

## The FUTURE of IRAQ

A special section chronicling two North County Times journalists in war-torn Iraq and their experiences and their experiences with the Camp Pendleton-based 2nd Battalion, 1<sup>st</sup> Marine Regiment.

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# BACK TO IRAQ

On the frayed edges of Fallujah

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Marine Lance Cpl. Anthony Dilling sat stunned on the train tracks as troops rushed his wounded buddy away.

It was April 6, and a battle raged some 300 yards away in Jolan, a dusty, tough neighborhood in northwest Fallujah. Dilling's patrol had just been ambushed by Iraqi insurgents. Lance Cpl. Brad Simmons, a comrade of Dilling's, had been shot in the head and we all feared he would die.

Marines with Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment yell at other Marines as they prepare to head back into battle after being attacked in an ambush in Fallujah on April 6, 2004.

Dilling, a lanky kid from Nebraska whose dad and brothers are also Marines, smudged a tear with the back of his dirty hand and took a deep breath as he leaned on his rifle to help himself to his feet.

There would be no rest, no time to mourn.

Sliding down the dirt berm on the train trestle to several Humvees idling on the pavement below, Dilling climbed onto the back of one, joining the chorus of pumped-up Marines raising their fists and waving their rifles.

"Mount up!" they yelled, piling into the Humvees this way and that, forming a spiky mass of gun barrels and taut arms.

It was time to "get some," as one young Marine grunted from beneath his helmet, time to teach the rebels a lesson.

It's uncertain what, if anything, was learned.

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## A mission morphs

The surprise firefight changed the Marines' mind-set. They were no longer planning to win the hearts of the people of Fallujah, the Iraqi city they'd surrounded the day before the ambush that bloodied their friend.

Fires burn after an air strike by a U.S. Spector gunship in Fallujah, Iraq, on April 16, 2004.

Instead, the Marines began a bloody, month-long siege of Fallujah that became a major turning point in the war, shattering any illusions that U.S. troops faced only a "few bad apples" in Iraq.

That April firefight in Fallujah soon drew thousands of Marines inextricably into the kind of full-scale, urban combat U.S. forces had tried so hard to avoid, and Marine generals had promised to resort to only when all else failed.

The fighting, which eventually left hundreds of Iraqis and Americans dead, ended with a settlement that left the town in rebel hands, leaving many to wonder if Fallujah would be the model for America's way out of Iraq.

It also showed America, and the world, that almost a year after President Bush declared an end to major combat, there was still a bloody war to be fought.

The violence in Fallujah was impossible to ignore and, in the heat of an election year, hardened people's positions about a war that now seemed more real than ever before.

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## Unexpected story

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As the tanks rolled into the city during that April 6 firefight and started blasting Iraqi homes, North County Times staff photographer Hayne Palmour and I knew we probably wouldn't be doing any more stories about Marines enjoying some horseplay with Iraqi recruits or passing out candy to kids.

When we embedded with the Marines and traveled with them to Iraq in early March, we had expected to report about Marines rebuilding schools and training new Iraqi security forces before the transfer of power to a new Iraqi government on June 30.

The troops called it "security and stability ops" ---- a fancy way of saying they were going to try to make friends and help the Iraqis onto their feet while trying to stop insurgents from spoiling rebuilding efforts.

We knew roadside bombs and ambushes were a constant threat in Iraq. We had written about how the Marines trained to counter them when we were back home in San Diego County following their pre-deployment preparations at Camp Pendleton, the Marines' major West Coast base.

We expected violence. What we got was war.

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## Back to Iraq

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When we left Camp Pendleton on March 1, we had the comfort of knowing we were heading to Iraq with veterans.

Most of the 1,200 infantrymen, Navy corpsmen and other troops of the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment had been members of the tightly run and well-trained unit during last year's invasion. Most had stayed for the first few months of the occupation in southern Iraq.

It was our second such trip to Iraq, too.

After following another Camp Pendleton battalion in early 2003 as they charged from Kuwait to Baghdad, we returned home in late April, just before President Bush declared an end to major combat on May 1, 2003.

When 25,000 Marines led by Camp Pendleton's I Marine Expeditionary Force were called up to replace the Army in western Iraq the following spring, it was only natural that we would go with them. Camp Pendleton's tens of thousands of Marines and their families are part of our community here in Southern California.

And, as former members of the defunct Iraqi regime joined Islamic radicals and nationalists and mounted an increasingly tough resistance to the U.S. occupation, we wanted to see for ourselves how the country had changed over the past year.

Our plan: to document the troops as they adjusted to their mission of rebuilding the country while fighting an escalating guerrilla war.

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## Al Anbar

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Despite reports of increasing unrest and mounting casualties in Iraq, the Marines were optimistic about their mission as they prepared to replace soldiers from the Army's 82nd Airborne Division in the Sunni-dominated region west of Baghdad.

Navy Corpsmen Deramichaeleous Daniels, 21, left, from Chicago, and Marine Jerod Brown, 19, from Charleston, W.V., have fun sharing wallet pictures with an Iraqi man and children during a patrol by Echo Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment, of a small village next to the Euphrates River on Thursday, March 25, 2004.

Their assignment was to stabilize the province of Al Anbar, which spans from the western edge of Baghdad west to the Syrian and Jordanian borders. The province stretches about 250 miles north to south ---- a little longer than the distance between San Diego and Bakersfield ---- and includes the towns and villages around the Euphrates River.

Al Anbar river towns such as Fallujah and Ramadi are pillars of the so-called Sunni Triangle, where Saddam Hussein had enlisted thousands of Sunni Muslim citizens for his military and intelligence services. Hussein had bought the loyalty of local tribes by lavishing dominant sheiks with money and power.

Most locally based Marines who have recently died in Iraq were killed in the volatile province of Al Anbar. More than 60 Camp Pendleton Marines and scores of other military service members have died there in the last two months alone.

Largely bypassed by U.S. forces during the invasion, the cities had since become the nucleus of the anti-U.S. insurgency ---- a safe lair for former members of Hussein's regime, a pulpit for radical Sunni Muslim clerics and a safehouse for foreign fighters arriving from other countries of the Middle East and Africa.

The Army had tried to quell the region with a forceful presence in the cities but pulled back to bases outside the towns, occasionally cracking down in heavy-handed operations that drew criticism from the Marine brass, who seemed to think they could do better.

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## Riding with 2/1

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As their turn in Al Anbar approached, the Marine generals promised not to act like cowboys.

They talked of pacifying the region without resorting to heavy armor or airstrikes and cited their peaceful occupation of southern Iraq last year as proof they could do it.

After they handed out missions to the Marines, we got ours. We would be attached to the 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment ---- known around Camp Pendleton as the "2/1."

The battalion was tapped for the prestigious and difficult job of quieting the volatile city of Fallujah, where Army casualties were mounting and rebels were launching increasingly sophisticated attacks against U.S. and Iraqi troops.

Affan al-Basit, 8, is treated by Navy Corpsman Robert Davenport in the back of a field ambulance after he and his brother were wounded by shrapnel from a mortar shot by insurgents in Fallujah on April 23, 2004.

It was considered by most observers to be a rebel town, something 1st Marine Division commander Maj. Gen. James Mattis said they planned to change by being "no better friend, no worse enemy."

One Marine major told me the Marines' mission in Al Anbar was the top priority for the entire U.S. effort in Iraq. We later found out that 2/1 was the top priority for the Marines. As far as missions went, 2/1's would be the toughest. That meant ours would be, too.

For a force known for storming beaches, delicate peacekeeping in such a volatile region would be a challenge.

The troops trained for an unconventional war that would be won more with good deeds and American charm than with bullets and bombs.

They were taught how to search homes and detain people without offending Muslims. They got a crash course in Arabic. They even packed Frisbees, jelly beans and teddy bears for the kids.

But the realities of Fallujah soon forced them to drop the treats and grab their guns.

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## First blood

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Marines of 2/1 suffered their first blow less than 48 hours after they hauled their rucksacks into their new barracks at the Army's base a mile or so outside of Fallujah on March 16.

When Marines accompanied soldiers to help guard a meeting of the new city council at the mayor's compound downtown, rebels attacked the troops with mortars and rocket-propelled grenades. At least 20 troops, mostly soldiers, were riddled with shrapnel.

Marine Cpl. Christopher Klingman, whose arms and legs were bloodied by bits of metal and rock, said the attack was a violent "wake-up call" for the Marines who were due to assume responsibility for Fallujah in about a week.

We visited him and some of the others as they recovered in a nearby field hospital a few days after the attack.

He hobbled on crutches across a stuffy concrete room that smelled of latex, sweat and medicine. Some men sat in folding chairs, each propping bandaged arms and legs up on the next man's chair. Others lay unconscious on olive-drab colored cots, under intravenous drips.

Klingman, a 27-year-old sniper who said he joined the Marine Corps to escape a sleepy farming town in Nebraska, said he felt lucky. Some of the guys got it much worse than he did. At least he could rejoin his men, he said.

"On the one hand, I'm glad I got it out of the way," he said of his injuries, seeming resigned to the fact that one would inevitably get wounded in Fallujah. "On the other, I'm thinking, 'Goddamn, it's gonna be a long seven months.' "

It was the Marines' second day of on-the-job training with the soldiers, some of the 700 paratroopers of the 82nd Airborne's 1st Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment. The soldiers were quiet, hardened men just trying to survive the last days of a seven-month tour in Fallujah. They lost one man killed in action. Nearly 100 more were wounded.

As their replacements arrived, their commander, Army Lt. Col. Brian Drinkwine, said the Marines would enjoy the challenges of Fallujah. But he warned: "They'll be bloodied."

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## Trading seats with the Army

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Drinkwine said he had learned to limit his soldiers' presence in Fallujah, restricting military operations to in-and-out raids on safehouses or well-planned sweeps of neighborhoods, and working to support local leaders and institutions with small teams of specialists.

But as the Marines took over, it was clear they would take a more aggressive tack.

While the soldiers and Marines worked on the transfer in an air of mutual respect, considerable bad-mouthing went on in private conversations and in graffiti scribbled on outhouse walls.

Some Army officers said they thought the Marines were too eager for action.

The outgoing Army commander warned that it would take more than might to pacify the town.

The insurgency thrived in the absence of hope, Drinkwine said. The Marines would have to spend more time creating jobs, building local institutions and listening to Iraqis than they would waging war.

Some of the Marines seemed to listen. Others blew off the Army's suggestions, dismissing the soldiers as wimps who had left them the brunt of the work.

It was in the final days of the transfer ---- as Marines assumed complete responsibility for patrolling the city's outer roads and policing the base perimeter ---- that the rebels attacked a convoy on the highway just outside of town, killing Lance Cpl. Jeffrey Burgess and wounding several others.

The attack was all it took for Marine commanders to part with the Army's recommended hands-off approach.

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## Out of the gates

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On March 26, less than 24 hours after the last of the soldiers left, the Marines made their formal debut in Fallujah.

Just before dawn on March 26, 2/1's commander, Lt. Col. Gregg Olson, sent 600 of his Marines to storm the southeastern sector and show everyone that there was a new force in town.

After that, there was no turning back. The massive, daylong operation left one Marine and at least six Iraqi civilians dead, turning the town upside down and stripping away any hopes the Marines would win many hearts or minds in Fallujah.

A group of Marines, lower left, watch a 500-pound bomb explode on a rebel position during a U.S. airstrike on the northwest side of Fallujah on April 8, 2004.

Palmour and I had hitched a ride into town with Fox Company and followed them as they scoured homes for weapons and questioned residents.

Encounters between Marines and residents were strained from the beginning ---- lukewarm at best. Marines started the day by blasting open some doors with explosives and kicking in others, then trying to calm the women and children frightened by the intrusion.

They gradually lightened up and even had several cordial chats with nervous neighbors as they moved block by block.

Rebels rattled wild fire at us as we weaved our way north through the city. The troops we were with never fired wildly at the attackers ---- they waited for a clear target ---- and warned the neighbors to stay inside.

Despite the Marines' general restraint, we witnessed one incident that made it painfully clear that even a careful use of force could backfire and turn Iraqis against the troops.

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## Sniper turns tide

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After talking to several residents and dodging several small attacks, we stopped outside a mosque to wait for other units to catch up. We could hear the sporadic chatter of machine guns and thunderous booms of grenades down nearby streets, but all was quiet on our corner.

Suddenly, a single shot from a Marine sniper on a nearby rooftop broke the calm. More shots followed seconds later. Then, silence.

Minutes later, Lt. Josh Jamison trotted across the open street to the mosque and reported that one of the Marine snipers had "dropped" a man on a nearby rooftop. He said the man had been talking on a cell phone while staring at the Marines' position, so the sniper shot him.

It had been reported that rebels often used cell phones to detonate bombs or to direct military actions, so no one second-guessed the killing.

Soon the snipers reported that a crowd had gathered to remove the body of the man they had just killed.

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## Marines not welcome

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A half-block away at the site of the shooting we found a slick of blood ---- the thick, dark kind that I've always known as death ---- soaking the curb in front of the house.

Women wailed from inside, filling the street with their haunting chorus of grief.

The slain man's brother sat gasping for air at the edge of the pooled blood, crying, "Why? Why? Why?"

Warned by neighbors that we should leave the scene, we pushed a few blocks north, but the troops were soon called to return.

"We're not heroes anymore in this part of town," Sgt. Todd Luginbuhl warned his men as we double-timed through the dust to avoid dozens of mourners who were following the man's body, which was being carried into the mosque.

Passing the block again later, we were faced with a crowd of more than a hundred angry-looking boys and men. Elders warned us to leave ---- now!

The slain man might or might not have been a rebel, but his death had clearly turned the residents of that neighborhood against the Marines.

I later heard from troops who had fought there that similar dramas played out around the town, and at least five other civilians died and more than 20 were wounded in Fallujah that day.

It didn't matter that the other casualties could have been the result of the rebels' indiscriminate sprays of fire or volleys of mortars and grenades. To many residents, the bloodshed was the Marines' fault for being there in the first place and giving the rebels an opportunity to fight.

At the edge of town near the end of the day, I asked an Iraqi how he thought residents felt about the Marines' debut in the city.

"In our culture," he said, "the tribe will have to get revenge."

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## Blood for blood

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Revenge came quickly in Fallujah.

Fallujah's mayor and council of sheiks begged the Marines to pull out of the city. Their presence had only made things worse, they said.

An Iraqi man opens the door to his small home not realizing that an Army soldier and a Marine, right, are about to enter and demand that he turn his house lights off during a joint Army and Marine cordon and search operation in Fallujah, Iraq on Sunday morning, March 21, 2004.

As news of the Marines' first bloody day in Fallujah spread in Iraq and at home, one Marine information officer called the escalating situation a public relations "nightmare."

Over the next few days, intelligence officers reported that rebels were using the local outrage over the raid to their advantage and were waging a propaganda campaign over mosque loudspeakers in Fallujah to keep things stirred up.

Then, on March 31, after several days of bloody skirmishes at the edge of town, the rebels brought the escalating violence to a horrible climax, killing four armed American civilians as they drove through town.

In what would become a widely publicized image of the escalating violence in Fallujah and Iraq, a wild crowd set the victims on fire and then mutilated the charred bodies in the street.

Troops from 2/1 were especially shocked as they watched the images on television from their base a mile or so away. The grisly scenes of burned corpses being dragged through the dirt and hanged from a bridge over the Euphrates River were taken right in their "A.O." ---- area of responsibility.

They knew they would have to respond.

"Bill O'Reilly is saying we should make the people of Fallujah bathe in their own blood," complained Maj. Brandon McGowan a few days later.

"You just don't do that to Americans," warned Echo Company commander Doug Zeimbac as the Marines planned their attack.

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## The siege begins

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Just before midnight on April 4, about 2,000 Marines from 2/1 and Camp Pendleton's 1st Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment surrounded the city to squeeze it until residents turned in those who killed the contractors.

Officials insisted there were just a few rebels in Fallujah ---- mostly "dead-enders" from Hussein's regime working in concert with a core of extremists and foreign fighters. The Marines would help the Iraqi people and Iraqi security forces weed them out, they said.

When Fox Company reached a train trestle at the northwest corner of the city, rebels attacked with a hail of gunfire and rocket-propelled grenades, killing combat engineer Cpl. Tyler Fey.

"It all happened so fast," Sgt. Warren Hardy said as he pointed to the pile of rocks where Marines had ducked to avoid the blasts.

It was the first American blood spilled in what Marines dubbed Operation Vigilant Resolve ---- the siege of Fallujah that would soon draw Marines into a month of bloody street-fighting and kill many illusions about the nature of war in Iraq.

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## Alone to fight

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Only 20 of the 2,000-some Iraqi soldiers who were supposed to be working with the Marines showed up, leaving the Marines standing alone at the rough edge of town.

On the second day of the operation, after hours of tense quiet, Fox Company commander Capt. Kyle Stoddard sent a patrol to probe the Jolan neighborhood on the other side of the railroad tracks where the first Marine was killed the day before.

Residents were still milling around, despite the hundreds of troops amassed on the opposite side of the tracks.

As Marines cautiously walked through the dense neighborhood to an open street, residents suddenly started running for their homes. The street cleared out quickly, save for a few children who ran by the troops pointing imaginary guns and making noises like gunfire before they vanished.

Lance Cpl. Dilling said he knew they were in trouble.

Suddenly, the street exploded with gunfire. In an instant, a Marine was down.

Struck in the back of the head, Lance Cpl. Simmons later said he was able to get off a shot and probably kill his attacker before he faded into shock. Navy Corpsman Michael "Doc" Meaney darted through the fire to start treating his wounds.

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## Marine down

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Tanks rushed in as some of the infantrymen pulled the badly wounded Simmons back to the cover of the nearby train trestle.

Screaming and yelling for their buddies to hurry up, troops piled back on the Humvees and sped back to the fight.

During the chaotic next few hours, Marine tanks blasted away with machine guns and cannon. Helicopters swooped in low, firing missiles into rebel-occupied homes.

Armored vehicles ferried in about 100 more men from Echo Company to reinforce the exhausted men of Fox. They'd been fighting waves of rebels firing AK-47s and rocket-propelled grenades from Iraqi houses. They took over the houses as residents fled.

Troops said the frightened families scattered down the streets, waving white clothing or sheets as they ran through the gunfire.

By the end of the day, the Marines declared there were no "friendlies" left in the neighborhood, turning the northern section of the city into a free-fire zone where the Marines were allowed to shoot anything that moved and destroy buildings where they thought the rebels were hiding.

For the next few days, as the fighting waxed and waned, Palmour and I watched the daytime action from atop the train trestle and spent cold nights in a nearby mortar pit ---- a 3-foot-deep, 10-foot-diameter hole dug in the ground where a crew of three Marines fired 60mm mortars into the city.

It was about the safest place we could be as rebel mortars and rockets exploded in the surrounding field during the first week of fighting.

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### Pinned by fire

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One day a sniper, probably firing from the towering minaret of a distant mosque, pinned us down to the tracks and sent us crawling out with our faces in the gravel to get away.

For days bullets zinged overhead. Some of them were ricochets and errant rounds from distant fights, but some of them were probably well-aimed shots from the minaret. The really close ones made a loud and unforgettable crack.

One night, as I pecked away on a computer under a black, light-proof sheet in the cover of the mortar pit, a half-dozen huge rockets whizzed in and exploded. The closest landed about 75 yards away. The blasts sent Palmour diving in on me from a few yards away, where he was trying to brush his teeth. He ripped the battery and cables from my laptop as he crash-landed.

The rockets and mortars fired from rebel strongholds in the city fell with random abandon on Iraqis and Americans alike, once striking an apartment building full of Iraqi women and children.

As the Marines defended their foothold from the houses and school buildings at the city's edge, rebel snipers invited barrages from Abrams tanks, Super Cobra helicopters and F-16 jet fighters that leveled buildings with 500-pound bombs.

After days of firing mortars and artillery into the city, some troops joked that the town had been turned into a "live-fire range" like the ones they trained on at Camp Pendleton.

"So much for hearts and minds!" said 1st Lt. Ross Schellhaas when another bomb exploded a quarter-mile away from his position.

Operation Vigilant Resolve was first billed by Marine leaders as a cordon, or security perimeter, around the city from which they planned to carry out a series of raids on rebel areas.

Instead, it had become an all-out battle for the city. And Marine casualties were mounting.

The battle wasn't what the Marines had planned or wanted, said 1st Marine Regiment commander Col. John Toolan when he and other top commanders visited troops on the front line on the third day of fighting.

"We were sucked in," he said.

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### Cease-fire

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After the first week, Marine commanders agreed to a cease-fire to give some Iraqi politicians a chance to persuade the rebels that resistance was futile. They said the troops would halt offensive operations but would do what they had to do to defend themselves. It was a very loose cease-fire.

Ambulances wailed as they made grim rounds, collecting the dead inside the city during the calm. Reports surfaced that more than 600 residents and rebels had been killed and more than a thousand wounded.

During some slack in the fighting, Palmour and I slipped into the city from the trestle and were taken in by some 20 Marines from Fox Company. They were living in one of the many homes that residents fled during the first few days of fighting.

The troops were getting along with no running water and no electricity, making themselves at home and building up defenses without doing too much damage to the war-torn house.

We settled into a young woman's bedroom, which we identified as such from the stylish clothes and family pictures left behind when she and her family had fled. We pushed her purses and shoes, trinkets and makeup to one corner and made the room our home.

Our padded mats on her concrete floor were much better than sleeping in the fighting hole, where we had choked on dust and ducked rocket shrapnel with the three punchy mortarmen.

But it still felt creepy, and somehow wrong, to be in this woman's room. And nights in this stranger's room were made stranger still by a clock that played American-style nursery rhymes every hour, on the hour.

'They just want to escalate this'

While a cease-fire bought some time for leaders to find alternatives, continued attacks from rebels over the next two weeks seemed to make a final assault on the city the only option.

The toughest part of such an attack would be Jolan ---- the old heart of the city along the Euphrates River where rebels had weeks to build defenses and entrench themselves in the narrow streets and crowded brick quarters.

Officers said they believed they had trapped at least 1,000 hard-core fighters inside the city, and they made plans to level the rebel strongholds before the Marines moved in to mop up.

About 200,000 residents were still in the city as thousands of Marines from at least four infantry battalions were poised to squeeze the rebels into Jolan and into 2/1's "kill zone," military leaders said.

Leaning into their machine guns, watching the honeycombed city from atop the roof of our house, some of the troops said they felt like they would have to fight the whole town, that the heavy casualties and destruction had probably turned many residents into rebels.

Fox Company commander Stoddard said that's what he thought the rebels were after with their small, suicidal attacks against the better-gunned Marines.

"They are poking at us to see what we will do," Stoddard said after bullets and mortars crashed near some of his men in the houses. "They want us to come out with bigger and bigger weapons systems so they can say, 'Look what the Americans are doing.' They just want to escalate this."

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### 'Ain't nobody out there but bad guys'

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While talks between U.S. and Iraqi leaders gave the illusion of peace, Jolan was still at war.

The combatants hunted each other from afar: rebels with random mortar attacks, the Marines with silent snipers. One Marine alone claimed 24 "kills."

Lance Cpl. Enrique Villa, 21, of San Jose, Calif., keeps a close eye on three men, one of whom is carrying a white flag, as they walk past a house that is being occupied by Marines of 3rd Platoon, Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 1st Marine Regiment in the northwest section of Fallujah, Iraq on April 14, 2004.

The smoldering no-man's land between the rebels and Marines seethed with death as bodies rotted in deserted streets and abandoned buildings.

During the day, it was a fight against time. In the heat and uncertainty of the cease-fire, the troops fought off flies and battled boredom between the occasional thrill of a firefight. Still, they kept their chins up and their eyes peeled on the city from rooftop hideouts and sandbagged machine-gun bunkers.

"Ain't nobody out there but bad guys," Sgt. James Hollon mumbled one hot and humid afternoon as he watched for movement in the maze of brick buildings and green-domed mosques.

At night, it was a war of words. Rebels blared militant chants from neighborhood mosques, and Army psychological operations teams blasted rock music from loudspeakers mounted on Humvees, the good-humored troops countering calls for holy war ---- jihad ---- with heavy metal.

It was during this bizarre and deadly stalemate on April 12 that the insurgents dealt the Marines a deep blow with a mortar attack and ambush, leaving two Echo Company Marines dead and more than a dozen wounded.

Frustrated troops then called for a final, decisive assault on Jolan.

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### Ambush

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Just after midnight on April 24 ---- nearly three weeks into the siege ---- about 30 Fox Company Marines sneaked away from their houses and ventured out into the city to see what the enemy was up to.

After painstakingly tip-toeing through rubble and broken glass in the vacant blocks, they waited and listened for rebel activity for more than 15 hours, hiding in a house near a mosque where rebels had launched their daily attacks.

We waited, too, and rushed to the roof of our house at 7 p.m. when a radio crackled back to life and Lt. Josh Jamison whispered that six armed men were approaching their hideout.

Seconds later, Jamison announced that the men had emerged from the mosque laden with rifles and ammunition.

The street erupted with gunfire as the Marines ambushed the men.

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### Leaving a calling card

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When the street fell quiet about 40 minutes later, troops radioed that they had killed at least 11 insurgents. They laid the bodies of four of them ---- and what remained of a fifth ---- on the ground in front of the mosque as a grim warning.

Palmour and I had gotten to know almost every one of the Marines in the house over the recent weeks' fighting as we joked and jawed to kill time. We knew them mostly as kids in their teens and 20s who laughed about recent high school exploits, recounted horror stories about drill instructors and talked longingly about their families and friends in hometowns from Marin County to Manhattan.

To us, they had become "the guys." We had always tried to capture their human side in our daily reports and photos.

But when they returned in the dark from the blood-stained mosque, they were not kids anymore.

When they dumped their gear back at the house, they were jubilant, slapping "high fives" and recounting tales of bravado that were getting bigger and badder by the minute.

After they slurped cold drinks and ate a quick meal, a Marine combat cameraman gathered them together to watch a digital video of their handiwork.

They huddled in the living room of the darkened home, laughing and ribbing each other as the battle unfolded for a second time on the tiny screen.

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### A new light

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In the glow of the DVD, illuminated with smiles as if they were watching their high school playoff game, I saw the guys in a new light, and I withdrew, torn by feelings that fell somewhere between pride and disappointment.

It was war.

It was war that seemed to bring out the best in men ---- the sacrifice, courage, stamina and skill as they risked their lives for their brothers and worked tightly as a team to make it back together.

And it was war that seemed to bring out the worst in men.

It brought these young men ---- known in any other setting as the guy next door, a brother, a boyfriend, a father, a husband, a son ---- to kill. They laughed as they watched one man's broken skull flap open and kidded about a body that looked like "hamburger" when they were done.

"I don't want to kill anybody," Cpl. Peter Madrigal, 21, of Tucson, Ariz., told me a while later. "But I will if I have to. And I won't feel bad about it. It's my job."

It was the best and worst that men could be ---- and exactly what we Americans were asking these young men to become in this murky war in Iraq.

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### Echo suffers again

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When Echo Company tried to emulate Fox's success two days later, they suffered a defeat that sent them and the brass reeling.

After Marines sneaked about 300 yards into the city, rebels slipped in between Echo's troops and attacked them at close range, tossing grenades through the windows and firing on them from the roof next door. One Marine was killed and about 15 were wounded in two hours of brutal fighting.

Survivors told tales of Marines who fought fearlessly to regain the upper hand and Navy corpsmen who braved the fire to pull the wounded men back to safety.

It was the "belly of the beast," said Navy Corpsman Jason Duty hours after the fight, his beige boots still covered in black blood.

Men recounted how Duty fought his way into the house to evacuate the wounded and then tried desperately to pound life back into a dying Marine as they rushed him down bumpy roads in the open back of a Humvee.

The April 26 battle seemed to shake Marine leaders from the seductive idea that they could level Fallujah and somehow win in the end.

Civilian leaders said the fighting in Fallujah could affect the June 30 transfer of power and had potentially profound implications for the entire Middle East region.

Soon, even in the isolation of dusty, dangerous Fallujah, we could feel the politicians' clammy hands.

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### Political price too high

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"It's not our decision to make anymore," Lt. James Vanzant said of the decision to strike, his voice reaching a shrill pitch often heard among the Marine officers as they watched the military victory slip away. "It's way above our heads."

With plenty of time to reconsider, however, some Marine officers had already wondered aloud if leveling Fallujah was in their best interest. A decisive American military victory could backfire and a massive slaughter of civilians could breed insurgents in other regions and other countries faster than they would in Fallujah.

The heavy fighting already seemed to set the standard for other battles in Iraq. The Army laid siege to Najaf in the south much like the Marines had in Fallujah.

"We could do it," Cpl. Jong Kim, 20, of Sunnyvale said of a possible Marine offensive against the town.

"But if we leave, they'll come back," he said of the insurgents. "They're crazy. They're not scared of anything."

Besides, some said, what would they get if they "won" Fallujah? They didn't want the dusty river town and all its troubles.

No ---- a solution in Fallujah had to come from the Iraqis themselves, not from American guns.

As it became clearer to the Marines that they would probably never hoist an American flag in the center of town, an Arab savior appeared like a genie from the desert.

Three days after the attack on Echo Company, the generals announced that the Marines would pull out of Fallujah and release their stranglehold on the town where several Marines and 600 Iraqis had died.

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### Dealing with the enemy

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The solution to Fallujah's fighting was suspect: a cadre of Iraqi generals led by a former commander in Saddam Hussein's Republican Guard had emerged and persuaded the leatherneck generals that they could field a 1,000-man brigade of previously unknown Iraqi troops and bring peace to Fallujah.

The deal was reportedly brokered in back channels between rebel leaders and Marine brass as both sides grappled for a way out and a solution short of a final bloodbath.

On April 30 ---- the last day of a tragic month in which a record 136 soldiers and Marines had died in Iraq ---  
- Palmour and I went to see the miracle generals for ourselves.

We waited outside as the generals met with Col. Toolan in a closed conference room of the Fallujah Liaison Team building near the Marines' former base. It was where Toolan's bosses had shaken hands on the deal the night before.

Inside, the former enemies shook hands and finalized plans to hand over the city that had cost both sides so much blood.

Just beyond the walls of the heavily guarded compound in Fallujah, the rebels were already announcing victory from the mosques and residents were celebrating the city's martyred sons. The Iraqi generals soon announced that there were no foreign fighters in Fallujah ---- only heroes.

The deal effectively left the town in rebel hands. Marines prepared to pull back to the surrounding countryside to resume their security patrols.

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### Bitter end

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After weeks of sacrifice and heroism, carnage and waste, it seemed a bitter end, leaving the Marines about where they started. They wondered what, if anything, had been won.

Lance Cpl. Cory Wallace, 22, of Dunlap, Ill., shaves next to the bathroom at the abandoned home where he and members of Fox Company lived for three weeks in Fallujah.

Before Palmour and I finally packed up and said goodbye to the troops on May 2, Lance Cpl. Simmons, the Marine who was shot in the head in the April 6 ambush near the tracks, rejoined Fox Company.

He had healed well ---- you could hardly see a mark ---- and he was anxious to rejoin the fight.

But by the time he arrived, the battle was over. The Marines were distancing themselves from the heavy hand they had used in Fallujah. Now, as they prepared for a new mission in the countryside, it was all about hearts and minds again.

Whether those hearts will heal and those minds will mend is uncertain.

Fallujah remains a rallying cry for those who rally. Some will remember it for the horror of the contractors slain in the street. For others, it demonstrated excessive American might. The Marine Corps has new heroes; the Islamists have fresh martyrs and recruits.

Fallujah was the fight that turned the bright light of public scrutiny back on the war. It grabbed the world's attention and kept many people tuned in long enough for the other horrors that unfolded in Iraq's prisons and streets.

And though the heaviest fighting appears over, the 2/1 continues to be in danger in Iraq. Already, since Palmour and I have been back, several more men from the 2/1 have been killed or wounded by roadside bombs and other attacks while patrolling their new beats on Fallujah's outlying villages and countryside.

It is not the war they, or we, had envisioned.