for the opportunity to take a shot at them up close. 'Their goal was to kill an American and then die.' But it appears that this 'discipline' was not altogether a matter of raw courage or religious belief. 'Nearly all of the *mujahedeen* 1st Platoon would encounter during the battle were high on a cocktail of drugs', O'Donnell writes, which gave them both a zombie like relentlessness and a superhuman capacity to withstand physical injury.

There was, also, the ruthlessness of the enemy and their exploitation of the Rules-of-Engagement by which the Americans fought. In addition to bomb factories and arms caches in the city, the Marines found torture chambers where worse things were done to human beings than anyone has accused the Americans of doing at either Abu Ghraib or Guantanamo Bay. Jihadis would not only fight from mosques and hospitals, then cry foul if these were fired upon; they would dress in American uniforms (a violation of the Laws of Armed Conflict), use women and children as human shields, pretend to surrender only to resume the fight. 'The rules to fight this war need to change', declared Hanks the day he died.

Lessons in lethality

How to fight and defeat such an enemy, is the challenge that presently confronts the whole Western world. O'Donnell's book offers no guidance in this respect. It is not a theoretical piece of work. It is a description of close combat. It recounts murderous engagement with the enemy that is behind the endless IEDs, suicide bombings in market places or by roadsides and death squad executions that have made the prolonged terrorist insurgency in Iraq so vicious.

O'Donnell's sketch of the intense fighting in Fallujah is also a Dragon Eye's view, as it were, of the kind of really

lethal close combat for which the Australian Army has been getting re-equipped in the past few years, in case it is necessary. Our infantry did not fight at Fallujah, but should we need or choose to send them into such an operation, even if on a smaller scale, O'Donnell's account of what took place at Fallujah shows what it would involve.

The MOUT tactics used at Fallujah are very similar to the training now given to the Australian Army: close combat in complex, predominantly urban, terrain. The Abrams tanks have been purchased with this in mind. They have been bought in small numbers, in preparation for the *possibility*, not the certainty, that close armoured support for infantry may be necessary in a wide variety of plausible scenarios in the immediate future.

Intense urban fighting against irregular forces using bunker defences and highly lethal small arms could occur now anywhere from the Balkans, across Africa and the Middle East, through Central Asia to the islands north of Australia. The Army's overall doctrine regarding operations in this latter region is not MOUT but MOLE, Manoeuvre Operations in the Littoral Environment. And it is not just counter-insurgency, never mind state-on-state conflict that might entail the need for close combat.

The need can arise in stabilisation or humanitarian operations. Fallujah was at the high end of the scale of operations. US Rangers in Mogadishu, in 1993, on a humanitarian intervention mission, were caught in an urban ambush without tanks and needed to call in UN-flagged Pakistani tanks to help them out. UN-flagged Dutch peace-keeping forces in Bosnia in 1995, without tanks were helpless to deter the Serb militia from attacking Srebrenica and massacring thousands of its Muslim male inhabitants.

It is sometimes claimed that we could not or would not use tanks in our own region. In fact, in 1999 our old Leopard I tanks were on standby in Darwin, during INTERFET, in case the East Timor situation degenerated into a lethal fire-fight. We used tanks of various types in Papua, New Guinea, Bougainville and Borneo in World War II and Centurion tanks in Vietnam in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Should the need be grave, or the risk acute, be it during stabilisation operations or more acute conflict, the Army's calculations are that at least a minimal tank capability – a mere three squadrons – could be a vital asset in our armoury. The combined-arms combat in Fallujah showed how. ♦

Dr Paul Monk is a founding director of Austthink (www.austthink.com) in Melbourne. His most recent article in Defender was 'Tracked arguments and soft ground: Reflections on public argument about the Abrams tank decision' in the Spring 2007 issue. A fully footnoted version of this article can be found on the Austthink website.