

U.S. Marines in Battle

Al-Qaim

SEPTEMBER 2005 - MARCH 2006



First Light, First Casualties: Ubaydi, November 14, 2005.

Painting by CWO-2 Michael D. Fay
Art Collection, National Museum of the Marine Corps, Triangle, VA



The Battle for Al-Qaim and the Campaign to Secure the Western Euphrates River Valley

by Nicholas J. Schlosser

This study examines a counterinsurgency campaign conducted during the Iraq War between the fall of 2005 and spring of 2006 in the district of al-Qaim on the Syrian border. In many ways, the struggle to clear and hold the district marked a turning point for the U.S. Marines fighting to bring security and stability to al-Anbar Province. The tactics and procedures utilized by the Marines of Regimental Combat Team 2 as well as its numerous supporting units served as a model for future operations in 2006 and 2007. In particular, the battle for al-Qaim marked one of the first times that the Coalition and tribes in al-Anbar united against al-Qaeda in Iraq.

The Iraq War began in 2003 with a lightning quick assault by Coalition forces that toppled Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime within a matter of weeks. During the months immediately following the overthrow of the old regime, a lack of adequate security forces and indecision among policy makers rapidly led to a collapse of order and stability. By the summer a broad insurgency conducted by former regime loyalists, criminals, and Islamic fundamentalist fighters had broken out against the U.S. occupation of the country. The United States' initial goal of creating an independent, democratic government was superseded by the more basic and pressing need to establish a secure and stable Iraqi state. To confront this challenge, U.S. forces implemented a wide range of tactics, including raids against insurgent hideouts, surgical operations against "high-value" targets, and stability operations akin to those used during counterinsurgency campaigns in Malaya and parts of South Vietnam in the 1960s.

The lack of a unified approach to U.S. strategy in Iraq meant that it often fell to the commanders of smaller units (brigades, regiments, and battalions) to devise an effective means for defeating the insurgency in their particular areas of responsibility. It was in this type of operating environment that the commander of Regimental Combat Team 2, Colonel Stephen W. Davis, and one of his battalion

commanders, Lieutenant Colonel Julian D. Alford of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, undertook a concerted campaign to clear and secure al-Qaim District in western Iraq.

Marine Corps Operations in Iraq 2004–2005

The Marine Corps began to withdraw and redeploy its forces from Iraq almost immediately after the collapse of Saddam Hussein's Ba'ath regime in April 2003. However, as the already chaotic situation in Iraq rapidly declined into an open insurgency against the U.S. occupation over the summer of 2003, Marine Corps leaders began preparations for a return to the country. What began as a few battalions soon mushroomed into the majority of I Marine Expeditionary Force (I MEF), which included the 1st Marine Division, 3d Marine Aircraft Wing, and 1st Force Service Support Group.¹

Combined Joint Task Force 7, the overall Coalition headquarters in Iraq, gave I MEF responsibility over Iraq's vast western al-Anbar Province. The region was strategically significant for a number of reasons. First, it occupied the critical expanse of territory connecting central Iraq with its western neighbors. Second, several major highways, railroads, and the Euphrates River run across the province, linking Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia with the major population centers that occupied the fertile plains of central Mesopotamia. At over 170,000 square kilometers, it was Iraq's largest province and accounted for nearly 30 percent of the country's total area. For both these reasons, the province had long been a center for trade and smuggling.

A third reason for the province's importance was that it was a stronghold for Iraq's Sunni population. Once the ascendant ethnic and religious group in Iraq, the Sunnis had seen their power significantly cut by the American invasion, and many were fearful that they would suffer discrimination in a Shi'a-dominated state. Consequently, al-Anbar Province quickly became a center of the rapidly rising insurgency against the U.S. presence and a hub of opposition to the new political structures the U.S.-led transitional government,

On the Cover: Marines with 2d Platoon, 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, conduct house searches on 5 November 2005 during Operation Steel Curtain.

Photo by Cpl Ken Melton



Central Intelligence Agency map

called the Coalition Provisional Authority, sought to put in place to govern the new Iraqi state. The province was also dominated by tribes that often supplanted and superseded state authority, making it particularly difficult for authorities in Baghdad to assert direct control over the region. Consequently, cities such as al-Fallujah were frequently hostile to central control, and even Saddam Hussein was unable to effectively assert his authority throughout the region as much as he would have liked.²

For all of these reasons, al-Anbar Province needed to be secured and stabilized if the U.S.-led Coalition was to defeat the Iraq insurgency. To achieve this aim, the Marines of I MEF devised a strategy that focused on dividing insurgents from the populace. Drawing on classic doctrinal works on counterinsurgency such as the Marine Corps' *Small Wars Manual*, as well as modern techniques utilized by police forces to combat gang violence, I MEF hoped to refocus the Coalition's efforts in al-Anbar from targeting insurgents to protecting the population.³

This effort struck a major obstacle on 31 March 2004 when insurgents in al-Fallujah ambushed and murdered four Blackwater government contractors. Concerned that allowing this aggression to go unanswered would severely damage America's ability to maintain authority in the country, Combined Joint Task Force 7 commander Lieutenant General Ricardo S. Sanchez, USA, ordered I MEF commander Lieutenant General James T. Conway to conduct an offensive operation against the city to capture the insurgents responsible for the murders. Despite protests from both General Conway and 1st Marine Division commander Major General James N. Mattis that such a large-scale operation would make the tense situation even worse and would likely create outrage among the Iraqi populace, the Marines of I MEF followed Coalition orders and conducted Operation Vigilant Resolve. Four infantry battalions attacked the city. The Marines met stiff opposition, and on 7 April 2004 reports emerged (which were later found to be false) that several Iraqi civilians had been killed in an attack on a mosque. In the face of protests from the Iraqi governing council, Lieutenant General Sanchez ordered a suspension to the assault. The Marines remained on the outskirts of the city, which quickly turned into an insurgent stronghold.⁴

The remainder of I MEF's 2004 campaign would focus on destroying the insurgency in al-Fallujah and defeating the numerous uprisings triggered by the reaction to Vigilant Resolve such as in al-Anbar's capital ar-Ramadi and in the southern city of an-Najaf. Marines also confronted insurgents in al-Qaim District in the border towns of Husaybah and Karabilah. In November, I MEF

launched Operation Al-Fajr against the insurgency in al-Fallujah. Four Marine rifle battalions, two Army mechanized task forces, and numerous supporting forces methodically cleared the city of insurgent forces, securing the city by the end of the month.⁵

In March of 2005, I MEF returned to the United States and was relieved by II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) (II MEF) under the command of Major General Stephen T. Johnson. Over the course of the subsequent year, II MEF's primary mission in al-Anbar Province was to provide a secure environment in which to hold two major national elections: a referendum on the Iraqi constitution in October and general elections for a new parliament to be held in December. To achieve this, the new commanding general of the Coalition forces in Iraq, General George W. Casey Jr., USA,* planned a range of operations throughout the Euphrates River valley under the umbrella name Operation Sayaid. Casey's overall strategy focused on "Iraqization," as he believed the best means for combating the insurgency was to reduce the presence of American forces and place the task of providing security in the hands of Iraqi soldiers. Consequently, with two fewer infantry battalions, the Marine expeditionary force sent to Iraq in 2005 was smaller than the one deployed the previous year had been.⁶

The ground combat element of II MEF was the 2d Marine Division commanded by Major General Richard A. Huck. Huck deployed the battalions of his division's two reinforced regiments throughout the major towns along the Euphrates River, from the al-Qaim District at the Syrian border to al-Fallujah in the east. The II MEF area of operations was divided into four parts. Three of these were centered in the eastern urban centers of al-Anbar Province: the capital ar-Ramadi (code name Topeka), al-Fallujah (code name Raleigh), and Taqaddum (code name Oshkosh). The bulk of II MEF's forces were deployed here. The headquarters of both the expeditionary force and Regimental Combat Team 8 was at al-Fallujah. The headquarters of the 2d Marine Division was at ar-Ramadi. The largest area of operations, larger than the other three combined, was Area of Operations Denver. The area stretched roughly from ar-Ramadi to the Syrian border and the region included the towns of Hit, al-Asad, the Haditha triad, Rawah, Rutbah, Anah, and the al-Qaim District towns of Ubaydi, Sadah, Karabilah, and Husaybah. The forward deployed elements of the 2d Marine Aircraft Wing, commanded by Brigadier General Robert E. Milstead Jr., were stationed

*The Combined Joint Task Force 7 was redesignated Multinational Force-Iraq in May of 2004. In July of 2004, LtGen Ricardo S. Sanchez, USA, was replaced by Gen George W. Casey Jr., USA, as the overall Coalition commander.

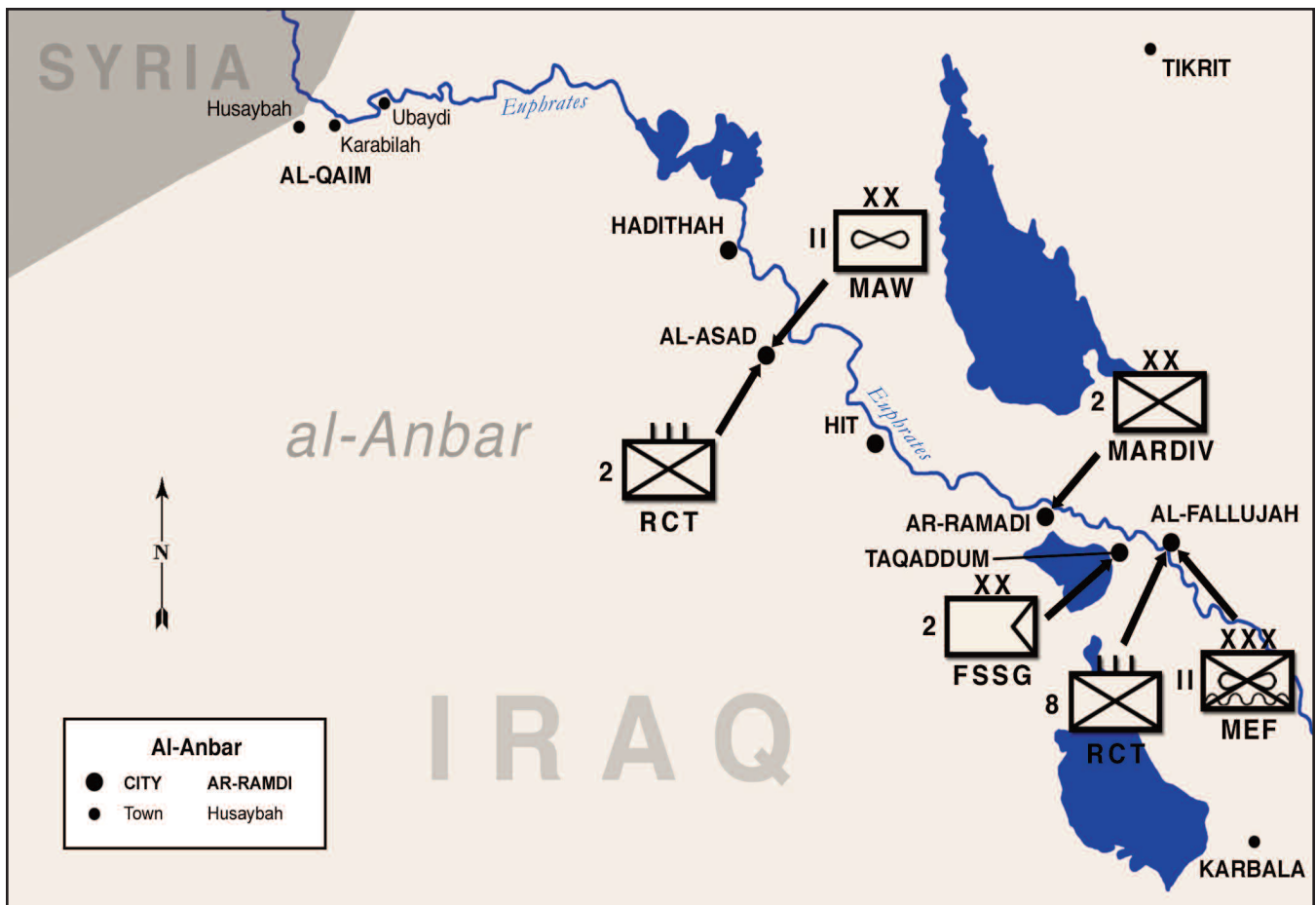


Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

Initial deployment of II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) units in al-Anbar Province, March 2005.

at al-Asad, as well as the headquarters of Regimental Combat Team 2 commanded by Colonel Stephen W. Davis, which was responsible for the infantry battalions operating across the area. Marines called this region, in particular the area at the Syrian border known as the al-Qaim District, “the wild, wild west.”⁷

At about 48,000 square kilometers, Area of Operations Denver was roughly equivalent in size to the state of South Carolina. The mission of patrolling and securing this entire area fell to Regimental Combat Team 2. During his regiment’s deployment, Colonel Davis noted that “this is a [regimental combat team] with a division mission in a [Marine expeditionary force]-plus battle space.”* Davis’ command included three battalions; however, due to the size of the region, he was forced to detach a company from each battalion for other responsibilities such as base security operations. Consequently, even though Davis was aware that a

constant Marine Corps presence in certain urban areas was critical to achieving a lasting solution to the problems



Photo by Cpl Neill A. Sevelius

The commanding officer of Regimental Combat Team 2, Col Stephen W. Davis (left), speaks to Gen George W. Casey, USA, commanding general of Multinational Force-Iraq in early 2006. Col Davis’s headquarters would hold overall command of the al-Qaim counterinsurgency operations during the fall of 2005.

*A Marine regimental combat team in Iraq was roughly 3,000–5,000 Marines, sailors, and soldiers; a division roughly 15,000–20,000 Marines, sailors, and soldiers; and a Marine expeditionary force, 30,000–40,000 Marines, sailors, and soldiers.

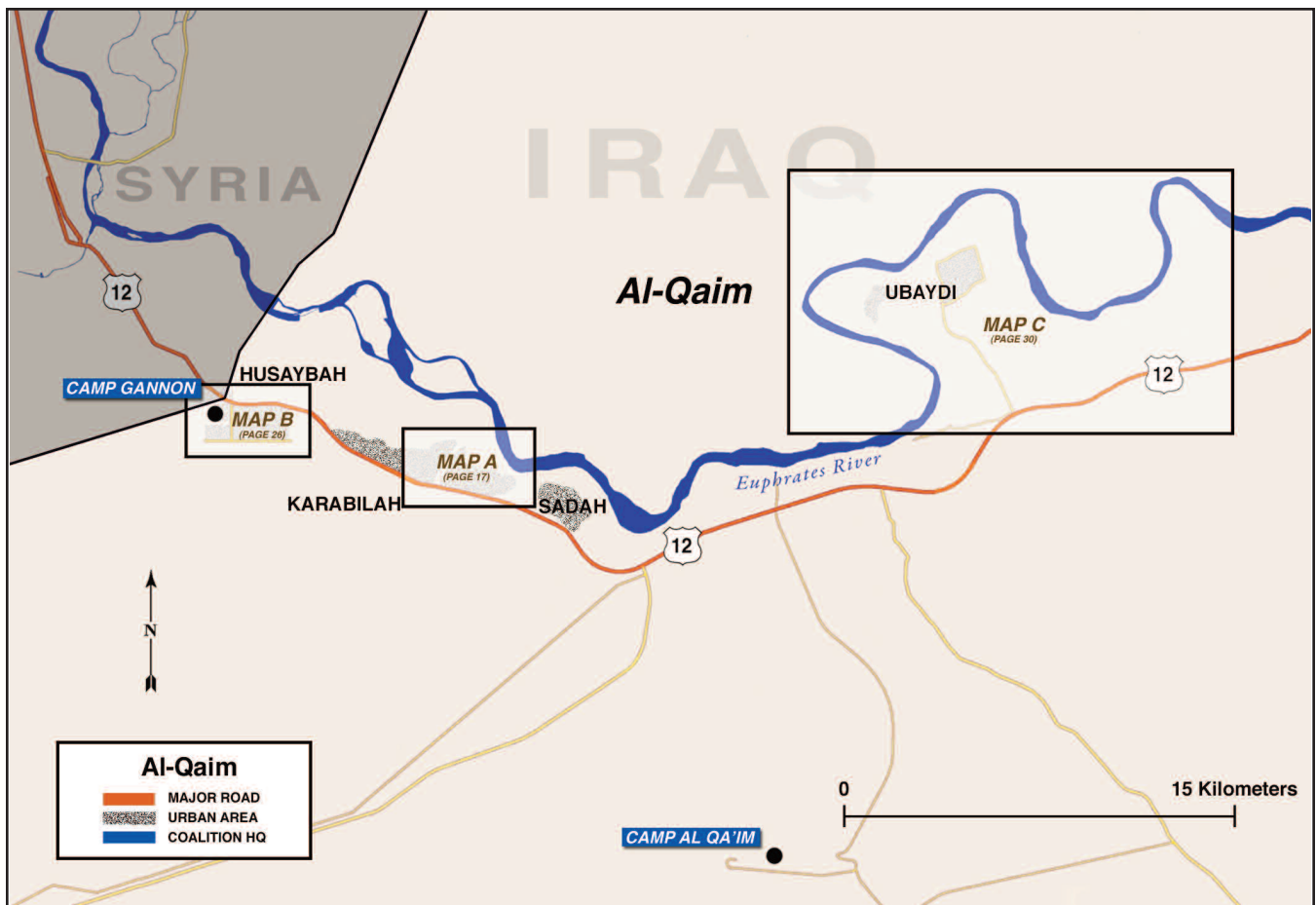


Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

Al-Qaim in 2005, showing major Marine Corps outposts.

in the region, his regiment simply did not have the necessary forces. He recalled in May of 2005, “Because my force structure’s so small, I don’t have the ability to leave anybody in town who can make patrols . . . you’ve got to have people that stay there to give people security.”⁸

The Coalition command’s plans to rely on the Iraqi Army to provide security, an army that was still a work in progress, meant that U.S. forces in Iraq such as Regimental Combat Team 2 were often forced to rely on firepower and mobility to make up for their lack in numbers. It also made remaining in a single area for too long a period after it had been cleared of insurgent forces difficult, thus allowing insurgents to return once American forces had left. In many ways, the operations conducted by the Coalition during the first half of 2005 resembled the “search and destroy” missions conducted by American forces during the Vietnam War. There were exceptions, notably the operations of Colonel Herbert R. McMaster’s U.S. Army 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment in Tal Afar during the summer. In general, however, the overall struggle against the insurgency began to resemble what some critics called a “whack-a-mole” strategy. Coalition

operations would successfully neutralize insurgent activities in one city, only to find insurgents popping up in another city. Forced to turn attention to the new area of insurgent activity, the Coalition forces would often be unable to prevent insurgent fighters from returning to areas they had earlier cleared. One Marine described these efforts as “squeegeeing out” insurgents. Although the Coalition was able to clear areas, most insurgents would escape and would simply return once the Coalition forces had redeployed to conduct another clearing operation somewhere else in their area of responsibility.⁹

The Al-Qaim District

The al-Qaim District stretches roughly 26 kilometers along the southern bank of the Euphrates River, from the western town of Husaybah at the Syrian border to the twin towns of Old and New Ubaydi to the east. The villages of the district stand a few miles south of the river. Its population in 2005 was about 200,000. Both Highway 12 and a railway line running parallel to the south frame the southern border of the district. Directly on the Syrian border is Husaybah and to that town’s east is Karabilah.



Photo by SSgt Jason D. Becksted

The al-Qaim cityscape is shaped by low buildings, narrow streets, and stone walls, with mosques dominating the skyline. These characteristics are apparent in this image of Karabilah, taken during Operation Spear in June of 2005.

Bisecting Karabilah, perpendicular to the Euphrates, is a dry riverbed called the Emerald Wadi. The wadi is deep enough that it requires a bridge to allow vehicle traffic to cross. Next to Karabilah is the town of Sadah. Past Sadah, the Euphrates makes a dramatic course change, moving northwest, then south. The sudden turns create an area that looks like the end of a dog's bone. Nestled within this area are the towns of Old Ubaydi and New Ubaydi. Across the Euphrates from New Ubaydi is the town of Ramah.¹⁰

Due to its location on the Syrian border and along major transit routes, al-Qaim had become an important logistical center for the insurgency as fighters moved toward the urban areas of central Iraq. As the insurgency became more international in character, al-Qaim also became an important point of entry for foreign fighters entering from Syria. Consequently, the Coalition established several bases around the district. The largest was Camp Al-Qaim, positioned about 10 kilometers south of the Euphrates, near a railway station. A large and substantial facility, the camp was the central command post for operations throughout the district. Its distance from the urban areas of al-Qaim also meant that it was difficult for insurgent forces to attack. In contrast, a second base, originally called Camp Husaybah, sat at the western edge of the town of Husaybah (Marines would rename it Camp Gannon in

2004).^{*} Roughly the size of a square city block and composed of about eight to ten buildings, the camp had originally been an old customs post along the Syrian-Iraqi border. The outpost granted Marines an important position from which to observe and interdict activity along the border and in the northern sections of the town. In the spring of 2005, the 3d Battalion, 2d Marines had also constructed a battle position on a hill north of the town, further enhancing the Marines' ability to observe activity in the region and the city's key avenues.

The locations of both the battle position and Camp Gannon made them frequent targets for insurgent hit-and-run attacks, and the Marines in both locations faced fire from insurgent forces on a daily basis. Captain Richard H. Pitchford, whose Company L, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, would be positioned at Camp Gannon for much of the fall of 2005, recalled later that the company faced, "nearly constant daily engagement from some enemy popping up somewhere, using much of the urban terrain to mask their movement, and then engaging us from different areas. I would say we were in the defense but in a very aggressive posture in our defense."¹¹

^{*}After Maj Richard J. Gannon II (1972–2004), commander of Company L, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, who was killed in a battle with insurgents on 17 April 2004.

As with much of the al-Anbar Province, tribalism dominated the social and cultural makeup of the al-Qaim District. In the words of Major Edwin O. Rueda, an intelligence officer working with 3d Battalion, 6th Marines in 2005, “The region is arguably the most intricate tribal area in Al Anbar, where the tribal elements maintain a significant amount of influence and power.” The area was dominated by four tribes: the Albu Mahal, al-Salmoni, Karbuli, and Ubaidi. Alongside these four were a number of smaller groups such as the al-Jurghafe tribe.¹²

For decades the ruling powers over Mesopotamia had used the tribes as a means of asserting control, with the Ottomans, British, Hashemites, and Ba’athists all relying on the tribes’ influence and authority to help govern Iraq as a whole. For much of the twentieth century, tribal authority and influence was on the decline as the modernizing and centralizing forces of the Iraqi state and market economics began to weaken more traditional modes of authority and commerce. The drive to curtail tribal power became particularly aggressive following the 1958 coup abolishing the Hashemite monarchy as Iraqi leaders sought to supplant traditional sources of authority. The privileged status tribes enjoyed as well as any official connections between the tribes and the government were quickly severed and abolished. The government replaced tribal law with civil and criminal law, curtailed the practice of granting privileges to different tribes, and used educational and information initiatives to propagate the idea that tribes were a vestige of Iraq’s past and did not belong in a modern, pan-Arab state.¹³

The blow delivered to the Iraqi state by the Persian Gulf War led to a resurgence of tribal dominance. The defeat of the Iraqi military by the Coalition and the subsequent uprisings in the north and south had badly shaken the foundations of Saddam Hussein’s authority. Although his regime would successfully put down the uprising in the south, the rebellions nevertheless demonstrated the dictator’s tenuous hold on the Iraqi people. He subsequently enlisted the aid of tribal leaders, particularly powerful ones in the country’s west, where nomadic attitudes and traditions remained a dominant part of the region’s social makeup even during times when tribal activity and power were at a low point. Soon, tribes throughout Iraq began to supplant and adopt roles and functions formerly reserved for the state. Tribal authorities established alternative means with which to settle disputes, collect money, and maintain law and order. By the time the Saddam regime fell in 2003, the tribes had become a predominant influence on everyday life in al-Anbar. Sheikhs were expected to ensure the economic well-being of their tribe by providing their members with jobs, engaging in extortion, and acquiring

support from the government. They also worked to acquire contracts and licenses from the central government.¹⁴

Exploiting divisions among the tribes, Saddam also played different tribes off against one another and undertook to divide and conquer the al-Anbar region. The chief beneficiary of Ba’athist patronage in al-Qaim was the al-Salmani tribe, which gained increasingly greater influence over the region at the expense of the other tribal groups. The fall of the Ba’ath regime in 2003 led to an unraveling of this state of affairs. The Albu Mahal tribe, the region’s largest, began to assert themselves now that their chief rivals, the al-Salmani, had lost their Ba’athist patronage and protection. In response, the al-Salmanis and Karbulis began to align themselves with al-Qaeda in Iraq and other insurgent groups that had been organized to fight the Americans.¹⁵

The Iraqi insurgency had a significant impact on this resurgence in tribal authority. By the middle of 2005, the insurgency against the United States had gone through a dramatic metamorphosis. Initially, it had been a diffuse resistance movement led by individuals who, for a variety of reasons, shared the common goal of ending the American occupation. Beyond this, there was little central authority or direction, and its decentralized character gave the insurgency the impression that it was everywhere and nowhere at the same time. This movement, described as “netwar,” was characterized by a seeming lack of coordination, centralized planning, and overall guiding ideology and purpose. The insurgency brought together a wide variety of groups and participants including former Ba’athists, Iraqi secular nationalists, religious nationalists, and religious fundamentalists from both Iraq and abroad.¹⁶

Beginning in 2004, charismatic and energetic leaders began to emerge to give the insurgency greater direction and focus. In Iraq’s southern regions, the radical cleric Muqtada al-Sadr quickly became the face of radical Shi’a opposition to the Coalition. In al-Anbar Province, Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi emerged as one of the strongest leaders of the Sunni insurgency. His organization, Jama’at al-Tawhid wa al-Jihad carried out a campaign of terror and intimidation throughout al-Anbar Province from its base in al-Fallujah. In the fall of 2004 he requested and received recognition as leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq from al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden. Following the Second Battle of al-Fallujah, al-Zarqawi and his al-Qaeda in Iraq organization shifted operations west, and soon established al-Qaim as an important insurgent base.¹⁷

Although at first many of al-Anbar’s tribes had aligned themselves with the insurgency, their frequently parochial outlook and traditional concerns clashed with

the internationalist, Islamist vision of al-Zarqawi's organization. According to a letter written by al-Zarqawi in April 2004 and recovered and translated by the U.S. government, the "shaykhs" were "mostly Sufis doomed to perdition." In the insurgent leader's estimation, they lacked the requisite fervor and drive to wage jihad and religious warfare. "With all the horrors and bad circumstances, not one of them ever speaks about jihad or calls for sacrifice or self-sacrifice. For these, three is too much, not to say four. They are not suited to this."¹⁸

As his insurgent organization increased its influence in the region, it began to displace the power of al-Anbar's dominant tribes. The two forces competed for influence and also for economic gain, with al-Qaeda in Iraq funding itself through the black market smuggling activities that had previously been the domain of the tribes. Traditionally, sheikhs were expected to provide the members of their tribe with patronage and work. However, the violence wrought by the insurgency had crippled al-Anbar's economy, discouraging economic investment. Al-Qaeda in Iraq also interfered with the traditional social norms and customs of the region. They violated the sanctity of funerals, often using such gatherings as moments of opportunity to kill large numbers of prominent sheikhs. They also sought to curtail the role of local laws and traditions, local religious practices, and institute sharia law in the regions of al-Anbar that they controlled. Rather than win allegiance and loyalty from the local tribes and Iraqis in the region, al-Qaeda in Iraq's aggressive campaign to reorder the economic makeup and social fabric of al-Anbar's society alienated and angered many of the province's inhabitants.¹⁹ The foreign fighters also helped exacerbate pre-existing tensions between al-Qaim's tribal groups, and Marines suspected that groups such as the Salmoni tribe were at the very least giving their tacit approval to the insurgents in their struggle against the Albu Mahal. To defend its interests, the Albu Mahals formed their own militia, the Katab al-Hamsa.²⁰

Marine Corps Operations in al-Qaim: March 2004–August 2005

As these social upheavals threatened to reshape the al-Qaim District, Marines conducted a number of operations in and around the region to disrupt insurgent activity and establish a modicum of stability. Beginning in March 2004, when I MEF took command of operations in al-Anbar, Marines confronted persistent and aggressive insurgent activity in the district. Beginning in March 2004, the 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, took responsibility

for stability and security in al-Qaim. Within weeks of their arrival, the situation in al-Fallujah sparked uprisings against the Coalition in ar-Ramadi and an-Najaf. The Marines of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, faced a similar surge in violence beginning in mid-April. On 14 April 2004, around 30 insurgents ambushed the Headquarters Company of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, while it was convoying from Karabilah to Husaybah. The attack damaged several vehicles in the convoy and wounded the battalion commander, Lieutenant Colonel Matthew A. Lopez, and four others. Despite wounds to his back from enemy fire, Colonel Lopez responded, oversaw the aerial evacuation of a wounded Marine, and directed the Marine counterattack.²¹

At the same time as the ambush, a squad from 4th Platoon, Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, was conducting a reconnaissance patrol of the water treatment plant in Karabilah. Hearing the sounds of the rocket propelled grenades and small arms fire from the ambush, the squad immediately deployed to provide assistance. As it came to eastern Husaybah, insurgents attacked the squad. The squad dismounted and returned fire. Subsequently, traffic along the roads moving east from Husaybah began to build up and the squad's Marines started to inspect and search the vehicles. Upon inspecting one vehicle, three men fled from the car and moved west. The squad leader, Corporal Jason L. Dunham, and two Marines pursued and tackled one of the men. While attempting to secure him, the man dropped a live grenade. Dunham immediately threw his helmet on the grenade, which then detonated. While Dunham's act saved his fellow Marines, the explosion left him mortally wounded and Corporal Dunham would die eight days later at the National Naval Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. For his actions on 14 April, Corporal Dunham became the first Marine recipient of the Medal of Honor since the Vietnam War. The medal was presented to Dunham's family by President George W. Bush in a ceremony held on 11 January 2007.²²

Fighting continued in Karabilah and Husaybah for several weeks. On 17 April the insurgent attacks intensified in what 3d Battalion, 7th Marines' operations officer, Major George C. Schreffler III, called the "Battle of Husaybah." At 8:00 a.m. an explosion rocked the old Ba'ath party headquarters. Following this the Marines from the battalion came under heavy mortar and small arms fire from insurgent forces. The fighting was fierce and saw numerous house-to-house fights as the Marines of the battalion methodically cleared buildings one after the other. In the afternoon, the Marines of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, set up a cordon around Husaybah and



Photo courtesy of the Dunham family

During the insurgent assault on 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, in Husaybah and Karabilah in April 2004, Cpl Jason L. Dunham was mortally wounded as he used his helmet to shield fellow Marines from a grenade blast. He was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor, the first Marine to receive the medal during the Iraq War.

continued to engage the insurgents in the buildings and streets of the town, selectively using heavy weapons and airstrikes in an attempt to prevent civilian casualties. In the course of the two-day battle, five Marines were killed. One of them, the commander of the battalion's Company L, Captain Richard J. Gannon II, was awarded the Silver Star. The others killed, all from Captain Gannon's command, were Corporal Christopher A. Gibson, Lance Corporal Michael J. Smith Jr., Lance Corporal Ruben Valdez Jr., and Lance Corporal Gary F. Van Leuven.²³

While Marines continued operations in al-Qaim for the remainder of 2004, the operation to take al-Fallujah scheduled for the fall of 2004 meant that most of I Marine Expeditionary Force's resources needed to be diverted toward operations in the eastern Euphrates Valley. The situation in al-Qaim did not improve, and continued to deteriorate throughout the fall of 2004 and into the winter and spring of the following year. In October 2004, the *New York Times* reported that American forces in the district were fighting insurgents every day, writing, "Villagers in this tiny hamlet on the Syrian-Iraqi border no longer wait

Medal of Honor Citation for Corporal Jason L. Dunham

The President of the United States in the name of the Congress takes pride in presenting the MEDAL OF HONOR posthumously to

CORPORAL
JASON L. DUNHAM
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

for service as set forth in the following

CITATION:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving as a Rifle Squad Leader, 4th Platoon, Company K, 3d Battalion, 7th Marines (Reinforced), Regimental Combat Team 7, 1st Marine Division (Reinforced), on 14 April 2004. Corporal Dunham's squad was conducting a reconnaissance mission in the town of Karabilah, Iraq, when they heard rocket-propelled grenade and small arms fire erupt approximately two kilometers to the west. Corporal Dunham led his Combined Anti-Armor Team toward the engagement to provide fire support to their Battalion Commander's convoy, which had been ambushed as it was traveling to Camp Husaybah. As Corporal Dunham and his Marines advanced, they quickly began to receive enemy fire. Corporal Dunham ordered his squad to dismount their vehicles and led one of his fire teams on foot several blocks south of the ambushed convoy. Discovering seven Iraqi vehicles in a column attempting to depart, Corporal Dunham and his team stopped the vehicles to search them for weapons. As they approached the vehicles, an insurgent leaped out and attacked Corporal Dunham. Corporal Dunham wrestled the insurgent to the ground and in the ensuing struggle saw the insurgent release a grenade. Corporal Dunham immediately alerted his fellow Marines to the threat. Aware of the imminent danger and without hesitation, Corporal Dunham covered the grenade with his helmet and body, bearing the brunt of the explosion and shielding his Marines from the blast. In an ultimate and selfless act of bravery in which he was mortally wounded, he saved the lives of at least two fellow Marines. By his undaunted courage, intrepid fighting spirit, and unwavering devotion to duty, Corporal Dunham gallantly gave his life for his country, thereby reflecting great credit upon himself and upholding the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.



Photo by Cpl Neill A. Sevelius

An M1A2 Abrams main battle tank from Task Force 3/2 patrols Ubaydi during Operation Matador in May 2005.

for the call to prayer to mark the end of the daily fast for Ramadan. Instead, sundown arrives in tandem with an eruption of mortar rounds and gunfire between Iraqi insurgents and the American forces stationed next door.”²⁴ On 15 October 2004, a car bombing killed a Marine, two soldiers, and their translator while on patrol in the district.²⁵ On 11 April 2005, suicide bombers attacked a U.S. installation in the region.²⁶

The violence was not only directed at the Americans. Iraqi police, Iraqi soldiers, and tribal leaders were also targeted by insurgents. In March 2005, 20 Iraqi bodies were uncovered, one of which was carrying a police identity card. The others were believed to have been national guardsmen.²⁷ Sheikh Sabah al-Sattam Effan Fahran al-Shurji al-Aziz, a principal sheikh of the Albu Mahal tribe, described the situation in al-Qaim under al-Qaeda in Iraq as harsh and brutal. He described one incident:

Four members of one family in the al-Qaim District—not from my tribe, from the Salman tribe—they were former soldiers. [The insurgents] brought them out and killed them in the middle of the street. They cut off their heads, and they put each head on the back of the body. This was in August of 2004. The family came to pick them up, to take them and bury them. Al-

Qaeda stopped them. I contacted the director general for the phosphate factory to bring a shovel so he can just bury the bodies. It was starting to smell. They stopped them. After a week or 10 days, if a car wanted to pass through this area, he had to put a mask on his face from the smell. What they did, they came and put TNT on each body, and they called the family to come pick them up. When the family came at dawn, they exploded them. With these four people, they killed another eight, and they injured many others.²⁸

The sheikh’s assertions revealed that a divide had begun to emerge between al-Qaeda in Iraq and the local tribal groups, in particular the Albu Mahal tribe. “We started to understand their mission was to destroy our tribe.”²⁹

The Albu Mahal tribe requested Coalition assistance against al-Zarqawi’s group in the spring of 2005. That May, II MEF’s Regimental Combat Team 2 conducted Operation Matador. A lack of adequate forces immediately became a challenge for the Marines planning the operation. Colonel Davis’ regiment had only three battalions to maintain security throughout its entire area of operations. Shortly after the operation, Davis noted that “we have underresourced this fight out here.”

Nevertheless, Davis planned to compensate for the limited number of forces by emphasizing speed and mobility, and attached Boeing Vertol CH-46E Sea Knight medium helicopters and Sikorsky CH-53E Sea Stallion heavy lift helicopters to the Matador task force. The force would also include AAV-7A1 Assault Amphibian Vehicles, M1A1 Main Battle Tanks, and LAV-25 Light Armored Vehicles. The goal of Operation Matador was to clear the region of insurgent activity, with a focus on the area north of the Euphrates around Ubaydi and Ramana. The force for the operation was designated Task Force 3/2 and commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Timothy S. Mundy. The task force included Company I and Company K from Colonel Mundy's 3d Battalion, 2d Marines; Company L, 3d Battalion, 25th Marines; Company B, 2d Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion; Combat Logistics Battalion 2; and the U.S. Army 814th Bridge Company.³⁰

The initial objective of the operation entailed securing a suitable crossing point between New Ubaydi and the town of Ramana across the Euphrates, and then constructing a bridge in order to establish a line of communications north of that river. Fighting was fierce as the U.S. Army bridge company constructed a ribbon bridge across the river beginning on 8 May. Meanwhile, the Marines of Task Force 3/2 fought to clear New Ubaydi. The following day, Marines crossed the river using assault amphibian vehicles and battled insurgents as they cleared Ramana. By the end of the day, the ribbon bridge was complete and Marines continued to clear Ramana. The assault force then moved to the town of ar-Rabit, rooting out the network of caves lining the riverbank. The operation came to a close on 14 May, with the bulk of the Marine task force returning to Camp Al Qaim. The operation ended with an estimated 144 insurgents killed and 40 taken prisoner. Coalition losses were nine killed and 39 wounded. The Marines killed in action were Corporal Dustin A. Derga, Lance Corporal Lawrence R. Philippon, Staff Sergeant Anthony L. Goodwin, Lance Corporal Wesley G. Davids, Private First Class Christopher R. Dixon, Lance Corporal Nicholas B. Erdy, Lance Corporal Jonathan W. Grant, Lance Corporal Jourdan L. Grez, and Staff Sergeant Kendall H. Ivy II.³¹

Although the operation had initially been organized at the behest of the Albu Mahal tribe, it had been conducted without coordination with local tribal leaders. At the time, the Coalition had little sense that a difference existed between organizations such as al-Qaeda in Iraq and the local militias like Katab al-Hamsa.³² The gains of Operation Matador were also largely undercut by the

perennial problem of troop deficiencies. To maintain security throughout his area of operations, Colonel Davis had been forced to send one of 3d Battalion, 2d Marines' rifle companies to guard Al Asad Air Base. The task force also lacked Iraqi security forces to reinforce its strength. During the months following Operation Matador, Katab al-Hamsa suffered a critical defeat against al-Qaeda in Iraq, and the Albu Mahal's authority in the region was quickly supplanted by the terrorist organization. During Operation Matador insurgents kidnapped the governor of al-Anbar Province, Raja Nawaf, and demanded an end to U.S. operations in the region in exchange for his release. On 31 May, his body was found after a firefight between Marines and insurgents.³³ In mid-June, residents of Husaybah reported that insurgents affiliated with al-Qaeda in Iraq had seized control of the town. Concurrently, Iraqi soldiers uncovered 17 bodies, two of which were decapitated. According to residents in the district, al-Qaeda claimed responsibility for the killings, and declared that the dead had been American spies.³⁴

By September, al-Qaeda in Iraq openly declared that al-Qaim was under its control. Signs throughout the district proclaimed the region the "Islamic Kingdom of Qaim." Al-Qaeda in Iraq fighters burned down beauty parlors, music stores, and movie theaters. On 5 September, a woman's corpse was found in a street carrying a sign that read "A prostitute who was punished." That same day, Sheik Dhyad Ahmed of the Albu Mahal was killed, along with his son, by a car bomb set up in front of his home. The al-Qaim tribes remained open to an alliance with the Coalition, but were wary of whether or not the Marines would remain to secure the area once the insurgents had been cleared out of the district.³⁵

The opportunity for a new alliance arose in the fall of 2005, as the 3d Battalion, 2d Marines was relieved by the incoming 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Julian D. Alford. The battalion's operations over the course of the next six months would have a significant and lasting impact on the district and on al-Qaeda in Iraq's ability to operate along the Syrian border.

3d Battalion, 6th Marines, in Afghanistan and Its Preparations for Iraq

The first units of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, began to arrive in the al-Qaim region in late August of 2005, marking the unit's second overseas deployment in two years. During the summer and fall of 2004 the battalion served in eastern Afghanistan. The experience in that country would prove to be a significant influence on the battalion's operations in Iraq.

As with all Marine battalions, the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, prepared for its deployment to Afghanistan by participating in a combined arms exercise at the Marine Corps Air-Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms, California. During the exercise, the battalion trained for the specific environment to which it would be deployed, the mountainous regions of eastern Afghanistan. It trained in the ridges at Twentynine Palms and even practiced operations with supply mules imported from the Mountain Warfare Training Center in Bridgeport, California. Following the exercise, while the majority of the battalion returned to its home at Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune in North Carolina, 100 Marines attended the Mountain Warfare Training Center in California. These Marines eventually served as a cadre of mountain warfare specialists who were able to impart what they had learned at Bridgeport to the rest of the battalion.³⁶

The 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, deployed to Afghanistan in May of 2004. Its companies were deployed throughout Khowst and Ghazni Provinces east of Kabul and Bagram Air Base, along the Afghan-Pakistani border. The battalion's companies were dispersed across a wide geographical area and were tasked with a variety of missions and responsibilities. "Each company had a different experience and each company was in a vastly different terrain," Lieutenant Colonel Alford recalled. Indeed, the battalion rarely operated as a single unit throughout its time in Afghanistan, with its rifle companies (usually reinforced by elements of the battalion's weapons company) functioning independently as autonomous units, or under the operational command of another unit. For the first three months of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines' deployment, the platoons of its Company L served as a security force for Bagram Airfield and a quick reaction force for Combined Joint Task Force 76, the overall Coalition headquarters in the country. Company K deployed its rifle platoons to man three forward operating bases at Nagalam, Asadabad, and Naray. Reinforced with elements from Weapons Company, each base was manned by roughly 80 Marines. Company I manned Forward Operating Base Surobi and conducted 70 local patrols throughout the Wuzbin Valley before redeploying to Jalabad. From there, the company conducted missions in Gelan, Moqur, and Sanya Masha.³⁷

Beginning in July, the rifle platoons from Company K reunited to conduct Operation Chainsaw with a U.S. Army Special Forces company in the Korangal Valley. In August, Company L, which had been performing guard duty and conducting operations as a quick reaction force, began to once again operate as a light infantry company. Using 20 attached vehicles, the company's Marines

conducted patrols throughout the Khowst-Gardez Pass, familiarized themselves with locals, and gathered intelligence. They also provided security for a U.S. Army artillery battalion. That same month Company K began constructing a base at Gardez, from where it conducted security and stability operations at Carkh and Chimkani.³⁸

In October, all of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines' companies provided security for the national elections, with Company I providing security in Kogiani and Pachir Wa; Company K providing security at Sayeed, Karam, Chimkani, and Gardez; and Company L guarding the transportation of ballots from Khowst to Gardez. During this period, Company K was placed under the operational control of the U.S. Army's 1st Battalion, 505th Infantry. In November, the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines' deployment came to an end and its elements began the process of returning to the United States.³⁹

The deployment to Afghanistan would prove to be an instructive experience for the Marines of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines. Over the course of six months, the battalion had participated in the full range of operations described in the concept of the "three block war." It conducted stability operations, provided humanitarian assistance, and battled militia forces opposed to the Coalition and Afghan government.⁴⁰ Among the lessons learned by the battalion during its deployment was the critical role the populace could play in both supporting and defeating an insurgency. The 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, realized the significant influence that local elders and tribal groups held over the social and cultural makeup of the region. While 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, worked alongside Afghan security forces, it nevertheless did not focus its efforts on living with and operating among the Afghan people, focusing instead on operating out of forward operating bases. When deployed to Iraq in the fall of 2005, the battalion leadership resolved to take a different approach and live with Iraqis.⁴¹

A few months after its return to the United States, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, began preparing once again for an overseas deployment, this time to Iraq. The unit trained at both March Air Force Base and the Marine Air-Ground Combat Center at Twentynine Palms, both in California. At that time, Twentynine Palms was in a state of transition, with the combined arms exercise rapidly undergoing revision. Beginning in 2004, the Marine Corps Combat Development Command and its subordinate commands (Twentynine Palms included) had begun revising Marine Corps training to better prepare Marines for counterinsurgency operations. By the end of the decade, the annual combined arms exercises conducted by Marine

The United States Marine Corps and Small Wars

As a seaborne force, the Marine Corps has a long history of fighting small wars during the numerous interventions conducted in foreign nations by the United States. The most well-known were those fought in Central America in Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and Nicaragua during the first three decades of the twentieth century (often called the “Banana Wars”). In most of these cases, Marines initially landed to protect Americans and American interests as these nations were wracked by upheavals and civil wars. In some cases, such as in Haiti in 1915, Marines and Navy personnel served as administrators. In most cases, Marines also trained and served alongside local security forces, notably the Haitian Gendarmerie and the Nicaraguan Guardia Nacional. In all of these countries, Marines fought anti-government guerrilla forces such as the Cacos in Haiti and the Sandanistas in Nicaragua.

During these interventions, Marines learned and honed the tactics for fighting small wars. They utilized small, lightly equipped, and highly mobile foot patrols. They interacted with the populace, organized and observed elections, and tried to avoid harsh and excessively punitive measures against the population. Between 1935 and 1940, the Marine Corps produced a doctrinal publication that gathered together the most important lessons it had learned from the interventions in Central America and the Caribbean. This work would become the *Small Wars Manual*, published in 1940.

While many Marines during the 1930s anticipated the Corps would have to participate in future interventions, the rising threat from Japan and the outbreak of World War II forced them to focus on building the Fleet Marine Force and on the mission of seizing advanced bases. For the next two and a half decades, Marines focused on large-scale forced entries and combined arms operations.

Beginning with the United States’s involvement in South Vietnam in the late 1950s however, Marines served as advisors to local security forces and the Army of the Republic of Vietnam. In 1965, large-scale Marine formations landed in South Vietnam and Marines once again found themselves fighting guerrillas in a jungle environment. To weaken the Viet Cong’s ability to operate among the South Vietnamese villages, the Marines developed the combined action program (CAP). The CAP utilized integrated platoons of Marines and South Vietnamese soldiers to build trust with the villagers, gather intelligence, and weaken the Viet Cong’s influence over the population.

Following the Vietnam War, many Marines once again sought to shift the Corps’ focus back to amphibious landings and conventional operations. Marines nevertheless served as advisors in counterinsurgencies during the 1980s, most notably in El Salvador. The Iraq War led to a renewed interest and focus on insurgencies, and before the second deployment in 2004, Major General James N. Mattis instructed his Marines of the 1st Marine Division to read the *Small Wars Manual*. He also reintroduced a version of the combined action program to help train Iraqi forces. His comments on returning to Iraq aimed to remind Marines that small wars and insurgencies have been a part of the Corps’ history as much as the large-scale amphibious landings in the Pacific during World War II: “This is the right place for Marines in this fight, where we can carry on the legacy of Chesty Puller in the Banana Wars in the same sort of complex environment that he knew in his early years.”

battalions at Twentynine Palms became Exercise Mojave Viper, an immersive live-fire training exercise focused on preparing Marines to operate in densely populated urban settings in a desert country. In 2005, battalions preparing for deployment went through a revised combined arms exercise that featured role players and a focus on patrols and convoy escorts. During this period the battalion also

deployed to March Air Force Base where it trained with role players in a mock-up of an Iraqi town designated Matilda Village. The predeployment training also included some cultural briefings designed to help Marines understand the customs and religion of the Iraqi people. Nevertheless, the training effort was not focused specifically on counterinsurgency operations. To fill in the

gaps, battalion company commanders scoured the internet for articles and material on counterinsurgency to better prepare themselves and their Marines for the new deployment.⁴²

As the battalion prepared to deploy to Iraq in 2005, Lieutenant Colonel Alford resolved to take a new course with regards to the Iraqi populace, drawing on lessons from his Afghanistan deployment. He recognized that the main objective needed to be retaking the al-Qaim District. “I didn’t know exactly how, but I knew we were going to do it.” Upon conducting a predeployment site survey in July of 2005, Lieutenant Colonel Alford noticed intelligence reporting that the militant groups in the district were fighting one another. “When we’re there on our [pre-deployment site survey] in July of ’05, there was a lot of fighting going on up in the city and [3d Battalion, 2d Marines] was like, yeah that’s red on red.* Just right there, I was like, well that’s got to mean something, if they’re fighting each other. I didn’t know what it meant, but I wanted to find out what it meant.”⁴³

To uncover “what it meant,” Alford and 3d Battalion, 6th Marines’ staff concluded they would need to live and operate among the populace of the district, and not from outside the towns in Camp Al-Qaim. Drawing on their experience in Afghanistan, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, concluded that the center of gravity in the insurgency was the people, not the enemy. It was an observation famously made by David Galula, a veteran of France’s colonial war in Algeria.⁴⁴ A battalion briefing made the point more succinctly: “It’s the people, stupid.”⁴⁵

Commissioned in the Marine Corps in 1988, Lieutenant Colonel Julian “Dale” Alford was a veteran of Operation Just Cause and Operation Desert Storm. During both operations he had served as a platoon commander with his future command, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines. Lieutenant Colonel Alford was also a veteran of Operation Iraqi Freedom, serving as the executive officer of 2d Battalion, 8th Marines, during the march up to Baghdad in 2003. A self-taught student of counterinsurgency, Alford had digested important texts on the subject at a time when the topic was still of little interest to most of the U.S. military establishment. These included an expanded edition of David Galula’s *Pacification in Algeria* published by the RAND Corporation, Francis J. “Bing” West’s seminal study of the Marine combined action program in Vietnam, *The Village*, and the Marine Corps’ *Small Wars Manual* from 1940.⁴⁶

*“Red on red”: enemy forces against enemy forces. Enemy forces are usually designated in red on U.S. and NATO battle maps, whereas friendly forces are designated in blue.



Marine Corps History Division
LtCol Julian D. Alford was commanding officer of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, from 2004–2006. Col Alford’s personal interest in counterinsurgency warfare and effective leadership would play a critical role in the overall success achieved by the Marines in al-Qaim in the fall of 2005.

While Lieutenant Colonel Alford’s chief goal was to secure the al-Qaim District, there was uncertainty with regard to how he would achieve this particular aim. The 2d Marine Division’s headquarters ordered the battalion to maintain the “status quo.” Consequently, the al-Qaim campaign would largely unfold as a consequence of decisions and innovations made in the field by Alford and endorsed and expanded upon by his regimental commander, Colonel Davis. Much of the battalion’s future success would also depend on the ability of its company and platoon commanders to devise and carry out operations in accordance with the overarching campaign goals.

The continuity in personnel between the battalion’s deployments to Afghanistan and Iraq would be crucial in this regard. Of the roughly 950 Marines who deployed with 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, to Afghanistan in 2004, about 700 would deploy to Iraq in 2005. Among those returning were several company commanders. Alford’s executive officer, Major Toby D. Patterson, had been the commander of the battalion’s Weapons Company in Afghanistan. The Headquarters and Service Company commander, Captain Justin J. Ansel Jr., had served as commanding officer of Company I in 2004. Company I’s new commander, Captain Conlon D. Carabine, had led the Headquarters and Service Company. Alford’s new

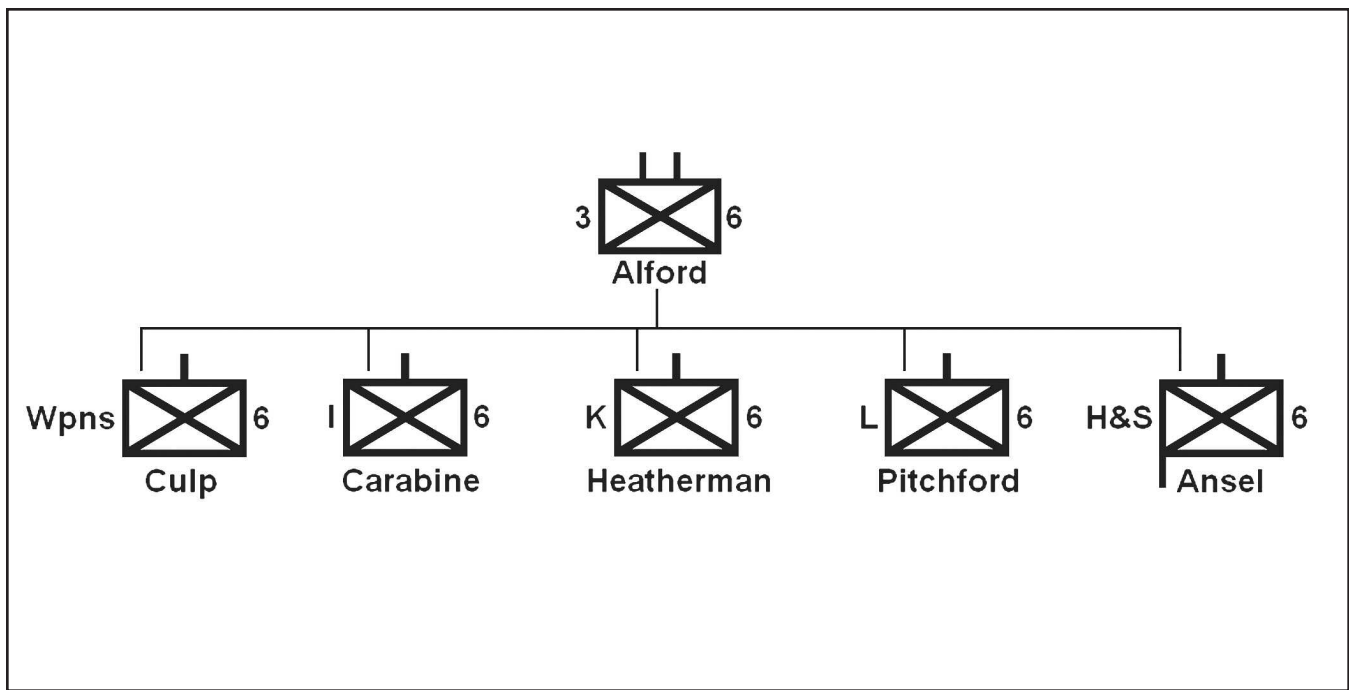


Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

The 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, in the fall of 2005.

operations officer, Major Christopher P. O'Connor, had led Company K. O'Connor's replacement as commanding officer of Company K was Captain Brendan G. Heatherman, who had served as one of the battalion's assistant operations officers. Company L's commander, Captain Richard H. Pitchford, had also served as an assistant operations officer. As Alford would state later, this continuity in personnel meant that, "when I said 'left,' they knew exactly what 'left' meant."⁴⁷

3d Battalion, 6th Marines' Arrival in Iraq and Operation Iron Fist

During its deployment to al-Qaim, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, ultimately concentrated on five major areas of concern. First, and perhaps most important, was strengthening the partnership between U.S. forces and the Iraqi Army. This entailed training, recruiting, and providing the Iraqi forces with operational and logistical support in order to "put an Iraqi face out front," in the counterinsurgency operations. Second, Alford planned to implement a variation of the combined action platoons utilized during the Vietnam War and pair Iraqi and Marine Corps elements together. The units would eat, work, and live together, thus strengthening cooperation between the two forces and providing better sharing of intelligence. Third, the battalion strengthened the Iraqi police force. Ultimately, this would be achieved by building cooperative relationships with the local sheikhs and tribal leaders.

Fourth, the battalion interacted with local leaders and lived among the people of al-Qaim District. Fifth, the battalion focused on civil affairs and reconstruction operations to provide electricity, water, sewage, schools, and hospitals to the region. Finally, the battalion would maintain a focus on engaging enemy forces.⁴⁸

The campaign to secure al-Qaim can be divided roughly into five phases. It began with 3d Battalion, 6th Marines' arrival in Iraq at the end of August 2005. The first month of the deployment was defined largely by small arms battles with insurgents inhabiting the major urban centers of the district. While the Marines of the battalion were aware that engaging the population would be critical, it would be impossible to do so unless the district's towns were effectively cleared of insurgent forces. Thus, the battalion's companies also spent September preparing for a large-scale sweep of the district. This began on 1 October with Operation Iron Fist, the second phase of the campaign. During this battalion-sized operation, Marines methodically moved through the towns of Sadah and eastern Karabilah, stopping at the Emerald Wadi that divided Karabilah in two. The period following the end of Operation Iron Fist on 5 October and the beginning of November constituted a third phase, during which the Marines of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, established battle positions inside the cities of Sadah and eastern Karabilah and lived with the population. During this period they began to acquire a clearer picture of the fighting between the al-Qaim tribes



Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

This map shows the initial disposition of Task Force 3/6 in the Al-Qaim District. The battalion headquarters was to the south of the urban area at Camp Al-Qaim. Elements from Company I of Task Force 3/6 manned Battle Position Khe Sahn at Sadah. Meanwhile, to the west on the Syrian border, Company L manned Camp Gannon and watched over the critical border area.

and al-Qaeda in Iraq and also how the tribal relationships had an impact on the region. For the remainder of October the Marines of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, also engaged in small arms fights and sniper duels with insurgents in western Karabilah and Husaybah across the Emerald Wadi.

The fourth part of the campaign was Operation Steel Curtain, a large regimental-sized assault to clear Husaybah, Karabilah, and the towns of New and Old Ubaydi. The final phase began in mid-November as Marines moved into battle positions built in the center of the major urban areas of the district. From here, Marines and Iraqi security forces conducted patrols, continued to acquire intelligence, and built a close working relationship with the five major tribes of the al-Qaim District.

The first units of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, arrived in Iraq at the end of August. To maximize operational range, the battalion was once again broken down into its component units and spread across the area of operations. Company L was stationed at Camp Gannon and at Battle Position Harmon, just outside Husaybah on the Syrian border. The remainder of the battalion deployed to Camp Al Qaim to the south. From the moment elements of the

battalion came to Iraq, it was engaged in near constant combat with insurgents. On 8 September, Company K conducted cordon and search operations southwest of the district. The next day, the same company accompanied 2d Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion to ar-Rutbah, roughly 200 kilometers to the south, to conduct a sweep of that area. Upon returning, Company K squads set up operations out of two battle positions: Battle Position Khe Sanh in Sadah and Battle Position Belleau Wood south of Ubaydi to the east.⁴⁹

Throughout their deployment to al-Qaim, the Marines of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, were sustained by Combat Logistics Battalion 2, the unit tasked with providing support to the entire Area of Operations Denver. Commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Bruce E. Nickle, the battalion's logistics convoys were the lifeblood for the Marines stationed in the region, and provided food, water, ordnance, and equipment for building fortifications. From its base at al Asad, the logistics battalion also conducted emergency refueling missions, mine-sweeping, and maintenance support. Following Operation Iron Fist, the battalion would also provision 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, with the equipment and engineers needed to construct battle positions inside al-

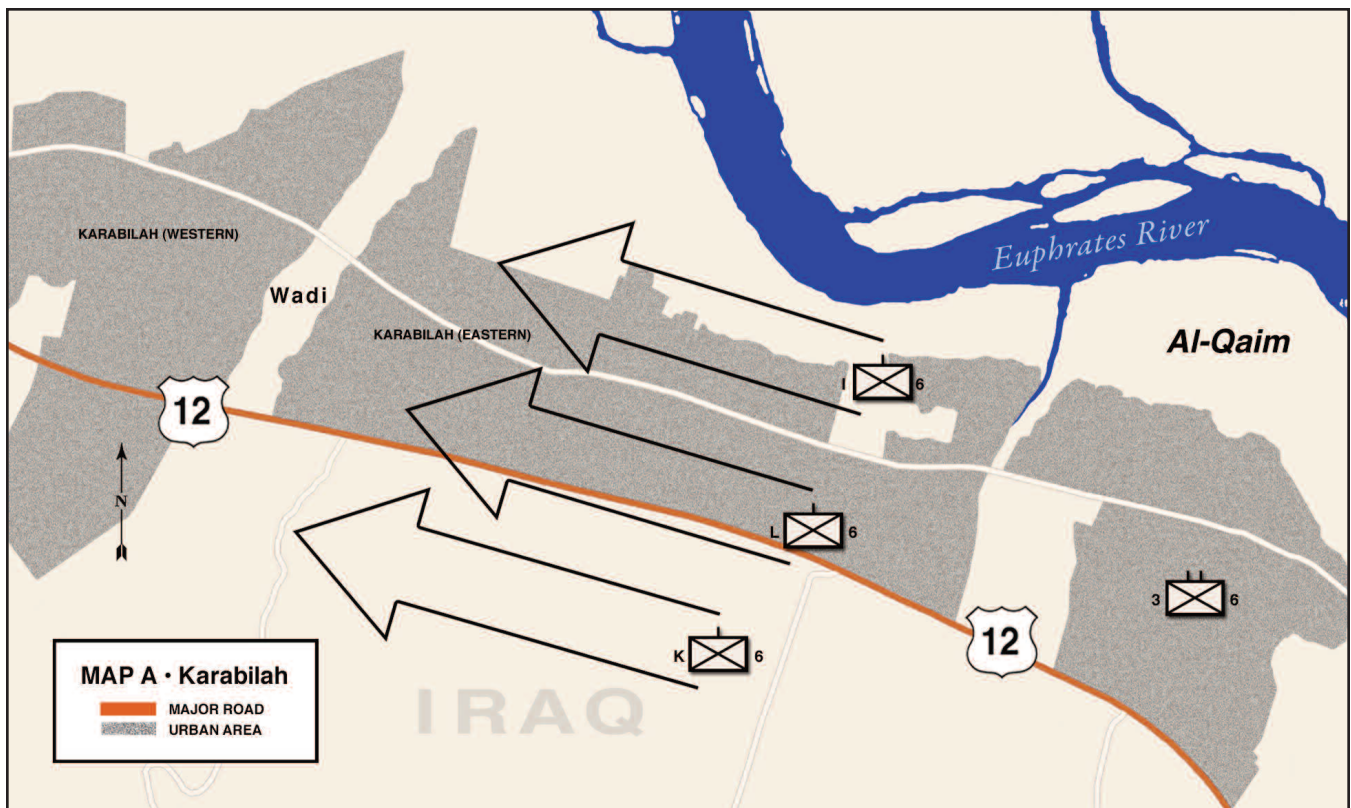


Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

In Operation Iron Fist, Task Force 3/6's three rifle companies moved methodically from east to west, stopping at the wadi dividing the town of Karabilah into western and eastern sections.

Qaim's towns. Roughly a third of the battalion's combat logistics patrols were tasked with provisioning the bases at Camp Al Qaim and Camp Gannon. Due to the dangers of roadside bombs set by insurgents along major supply routes, Bell UH-1 Huey and AH-1 Cobra helicopters from 2d Marine Aircraft Wing (Forward) provided escort and reconnaissance for the convoys. Further compounding the danger was the limited number of supply routes Marines could take to conduct resupply missions, especially during the period when al-Qaim's towns were under insurgent control. For example, to supply Camp Gannon, convoys needed to move across the desert just inside the Iraqi Border. Convoys often took seven to nine hours crossing areas often littered with pressure plate-activated mines.⁵⁰

In order to implement a plan that emphasized living and working among the people, the leaders of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, recognized that it would need to conduct an aggressive operation to clear the region of insurgents. By the end of September, the battalion began preparations for Operation Iron Fist. The operation's primary objective was to clear the towns of Sadah and the eastern part of Karabilah up to the Emerald Wadi in order

to establish battle positions inside those two towns. On 26 September, Company L redeployed from Camp Gannon, leaving 137 Marines behind to secure Husaybah. The remainder moved to Camp Al Qaim. Four days later, the reinforced battalion, designated Task Force 3/6, launched the assault. Along with the battalion's three rifle companies, the force also included an AAV-7A1 assault amphibian platoon, an M1A1 tank platoon from Company B, 1st Tank Battalion, and a forward command element, along with 81mm mortars.⁵¹

The task force's Marines utilized the full arsenal at their disposal: small arms; squad automatic weapons; AT-4 shoulder mounted rocket launchers; and M240G 7.62 mm, M2 .50-caliber, and MK19 40mm machine guns, augmented by 60 mm/81 mm mortars. The Marines also relied on the 120mm main guns of supporting M1A1 Abrams tanks, as well as the guided bombs, rockets, guns, and missiles from supporting Bell UH-1N Huey and Bell AH-1W Cobra helicopters, Boeing FA-18 Hornet fighter-bombers, and unmanned General Atomics MQ-1 Predator drones. Over the course of Operation Iron Fist, fixed- and rotary-wing air assets would drop over 18,000 pounds of ordnance during 80 strike missions.⁵²

The assault lasted four days. Movement through the two towns was slow and methodical, as the Marines from Task Force 3/6 cleared and secured each and every structure. The battalion's three rifle companies moved deliberately westward through the towns, with Company L in the center, Company K to the south, and Company I on the north. Elements from the battalion's Weapons Company occupied blocking positions on either side of the westward advance. From there, they interdicted approaching cars and other vehicles and prevented them from entering the battle zone.⁵³

Sergeant Jeremy R. Riddle of the battalion's Weapons Company recalled the deliberate process necessary for clearing the buildings of the two towns: "It was slow. I realized how slow it was for these battalions to move meticulously through these towns because there are big houses, lots of rooms, sometimes you have people, occupants in the house so it makes it hard to get through each one with the interpreter." The northern element, Company I, immediately came under sniper and small arms fire, with insurgents utilizing a mosque in Sadah to direct fire. On the second day, 2d Platoon of Company L encountered stiff resistance at the water plant supplying Sadah and eastern Karabilah, and brought in tanks to provide fire support. The next day, Company L's third platoon uncovered an improvised explosive device factory. While Company L and Company I encountered resistance, Company K's advance was relatively rapid. As a result, Captain Heatherman maneuvered his company northward to flank the insurgent forces. In the course of the advance, a suicide bomber who had rigged his car with explosives attacked the company, driving directly into the middle of a platoon through a false wall. "When that thing came out of the wall, I thought the whole platoon was dead," Heatherman recalled. Although the explosion was massive, no one in the company was killed or even injured as a result of the attack.⁵⁴

On 3 October the battalion suffered its first Marine killed in action. Since September, a mobile assault platoon from 3d Battalion, 6th Marines' Weapons Company had occupied a prominent position overlooking Sadah, Karabilah, and the Emerald Wadi. Designated Hill 214, it was also an area that 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, had avoided during their own deployment. Consequently, the leaders of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, believed that occupying it would send a clear signal to the insurgents in Sadah and Karabilah that they did not plan on spending their deployment in the security of Camp Al Qaim to the south. Marines from the battalion's Weapons Company occupied the position on 9 September. They immediately received mortar fire from the towns below. The hill

nevertheless provided the Marines of Task Force 3/6 with a strong blocking position during Operation Iron Fist. Likely due to its tactical position, the hill and the area around it was littered with buried improvised explosive devices. On 3 October, one of the sniper team's high mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (Humvee) struck an explosive device while on a routine patrol. The blast tore the Humvee apart, sending debris flying 150 yards, and killing one of the Humvee's occupants, the assistant leader of Sniper Team 6, Corporal John R. Stalvey, who was riding in the passenger's seat.⁵⁵

The insurgents' preferred means of attack were small arms fire: machine guns, sniper rifles, mortars, rocket propelled grenades, and improvised mines and other types of explosive devices that could wreak havoc upon Coalition convoys. In general, insurgent forces remained hidden and many Marine veterans of the al-Qaim operations recall never actually seeing the faces of their enemies. "You can't even see them, but you see where everything is coming from," Corporal Fabricio D. Drummond noted a few weeks after the battle for Sadah. "I'd see a muzzle flash . . . pretty much just a muzzle flash. I've never seen anything other than that." A section leader of Task Force 3/6's Mobile Assault Platoon 1, Sergeant James N. Sawyer, noted a few days after the end of Operation Steel Curtain, "I have not seen the face or even the figure of an Iraqi or an Afghani firing at me. All I have seen is a muzzle peeking around a building and have shots impact on the ground in front of me, or to see an RPG detonate in front of my vehicle. They will not fight you face-to-face."⁵⁶

Ironically, recovered documents from al-Zarqawi himself indicate that the al-Qaeda in Iraq leader denigrated such tactics, feeling that his fighters were not taking the necessary risks to achieve victory:

Jihad here [Iraq] unfortunately [takes the form of] mines planted, rockets launched, and mortars shelling from afar. The Iraqi brothers still prefer safety and returning to the arms of their wives, where nothing frightens them. . . . We have told them in our many sessions with them that safety and victory are incompatible, that the tree of triumph and empowerment cannot grow tall and lofty without blood and defiance of death, that the [Islamic] nation cannot live without the aroma of martyrdom and the perfume of fragrant blood spilled on behalf of God, and that people cannot awaken from their stupor unless talk of martyrdom and martyrs fills their days and nights.



Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

Following Operation Iron Fist, Task Force 3/6 strengthened its presence in Sadah by deploying most of Company I to Battle Position Khe Sanh. Meanwhile, Company K manned two battle positions (Chosin and Iwo Jima) in western Karabilah. Company L remained at Camp Gannon in Husaybah while elements of Company I manned Battle Position Belleau Wood south of Ubaydi.

The tactics described by al-Zarqawi were precisely the ones utilized by the insurgents at al-Qaim. Interestingly, many Marines found that they were not only fighting Iraqis, but Islamist fighters from countries such as Syria, Jordan, and Libya as well.⁵⁷

The operation to clear Karabilah and Sadah came to a close on 5 October, with the battalion's three rifle companies stopping their advance at the Emerald Wadi. In the course of the offensive, 51 insurgent fighters were killed in action. Following the end of the operation, Alford's Marines began constructing two new battle positions. Company K's 3d platoon occupied Battle Position Chosin in eastern Karabilah. The 1st and 2d platoons of Company K moved to Battle Position Iwo Jima in Sadah. However, although Operation Iron Fist was completed, the struggle and danger to secure the towns remained. Positioned inside the towns, the Marines of Task Force 3/6 were now more open to attack from insurgent snipers and small arms, as well as to the perennial threat of mines and other improvised explosives. The companies of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, confronted almost daily firefights and relied on their full arsenal and frequent use of close air support. Elements from the battalion also participated in numerous other

operations throughout the western Euphrates Valley alongside other Marine Corps and Army units.⁵⁸

The Figure-Out Stage: October 2005

Operation Iron Fist successfully cleared two major urban centers of al-Qaim District. Rather than press into the more heavily defended western areas of Karabilah and Husaybah however, the battalion focused on consolidating its gains in eastern Karabilah and Sadah. In many ways, the weeks of October 2005 following the conclusion of Operation Iron Fist would prove to be the most critical for the eventual outcome of the deployment. Company K commander Captain Heatherman described these weeks as the "figure-out" stage, a period during which Marines quickly began to comprehend how the local conditions and intertribal relationships played a role in the conflict in al-Qaim. From their battle positions directly within the towns, Marines became "nosy neighbors" as they conducted patrols and built relationships with the district's inhabitants.⁵⁹

The Marines of Task Force 3/6 began patrols of east Karabilah on 6 October. The battalion's Weapons Company deployed a double-sized sniper platoon of 38

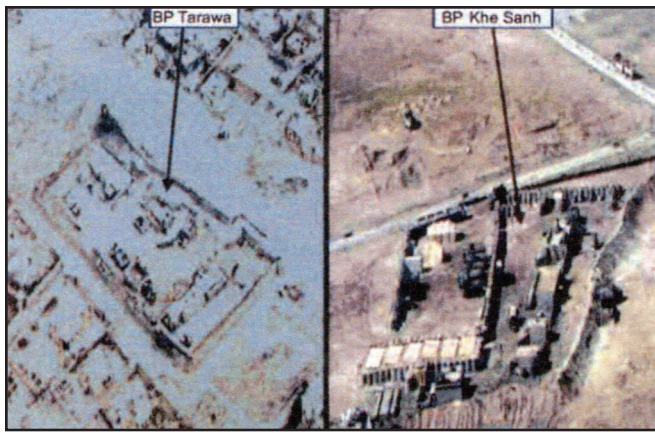


Photo courtesy of Marine Corps Gazette

The battle positions arrayed across the al-Qaim District were small and usually manned by platoon-sized formations of Marines and Iraqi soldiers. Their close proximity to the district's urban areas and, most importantly, the district's inhabitants, increased access to intelligence and strengthened Coalition security efforts in the region.

Marines stationed along the Emerald Wadi. From here they were in a position to pick off insurgents who continued to attack Marines with small arms and mortars from the western part of the city. With the insurgents in western Karabilah and Husaybah pinned down in those towns, Task Force 3/6 began a concerted effort to build trust and cooperation with the Iraqis of Sadah and Karabilah. The decision to construct the battle positions inside the towns was a significant step toward achieving this goal. As Colonel Alford commented a month after Iron Fist, “the people have got to know that you’re staying.” Alford’s executive officer Major Toby D. Patterson, summed up the approach, stating, “We’re here for the long haul. . . . I think one of [the Iraqis’] biggest fears was that we were going to come in, get rid of the insurgents, leave, and then the insurgents were just going to roll back in.” By establishing the battle positions, the Marines were able to demonstrate that this would not be the case.⁶⁰

Built primarily out of Hesco* barriers by Marine engineers from Combat Logistics Battalion 2, the positions were small, rapidly constructed fortifications designed to provide about a platoon of Marines with both protection and the ability to live and operate among the Iraqis in al-Qaim, often no further than 100 meters from an Iraqi home. Thus, townspeople going about their day-to-day affairs would see Marines on the streets providing security. According to Alford, “You walk out the front of a battle position and you’re in the street, you’re in the villages, houses. We plopped ‘em down right in the middle of the towns.” Major Patterson added that

*A collapsible, flexible wire mesh filled with dirt, sand, or stones that can be set up with relative speed and ease.

building the positions and maintaining a visible Marine presence inside the towns were, “definitely helping us win the [information operations] campaign, at least in this [area of operations].” Eventually, the platoons also partnered with Iraqi platoons, thus creating an ad hoc version of the combined action program platoons.⁶¹

The presence of Iraqi Army forces was an important contribution to the Coalition’s success in the al-Qaim region. The history of the Iraqi Army had been a tumultuous one since the Coalition Provisional Authority ordered the dissolution of the old army in May of 2003. That decision helped to inflame the nascent insurgency. Veterans lacking a means of subsistence and already suffering humiliation following the army’s defeat against U.S. forces joined the insurgency. Within months of the old army’s dissolution, the Coalition Provisional Authority ordered the creation of a new army of 40,000 individuals to serve as an internal security force. The performance of the army was mixed. It was dominated by Shi’a Iraqis, thus leading many Iraqis in the Sunni-dominated al-Anbar Province to fear and distrust the new force. Its effectiveness under fire was also a problem. During the First Battle of al-Fallujah in April 2004, several units serving alongside the 1st Marine Division mutinied and refused to fight. Units from the army did perform better several months later however, during the Coalition’s November 2004 offensive to retake al-Fallujah.⁶²

While the general performance of the Iraqi Army was mixed, it is important to remember the obstacles it faced from the outset. In the eyes of many Iraqis it was a puppet of the United States similar to the mandate army created by the British in the 1920s. Furthermore, Iraq’s military had traditionally focused on large-scale conventional wars, such as those against Iran in the 1980s and against U.S.-led coalitions in 1991 and 2003. Consequently, it faced the same challenges that the U.S. military was facing at the time: adapting a conventional force to fight urban warfare and counterinsurgency. The challenges of creating a brand new security force compounded the challenges of fighting a protean and unpredictable insurgency. The army’s officer corps was inexperienced and found itself relying heavily on attached American officers for leadership and guidance.⁶³

Whatever the limits of the Iraqi Army however, the Coalition leadership believed that it was critical that Iraqi units participate in large-scale Coalition counterinsurgency operations. First, planners hoped that Iraqi participation would fight the impression that the United States was occupying the country, rather than fighting a counterinsurgency in support of the Iraqi government



Photo by Cpl Neill A. Sevelius

Iraqi soldiers played a critical role in the battle for al-Qaim, serving as translators, providing intelligence, and providing extra strength for security operations. Here an Iraqi takes aim in Husaybah on 5 November 2005 during Operation Steel Curtain.

and people. Second, the inclusion of Iraqi forces solved the more practical problem of having enough boots on the ground to hold and secure territory cleared of insurgent forces. Conscious of both these factors, Colonel Davis and Lieutenant Colonel Alford requested and received reinforcements in the form of Iraqi battalions. To maximize cooperation, Alford manned his battle positions with a Marine platoon and an Iraqi platoon throughout the al-Qaim campaign. This forced partnerships to form between Marines and Iraqis, strengthening the overall counterinsurgency campaign.⁶⁴

Company I commanding officer Captain Conlon D. Carabine recalled an example of when the close working relationship between Marines and Iraqis proved beneficial. As he and an Iraqi lieutenant watched as a number of young Iraqi males went through a Marine checkpoint during a clearing operation, the Iraqi lieutenant spotted one of the men and, just by looking at the man's attire, told Captain Carabine that the man was "a terrorist." Initially dubious, Carabine followed the lieutenant to question the suspect, who had already been searched and cleared by the Marines. Within thirty seconds of questioning him, the lieutenant walked the man back into the building he had come from. As Carabine recounted,

Inside that building, right inside the doorway, was his AK-47, two cell phones, a little book with contacts. There's no question: the guy turned out to be Syrian, he had phone numbers to Damascus, there is no question, he was straight up just a terrorist. Now if it wasn't for that, those Iraqi soldiers (and there were plenty of other instances where they were huge force multipliers, but I use that specific example), that guy would have been home free. There's no question about it.

Thus, by working alongside Iraqi forces, the Marines of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, were assisted by individuals who knew local customs and cultures well enough to be able to spot individuals who did not belong. Consequently, cooperating with Iraqi forces provided a significant advantage in terms of intelligence. As a result, Colonel Alford stressed the necessity of close cooperation and partnership. As Alford put it on several occasions, "If you're not sleeping with them, eating with them, and crapping in the same bucket, you're not partnered."⁶⁵

In many ways, the three weeks between Operation Iron Fist and Operation Steel Curtain were as dangerous and as taxing as those two operations. Sergeant Jeremy R.

Riddle, a sniper from Weapons Company, recalled that insurgents fired on his position on the Emerald Wadi every single day during these weeks. Sergeant Riddle stated, "Once that op [Iron Fist] was over, pretty much started our real combat experience here in Iraq."⁶⁶ Improvised explosives remained a danger, as did vehicle-born improvised explosive devices (cars rigged to explode, driven by suicide bombers). On 19 October one such vehicle struck Company K. As a squad-sized patrol moved north, a vehicle came out of a blind alley, turned and sped toward the Marines. The patrol's point man, Corporal Norman W. Anderson III, opened fire. The driver ducked down, and the car immediately exploded, killing Corporal Anderson. The remaining six Marines in the patrol sustained injuries. Following the attack, Company K formed at the site and then swept the entire area of north Sadah. During the sweep of about 50 houses, the Marines uncovered the house where the explosive had been built and detained nine insurgents. "We talked about that kid for days," recalled a physician's assistant from Combat Logistics Battalion 2, Lieutenant James L. Anderson, USN, "because in our minds what he did, he saved all his buddies." The battalion sergeant major, Scott L. Theakston, concurred, "His heroics probably saved the whole squad." Lance Corporal Anderson posthumously received the Bronze Star with Combat "V" for his actions.⁶⁷

The patrols conducted during October revealed to Marines the layout of the major families and leaders of the region. On 15 October, Iraqis went to the polls to vote on a new constitution. The battalion leadership worked closely with local Iraqi leaders in Sadah and east Karabilah to set up voting sites and maintain security at the various polling locations. Turnout in the western cities of Iraq was larger than it had been for the constituent assembly election of the previous January, but was still small. In particular, the polling sites in Company K's area of responsibility saw only 19 people show up to vote at the Sadah School, most of whom were in the Iraqi Army. The low turnout attested to the Marines' initial ignorance of the cultural and tribal dynamics of the region. Unknown to the Marines, they had placed the polling site deep within an area controlled by the Albu Mahal tribe. Consequently, no members of the rival Karbuli tribe came out to vote. Many Iraqis also did not want to be seen voting as long as insurgents were still operating in the region. At one point, a tribal leader frankly said that the only way he and his tribe would vote is if the Marines forced them to do so at gunpoint. The Marines did not oblige his request.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, while the turnout was light, the Marines and Iraqi soldiers provided security throughout the region, and intermittent insurgent attacks did not disrupt polling. On the afternoon of the election date, insurgents attacked the Iraqi National Guard complex outside Husaybah. Company L and Iraqi forces responded, killing four insurgents and wounding another. On the same day, Company K confronted mortar fire and the detonation of an improvised bomb, though no Marines were injured.⁶⁹

October was a period of trial and error as the Marines of Task Force 3/6 attempted to learn more about al-Qaim, its people, and the insurgency. Sometimes this led to mishaps and mistakes, as seen in the placement of polling sites. Company K's experience in Sadah and Karabilah is a case in point. Early on the company came to believe that the local village elders, or *mukhtars*, were roughly equivalent to a mayor. The fact that there was only one in Sadah reinforced this perception. In Karabilah, however, the Marines empowered one of them, Mohammed Ahmed Salah, as mayor, not realizing there were several mukhtars in the town. By doing so, the Marines reordered the power structure in Karabilah without realizing it. "We empowered Mohammed Ahmed Salah, mistakenly, at the beginning, during [October] before we realized, 'Oh my God, did we just do that? Did we just dictate the power structure in this town?'" Captain Heatherman recalled. The Marines of Task Force 3/6 struggled for the rest of their deployment to rectify these early mistakes.⁷⁰

In another incident, Marines from Company K noticed flickering lights from a house near Battle Position Iwo Jima. Believing this to be an insurgent signaling to operatives to launch an attack, Marines stormed the home, smashing through the front door and damaging a wall and the house's foundation. As it turned out, the home's owner was simply rewiring his house. The Marines of Company K subsequently provided financial restitution and helped the man rebuild his door after the mishap. In another incident, about 10 Marines of Company K, including Captain Heatherman, became involved in an actual fistfight with about six or seven insurgents. "We go in, and there are five or six insurgents sitting at a table and their AK-47s were leaning against the wall, and we went in there. I guess we could have shot them all, but they all ran right at us. Some of them tried to run away, some of them tried to fight, and it turned into a big brawl in there . . . it was like a John Wayne movie, you don't see that anymore."⁷¹

Along with serving together manning battle positions, the Marines of Task Force 3/6 and the 2d Battalion, 1st Brigade of the Iraqi 1st Division participated in a number

of joint operations throughout the area. The first of these was a sweep of a small village conducted by the Headquarters and Service Company and an Iraqi Army unit. On 16 October, Company I and the 1st Company of the 2d Battalion swept the town of Barwannah, to the east of al-Qaim on the Euphrates, during Operation Zamboni. On 19 October, Headquarters and Service Company and a company of Iraqi soldiers conducted Operation River Sweep.⁷²

By operating closely with both Iraqi troops and civilians, the Marines of Task Force 3/6 were able to obtain critical intelligence as well. On 23 October, dozens of women and children were given medical treatment by members of a medical civil assistance program situated near Battle Position Khe Sahn in Sadah. An Iraqi approached members of Company K at the clinic, providing the Marines with information on a car bomb that had detonated near the battle position the previous day. The lead proved valuable, and led Company K to another car bomb and a house being used by insurgents as a base. Taking small arms fire, the Marines engaged in a firefight that led to one insurgent wounded and two others captured. A search of the home found materials for building improvised explosives and anti-Coalition program material.⁷³

On 2 November, another informant came to Marines in Sadah and told them of a house being used as an insurgent base north of Battle Position Iwo Jima. Marines from Company K subsequently moved north to investigate. As they entered the house, insurgents began dropping grenades down a flight of stairs. The blasts wounded four Marines and a sailor. The Marines withdrew from the house and called in an air strike, which leveled the building. Describing the subsequent events, the battalion command chronology stated, "Three of the insurgents were still alive in the rubble but could not move. Upon conversation with the insurgent, we learned the six were from Libya and the one we were talking to wore a suicide vest with explosives." In danger of being killed by the explosion, the Marines quickly backed away and were forced to kill the insurgent before he could detonate the vest himself.⁷⁴

To further increase cooperation with Iraqis, Lieutenant Colonel Alford began to seek aid from tribal leaders. As noted, the sheikhs of the local tribes, particularly those of the Abu Mahal, had already begun to turn against the insurgents and align themselves with the U.S. forces. However, Operation Matador's failure to provide a permanent solution to the security situation in al-Qaim had led many to doubt whether the Marines would be

able to effectively defeat the insurgent fighters. With Operation Iron Fist however, it was clear that the Marines of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, would not be withdrawing back to Camp Al Qaim. Thanks to the operation, civil affairs Marines were able to carry out their mission in both Sadah and eastern Karabilah. Following the clearing operations against the insurgency in Sadah, Team 3 of the 6th Civil Affairs Group set up operations in the city. Along with the group's mission of providing essential services to Iraqis and building cooperation between Marines and the populace, the team, commanded by Major Sean M. Hurley, also sought to locate local and potential leaders within the local communities. The group brought in medical supplies, provided medical assistance and care, and made reparations payments for damage.⁷⁵

The battalion staff also hoped to exploit the divisions between the tribes and al-Qaeda in Iraq. Major Edwin O. Rueda, a regional area officer assigned from regimental headquarters at Alford's request, proved instrumental in helping the battalion leadership navigate the local customs and cultural attitudes of the al-Qaim District. Rueda's knowledge of the region's culture and Iraqi history helped 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, and Regimental Combat Team 2 to devise a campaign plan that would incorporate an alliance with tribal groups.⁷⁶

Operation Steel Curtain, Part I: Clearing Husaybah and Western Karabilah

By the end of October 2005 the Marines of Task Force 3/6 prepared to complete the general sweep of the al-Qaim District. While eastern Karabilah and Sadah had been cleared and secured, Ubaydi to the east and Husaybah and the rest of Karabilah to the west remained under insurgent control. Consequently, insurgents proved a persistent and tenacious threat to the Marines and Iraqis operating along the Emerald Wadi in the western part of Karabilah.

The success of Operation Iron Fist had convinced Colonel Davis that a greater and more focused effort in the district could spur a significant shift in the situation in western al-Anbar. Consequently, Operation Steel Curtain entailed a far larger force than used in Iron Fist and constituted the largest Marine Corps operation in Iraq since the Second Battle of al-Fallujah.

Throughout the Iraq War, U.S. Central Command relied on Marine expeditionary units as its operational reserve. In 2004, the 11th, 24th, and 31st Marine Expeditionary Units had served in this capacity, helping to reinforce Multinational Force-Iraq when necessary. In



Photo by PFC David A. Irvin

LtCol Robert G. Oltman (far left) commanded Battalion Landing Team 2/1 in the fall of 2005. The battalion was the second major formation tasked with conducting Operation Steel Curtain (the other being the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines).

2005, the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) served as the Central Command reserve. To reinforce his assault force for Operation Steel Curtain, Colonel Davis received operational control of Lieutenant Colonel Robert G. Oltman's Battalion Landing Team 2/1, the ground combat element of the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit.⁷⁷

The 13th MEU, commanded by Colonel James K. LaVine, had been afloat aboard the USS *Tarawa* (LHA 1) amphibious ready group since July 2005. During its cruise it had participated in humanitarian operations in the Philippines in August and then proceeded to Egypt where it conducted Exercise Bright Star with Egyptian forces. As with the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit's predeployment training focused on a mix of both conventional operations and counterinsurgency. When he could, Colonel LaVine integrated counterinsurgency with his command's standard training package. Nevertheless, he also wanted to ensure that his air-ground task force remained versatile, flexible, and prepared for numerous challenges beyond counterinsurgency. Thus, the Marine expeditionary unit's training to obtain its special operations-capable certification did not overwhelmingly stress counter-

insurgency. Nevertheless, Battalion Landing Team 2/1 participated in the revised combined arms exercise at Twentynine Palms and had also trained to conduct urban clearing operations. During Exercise Bright Star, the 13th MEU also conducted live fire and convoy training.⁷⁸

Upon arriving in Iraq at the end of October, the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit conducted convoy protection operations and disruption operations along the main supply route to al-Qaim. Beginning on 2 November, Battalion Landing Team 2/1 began its deployment to al-Qaim in preparation for Operation Steel Curtain. At Lieutenant Colonel Oltman's insistence, the entire battalion landing team was placed under the operational control of Regimental Combat Team 2. The force would serve, in Colonel Oltman's words, as a "swing force" for Operation Steel Curtain, providing Regimental Combat Team 2 with a powerful formation capable of punching through al-Qaim as 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, established battle positions behind the line of advance. As a battalion landing team, Colonel Oltman's force consisted of not just a Marine infantry battalion (2d Battalion, 1st Marines), but also an artillery battery, an assault amphibian platoon, a light armored reconnaissance platoon, a combat

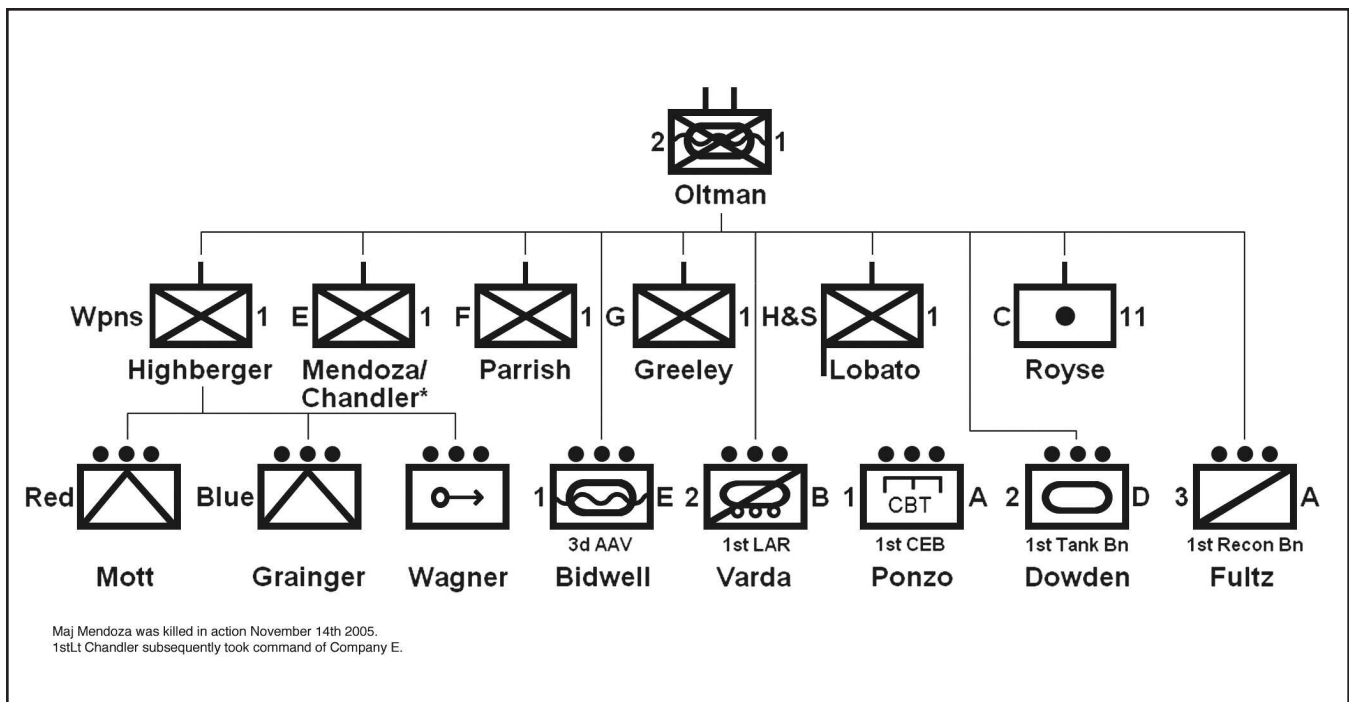


Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

Battalion Landing Team 2/1. This chart illustrates the reinforced combat power of the team, with an additional artillery company and a platoon each of light armored reconnaissance Marines, assault amphibian Marines, tanks, combat engineers, and reconnaissance Marines.

engineer platoon, a reconnaissance platoon, and a platoon of tanks.⁷⁹

The Steel Curtain assault force also included elements of the 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion, 2d Force Reconnaissance Company, and two U.S. Army units: the 4th Squadron, 14th Cavalry, and the 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment. Also coupled to the force were the 1st, 2d, and 3d Battalions of the 1st Brigade, 1st Division of the Iraqi Army. The force was supported by Combat Logistics Battalion 2, Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 369, Marine All Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 332, Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 163 (Reinforced), and other aviation assets from the 2d Marine Aircraft Wing.⁸⁰

Operation Iron Fist had involved a westward advance through Sadah and eastern Karabilah. To confuse the insurgents, who were expecting the Marines to continue the assault across the Emerald Wadi into western Karabilah and Husaybah, Task Force 3/6 redeployed to positions west of Husaybah, at the Syrian Border. On 1 November, the elements of Task Force 3/6 based at Camp Al Qaim convoyed northwest to Camp Gannon, where they joined Captain Pitchford's Company L. So that all of Captain Pitchford's rifle company could be used in the assault on Husaybah, Combat Logistics Battalion 2 created a provisional rifle platoon for security operations at Camp Gannon. As with the Second Battle for al-Fallujah, the

Marines utilized loudspeakers to warn Iraqi civilians to leave the towns before the impending assault.⁸¹

On 4 November, Companies I, K, and L from Task Force 3/6 moved into their battle positions west of Husaybah, with the three rifle companies of Battalion Landing Team 2/1 moving into positions south of Task Force 3/6. Task Force 3/6 was given responsibility for the northern districts, with Company L moving across the northern boundary, Company K advancing in the center, and Company I anchoring the task force's southern flank. Below Company K was Company F of Battalion Landing Team 2/1. The landing team's Company G occupied the assault force's southernmost flank, while Company E occupied the battalion landing team's center. Meanwhile, the 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment and the 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion served as screens north and south of Husaybah, respectively.⁸²

The assault force began its attack on 5 November. As Steel Curtain's planners had hoped, the insurgents were caught by surprise, having assumed that the assault would come from the east. Consequently, most of the insurgent forces and improvised explosives were concentrated in the eastern areas of unoccupied Karabilah, with remote detonators consistently found to the west of the bombs laid out to slow the Marines' attack. The advance was deliberate, and just as in Sadah and eastern Karabilah the Marine rifle companies focused their efforts on clearing

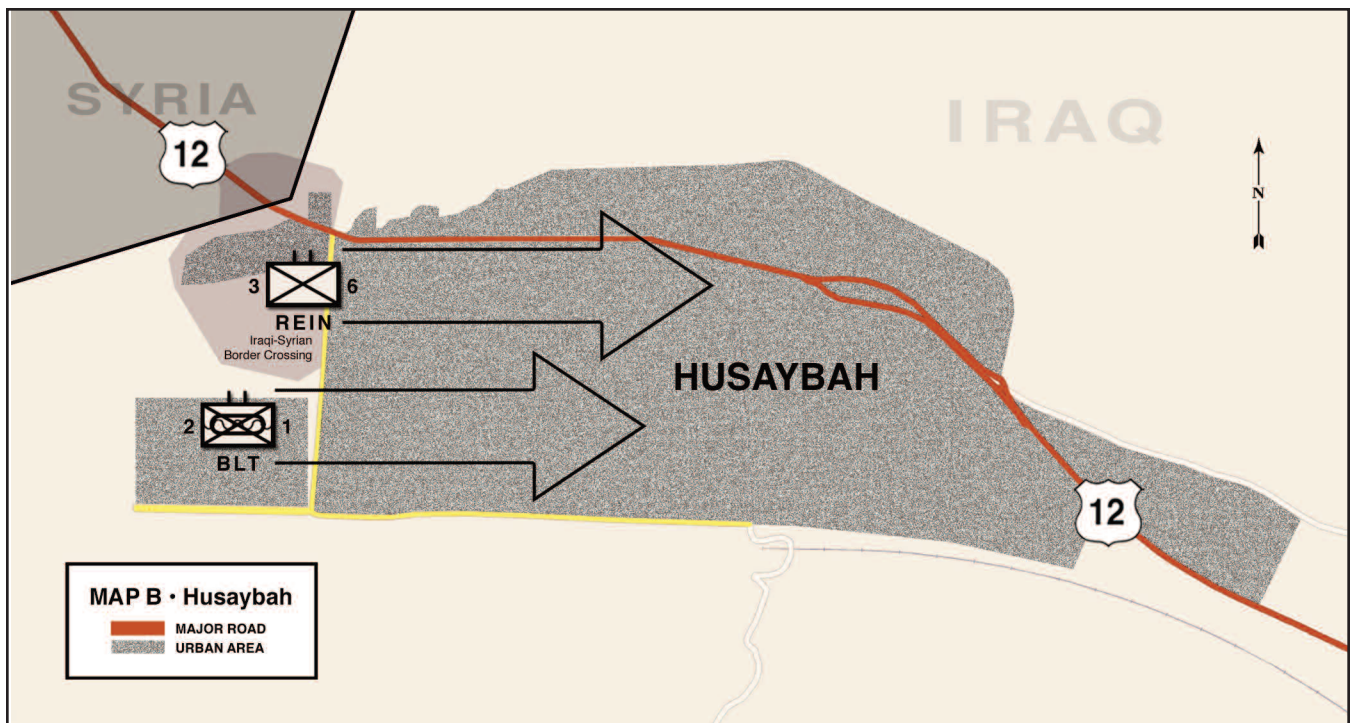


Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

The first phase of Operation Steel Curtain (5–7 November 2005) entailed a eastward advance through Husaybah by two reinforced Marine battalions. Task Force 3/6 cleared the northern sections of the town while Battalion Landing Team 2/1 cleared the southern areas.

each and every structure of insurgent forces. Due to the fact that Marines posted in Camp Gannon were able to observe most activity in northern Husaybah over the preceding months, the advance in that area was relatively rapid. In comparison, the advances through the southern city blocks, most notably the areas given to Battalion Landing Team 2/1, proved more difficult and slower. Insurgents continued to rely on rockets and small arms fire as well as mines and other explosive devices to stall the Marines. Every block seemed to be rigged with an explosive of some sort. The Marines also faced a threat that had been in place from decades ago in the form of an old World War II-era minefield south of the city. Nevertheless, the Marines were able to push forward and by the end of the first day, a quarter of the town of Husaybah had been cleared.⁸³

By the close of 6 November, half of Husaybah had been effectively cleared of insurgent forces. Fighting remained fierce as the Marines maintained their deliberate advance westward. In the course of their assault, Company K uncovered a weapons cache that included two anti-aircraft guns, a gun mount for a pickup truck, electronics used to detonate explosive devices, camouflage utilities, AK-47 assault rifles, ammunition, handcuffs, ski masks, and a 122mm rocket. Marines also found on the body of one insurgent killed in action, three different identification cards, a thumb drive, an improvised explosive device

manual, weapons, ammunition, and 500 American dollars. On the same day, Task Force 3/6 suffered its third Marine killed in action in Iraq when insurgent small arms fire killed Private First Class Ryan J. Sorensen of Company I.⁸⁴

The two battalions finished clearing Husaybah on 7 November. Over the course of the next two days the Marine rifle companies undertook operations to clear the



Photo by SSgt Jason D. Becksted

Marines ready High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (HMMWVs) and AAV-7A1 Assault Amphibian Vehicles as they prepare to launch Operation Steel Curtain.



Photo by Cpl Neill A. Sevelius

A Marine from 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, mans a position on a rooftop in Karabilah on 11 November 2005 during Operation Steel Curtain. To his left are two Iraqi soldiers.

corridor connecting Husaybah and western Karabilah. Fighting remained intense, if sporadic, and improvised explosives remained a critical threat, as seen when an assault amphibious vehicle struck a mine, wounding three Marines. On 10 November, another mine killed Private First Class Daniel F. Swaim and wounded two others from Company L.⁸⁵

The two battalions altered their deployments to clear Karabilah. Battalion Landing Team 2/1 set up blocking positions to the south. Meanwhile, Task Force 3/6 moved north of the town and on 10 November its three companies plunged south into the urban area. Company I advanced on the right, Company K in the center, and Company L on the left, through the area known as the “shark fin,” a grassy, fertile section of the district bordering the Emerald Wadi that looked like a dorsal fin. As the Marines advanced, they encountered several insurgents masquerading as farmers. About 30 insurgents were rounded up and detained during the southward advance. By 12 November, both the towns of Husaybah

and Karabilah had been cleared of insurgents, and elements of Task Force 3/6 walked along the Emerald Wadi bridge connecting western and eastern Karabilah.⁸⁶

Like a slow-moving glacier leaving sediment in its wake, Task Force 3/6 established new battle positions throughout the two towns of Husaybah and Karabilah as it advanced eastward, leaving behind a platoon-sized formation to man each one. As 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, advanced eastward, it built battle positions and left behind a platoon to man each one. As Alford recalled, “We attacked until we ran out of platoons.” In Husaybah the battalion built Battle Position Beirut and Battle Position Hue City, manned by elements of Company L. In Karabilah the Marines built Battle Position Tarawa and Battle Position Guadalcanal, both manned by units from Company I. Company K returned to its positions in Battle Position Chosin and Battle Position Iwo Jima in eastern Karabilah and Sadah.⁸⁷

Combat Logistics Battalion 2 continued to provide critical support for the Marines in al-Qaim throughout the operation. A platoon sergeant from the battalion’s Transportation Support Company, Sergeant B. J. Cody Bookwalter, recalled the continuous convoy missions to the Marines in al-Qaim:

Loads on the trucks were mostly chow and water for the first few convoys and then it got to be Hesco, Texas, and Jersey barriers for protective walls. At first . . . we’d get up at 4:30 in the morning to leave, get back at 1300, 1:00. Go ahead and load again, go back out, get back around 2300, 11:00 at night, go to sleep, somebody else would load our trucks for us, we’d have extra Marines staying back, they’d load our trucks, get up at 4:30 and do the same repetitiveness (sic) everyday. Mostly the drivers and the gunners did get a little bit down that they didn’t have no time but like four or five hours to themselves, couldn’t really go hygiene as properly as you wanted to, couldn’t have a little bit of lay-down time because as soon as you got back, you laid down, you go to sleep, you get up, you got to put your weapon back up, remount the vehicle, and get ready to go out.

Combat Logistics Battalion 2’s Marines rushed in the equipment necessary to build defensible battle positions from which Marines would be able to provide security throughout al-Qaim once it had been cleared of insurgent fighters. Over the course of the operation, Transportation Support Company moved in 164 Jersey Barriers, 174 Texas Barriers, 46 intermodal containers, and 199 pallets

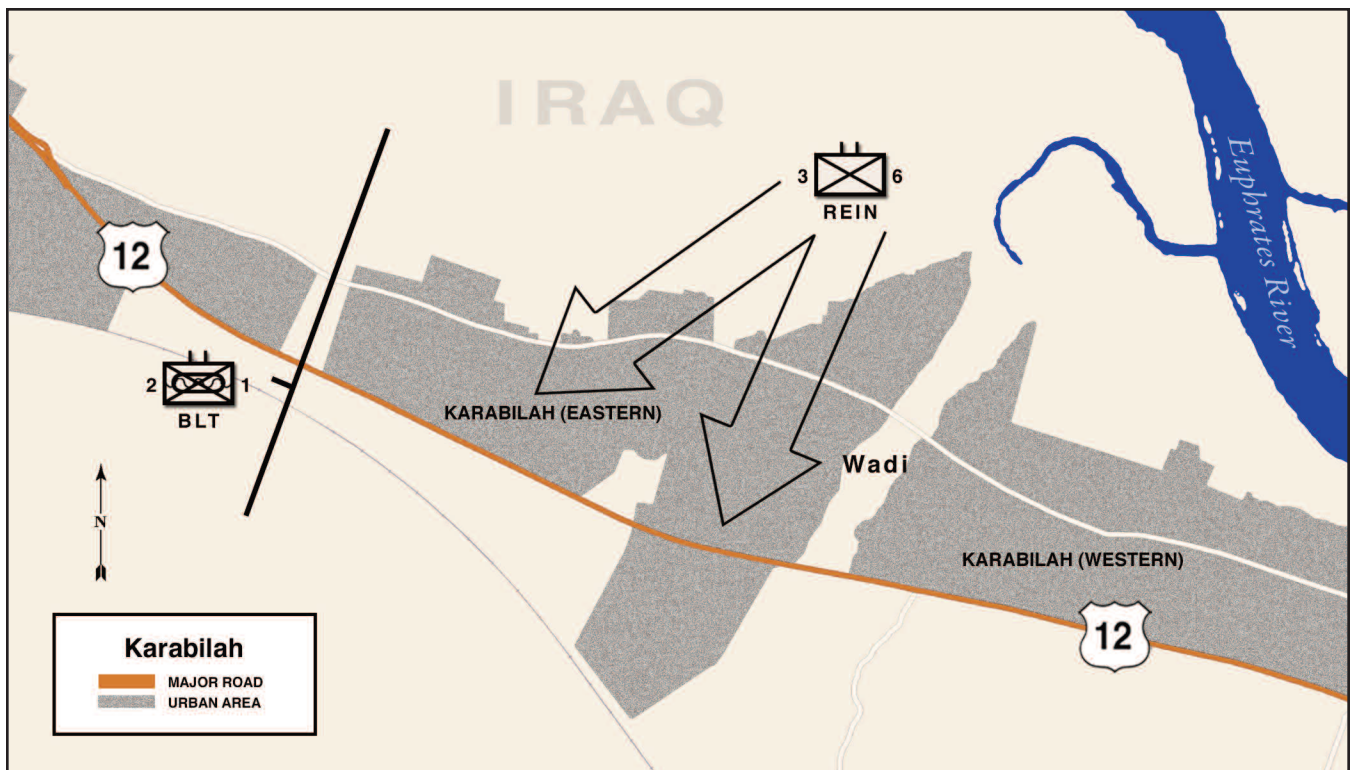


Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

With Husaybah cleared by November 7, Regimental Combat Team 2's two battalion assault forces moved to their next objective, the western section of Karabilah. Between 7 November and 10 November 2005 Task Force 3/6 moved north of the town. With Battalion Landing Team 2/1 anchoring the assault force's western flank, Task Force 3/6 advanced south along the wadi dividing Karabilah, beginning with an assault through the "shark fin" region on 10 November 2005.

of Hesco Barriers to the al-Qaim District. The company's Air Delivery Platoon also delivered 88 pallets of rations and water to the battle zone. In an important contribution to morale, the battalion provided the Marines on the front lines with a lobster dinner and cake for the Marine Corps birthday on 10 November 2005. It also provided Thanksgiving meals to the Marines posted in the battle positions throughout al-Qaim a few weeks later.⁸⁸

Operation Steel Curtain Part II: The Fight for New Ubaydi

With Task Force 3/6 stretched to its limits manning the battle positions in Husaybah, Karabilah, and Sadah, the task of clearing the twin towns of Old and New Ubaydi fell to Battalion Landing Team 2/1 and the U.S. Army's 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment. On 13 November, Battalion Landing Team 2/1 conducted a tactical road march to an assembly area south of New Ubaydi. The leader of the battalion's tank platoon, First Lieutenant Matthew A. Dowden, recalled that the moon turned a "blood red" as the dust kicked up by the moving battalion filled the night sky, a sign to insurgents that a large military force was on the move. The army airborne

battalion was given the task of clearing Old Ubaydi to the west. During staging operations for the push north, about two hours before dawn on 14 November, Company E commanding officer Major Ramon J. Mendoza Jr. was killed by what was likely a pressure plate mine just to the right of the battalion landing team's lead tanks. "I looked over, and I see this explosion next to me and just stuff flying around . . .," Dowden remembered. First Lieutenant Nathan B. Chandler assumed command of the company.⁸⁹

Battalion Landing Team 2/1 commenced its attack on New Ubaydi on 14 November 2005 as two platoons from Company F launched an assault in the southeastern part of the city. By this point in the battle, insurgents, aware that fighting the Marines in the streets was ineffective, took to setting up ambushes in the major buildings. They barricaded doors and then waited on the other side for the Marines to break through, opening fire at waist level to strike where the Marines' body armor was weakest. The insurgent fighters also rigged buildings with booby traps and other improvised explosives. At 8:30 a.m., an automatic rifleman from the 3d Squad of Company F's 1st Platoon, Lance Corporal Christopher M. McCrackin, entered a room as his squad cleared a building. Triggering an explosive device, McCrackin suffered mortal shrapnel



Photo by Cpl Michael R. McMaugh

One of the greatest hazards facing Marines during Operation Steel Curtain was unexploded ordnance and improvised explosive devices. In this image, a Marine from Combined Anti-Armor Team Blue for Battalion Landing Team 2/1 inspects a house in Karabilah to ensure that detonated ordnance has been destroyed.

wounds to his legs and wrist. Lance Corporal McCrackin posthumously earned the Navy and Marine Corps Achievement Medal with Combat “V.”⁹⁰

Later that day another Marine from Battalion Landing Team 2/1 was killed in action when a fireteam from the 2d Squad of 1st Platoon, Company F, breached the front room of a building. Corporal John M. Longoria and his team were immediately attacked by five insurgents waiting inside with PKM machine gun and AK-47 assault rifle fire. While the team was able to defeat the insurgent ambush, Corporal Longoria was fatally wounded in the action. He posthumously received the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with Combat Distinguishing Device. Lance Corporal Michael S. Rodriguez, whose covering fire allowed the team to recover Corporal Longoria, received the Bronze Star with Combat Distinguishing Device.⁹¹

The assault on New Ubaydi would last several days. At 6:40 on the morning of 16 November, Battalion Landing Team 2/1 continued its operations on what would prove to be the bloodiest day of Operation Steel Curtain for Regimental Combat Team 2. The battalion’s Company F, commanded by Captain Ross A. Parrish, was responsible for clearing the eastern side of the city with two platoons. The clearing operation of 33 buildings went without major incident until 8:40 a.m. when 21 insurgents ambushed Company F’s second platoon. The platoon received fire on both its front and its right from four buildings, with the enemy stronghold in a structure designated Building 6. About 25 meters from this objective, 2d Platoon, commanded by Second Lieutenant Donald R. McGlothlin, established a position at Building 4. The first fireteam from the 3d squad, led by Corporal Joshua J. Ware, advanced to the building and tossed a flash grenade through an open door into the structure. Insurgents lying in wait immediately responded with automatic fire and grenades from recessed firing ports, furniture in the hallways, and “mouse” holes. All four members of the fire team fell in the attack, including Corporal Ware, who was fatally wounded in the ambush.⁹²

As this was occurring, communications between the fire team and 3d squad were suddenly lost and Second Lieutenant McGlothlin and his platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Robert W. Homer, quickly took action. With Marines pinned down inside the structure, 2d Platoon was unable to call on supporting arms fire from tanks, machine guns, and aircraft to destroy the insurgent stronghold; the Marines of the fireteam would need to be extracted from Building 6 first. Staff Sergeant Homer immediately ran across the 25-meter kill zone to help and direct the evacuation of the injured Marines at Building 6. Upon arriving at the site, he found two Marines injured inside the building and two at the doorway. He quickly grabbed one Marine who was still conscious despite a wound to his head, and ran back through enemy fire to the company casualty collection point, located in a building designated Building 21. Meanwhile, McGlothlin brought forward the tank section attached to his platoon to provide cover and assembled a fireteam to relieve and evacuate the embattled fireteam at Building 6.⁹³

The team, led by Corporal Jeffrey A. Rogers and Lieutenant McGlothlin, ran across the deadly 25-meter area between Buildings 4 and 6. Upon arriving at the building, Corporal Rogers; the team’s grenadier, Lance Corporal Joshua R. Mooi; and the team’s automatic rifleman, Lance Corporal John A. Lucente, entered the building. As Lucente provided suppressing fire down Building 6’s front hallway, Mooi grabbed a wounded

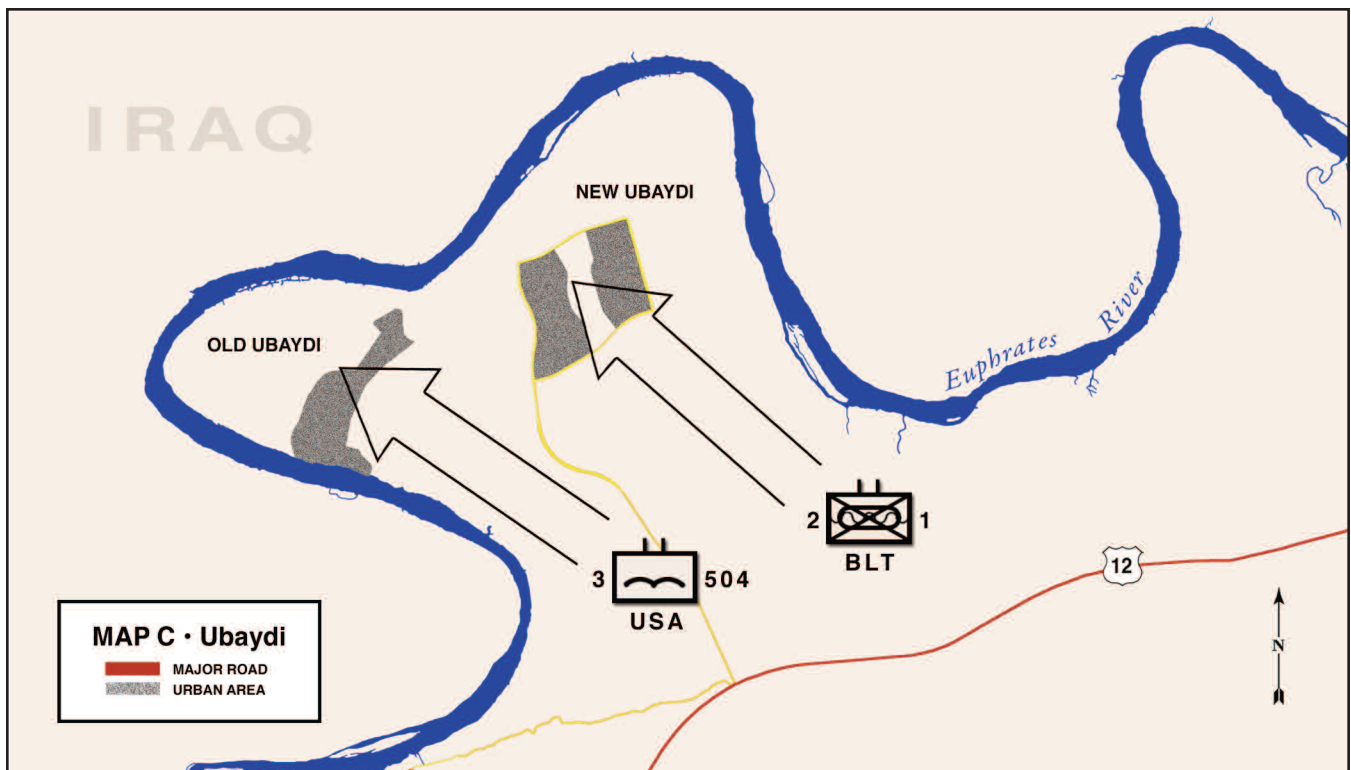


Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

The final objective of Operation Steel Curtain was the twin towns of Old Ubaydi and New Ubaydi. Beginning on 14 November 2005, the U.S. Army 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, assaulted Old Ubaydi. Meanwhile, Battalion Landing Team 2/1 began clearing operations in New Ubaydi.

Marine by his flak jacket and moved him outside the front door. He and Staff Sergeant Homer, who had just returned from Building 21, took the wounded Marine to a new casualty collection point at Building 4.⁹⁴

Mooi returned to Building 6 with the machine gun section leader, Lance Corporal Roger W. Deeds. Deeds had turned his machine gun over to a fellow Marine so that he could assist in the evacuation. The two moved into the building to remove the remaining injured Marine from the front room to outside Building 6's door. Lance Corporal Deeds provided first aid and then provided covering fire for a corpsman as he tended to the injured Marines, sending one of the evacuating Marines to his machine gunner to ensure that he had enough ammunition. Deeds continued to provide support until he was mortally wounded.⁹⁵

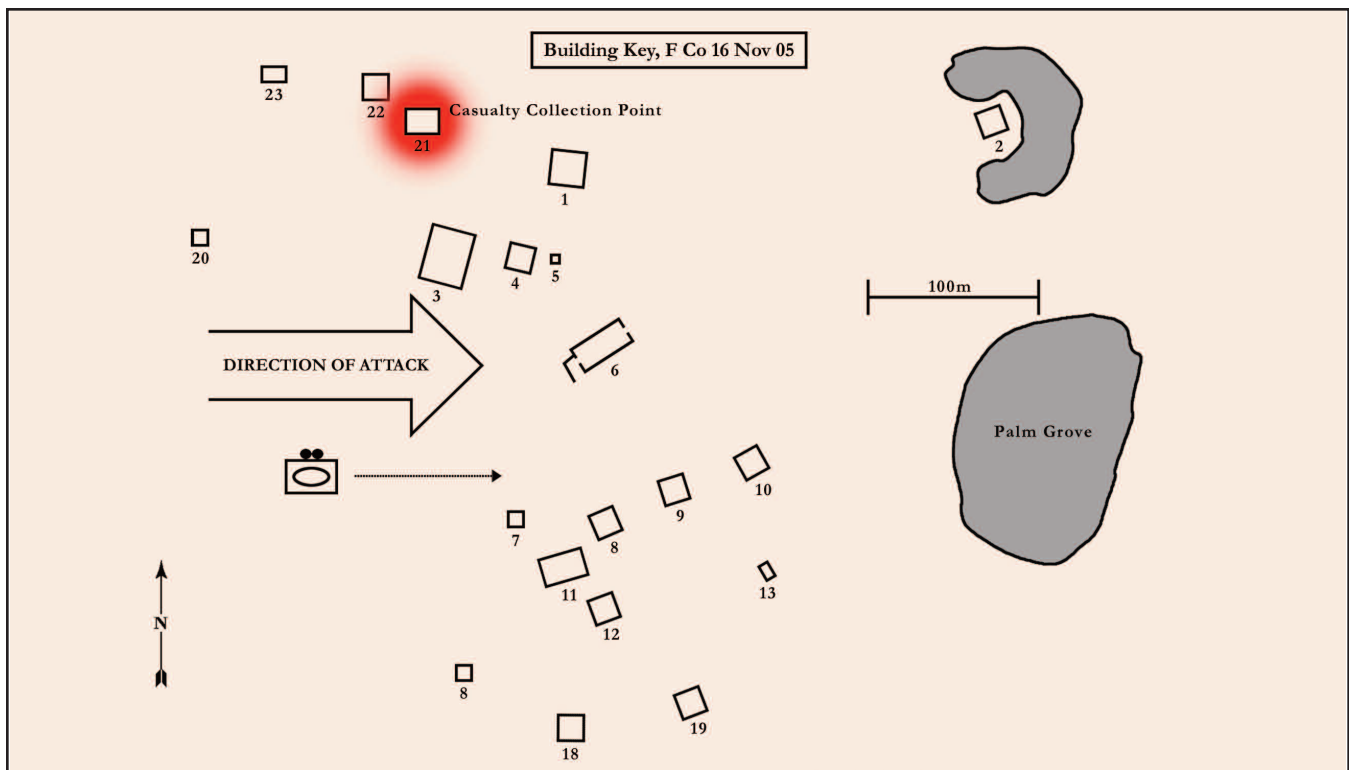
Mooi entered the building a third time with Corporal Rogers, where they linked up with Lance Corporal Lucente. The fireteam then pursued insurgents into another room (Room 3) in the building where they received a heavy volley of fire from a "mouse" hole connecting Room 3 with Room 5. While Corporal Rogers fired on an insurgent attempting to attack from the rear of the building, the volley of fire from Room 5 fatally

wounded Lucente. As he fell, Lucente handed Mooi one of his grenades. Mooi threw the grenade through the "mouse" hole, killed the insurgent gunman in the adjacent room, grabbed Lance Corporal Lucente, and brought him out of the building.⁹⁶

As Lance Corporal Mooi ran outside with Lance Corporal Lucente, Second Lieutenant McGlothlin, who had been directing the evacuation and providing covering fire from Room 2 at Building 6's entrance, was killed by grenades and gunfire. As Mooi recalled,

[Second Lieutenant McGlothlin's] asking us what's going on, and he's shooting back down the hallway and covering us while we're making our way out of the building. . . . We turn around, pass him up, and the last I hear is a couple of gunshots and a loud muffled explosion. . . . I'm pretty sure he saved us from that grenade, so—I owe him a lot.

Mooi then entered Building 6 a fourth time to recover his platoon leader's body, while Corporal Rogers provided covering fire. As Mooi fired down the long hallway that connected Building 6's front and back doors, his fireteam leader, Corporal Rogers, was mortally wounded by insurgent gunfire.⁹⁷



Courtesy of Leatherneck

On the morning of 16 November 2005, insurgents ambushed 2d Platoon, Company F, Battalion Landing Team 2/1, as it advanced through the outskirts of New Ubaydi. From positions in Buildings 6, 8, 11, and 19, insurgent fighters were able to deliver fire from a series of mutually supporting positions. Using armor and air-delivered munitions, the Marines defeated the ambush, though five Marines were killed in the firefight.

Upon successfully recovering Lieutenant McGlothlin's body and securing it outside, Mooi came under fire from an insurgent positioned at Building 6's back door. Mooi returned fire, killing the insurgent, and then went inside a fifth time, and at that moment was the only Marine in the entire building. At the bottom of the stairwell, he spotted and shot an insurgent who was throwing grenades from Building 6's roof. The lance corporal then left the building to support Marines fighting outside, where the battle had become more heated. He ensured a fellow Marine remained to provide security over Building 6's central hallway and then carried Lieutenant McGlothlin to the casualty collection point at Building 4.⁹⁸

Lance Corporal Mooi then led a hastily assembled fireteam back into Building 6 to clear the remainder of the structure (the sixth time he would enter the stronghold). The team fought their way through the building and out the back door. There, an insurgent engaged Mooi in a shootout. In the course of the engagement, Mooi's rifle was hit three times. One of the hits caused the rifle to jam, leaving Mooi defenseless before the enemy fighter. Just before the insurgent could fire he was felled by a nearby tank's M2 .50-caliber Browning machine gun. Mooi then vacated the building to allow the supporting armor to finish off insurgent resistance inside.⁹⁹

With Second Lieutenant McGlothlin mortally wounded and communications with Company F commanding officer Captain Parrish cut off, Staff Sergeant Homer had taken command of the evacuation effort. As noted, he designated Building 4 as the platoon's casualty collection point. He then immediately ran back across the 25-meter ambush zone and directed and coordinated machine gun and tank fire. To relieve the embattled fireteams of 2d Platoon's 3d Squad, Staff Sergeant Homer ordered the platoon's second squad, led by Corporal Javier Alvarez, to assist the casualty recovery efforts from Building 6 and tasked the platoon's first squad with protecting the platoon's flanks.¹⁰⁰

Corporal Alvarez immediately released his squad from tank security and led a fireteam to help 2d Platoon's besieged 3d Squad. As his team moved across 25 meters of open terrain, the rate of enemy fire increased. In the course of the assault, Corporal Alvarez was shot four times, twice in each leg. He fell to the ground, immobilized. Nevertheless, he continued to pour fire on the enemy positions, and ordered the fireteam to continue its assault, all while he was being treated for his wounds. He would change his rifle magazine three times as he provided covering fire and directed the fireteam's automatic rifleman to suppress the insurgents' fire coming from the building. As he treated Alvarez with a



Photo courtesy of Leatherneck

The leader of 2d Platoon, Company F, Battalion Landing Team 2/1, 2dLt Donald R. McGlothlin, was mortally wounded when he put himself in the line of fire to protect Marines wounded in an insurgent ambush during the fight for New Ubaydi. He posthumously received the Silver Star for his actions.

tourniquet, the fireteam leader was knocked down and rendered unconscious by enemy fire. As the team leader regained consciousness, he noticed an enemy grenade had fallen next to Corporal Alvarez's head, and immediately warned his fellow Marines of the threat. Alvarez grabbed the grenade and attempted to throw it back at the insurgents. It exploded before he could do so. The detonation was so close that it knocked the corporal unconscious. Alvarez recalled, "I don't know if it went off in my hand or within a foot of it. It was pretty close." He went on to recall,

And then it just went off and everything was black for a couple of seconds until my—I think I just went into a—because of the G-force of the grenade, it made me black out for a couple seconds and then I came back to. Everything started coming back and I started visualizing again.

As he came to, he realized the severity of the blast, and knew his hand was burning. "I lifted up my arm to see what happened, and my hand was completely missing. There was just like ragged bone sticking out, with my sleeves from my uniform black and red from blood."¹⁰¹

As Corporal Alvarez lay injured, Staff Sergeant Homer, also badly injured by shrapnel from insurgent grenades, came to Corporal Alvarez's aid, using a belt as a

tourniquet and continuing to return fire. He then brought Alvarez to the casualty collection point in Building 4. Despite his wounds, Corporal Alvarez continued to lead, ordering Marines to individually pair up with a casualty and provide medical treatment.¹⁰²

Staff Sergeant Homer crossed the field of fire four more times to rescue wounded Marines and get them to safety. At this point, he learned that Second Lieutenant McGlothlin had been killed in action inside Building 6. Homer informed Company F commander Captain Parrish of the situation, and then returned to Building 6 where he directed the final extrication of all Marines and all Marine equipment from the area. He then coordinated with Lieutenant Dowden's tanks as they engaged the insurgents' stronghold. Staff Sergeant Homer remained on the field until he was forced to get onto the last casualty evacuation vehicle.¹⁰³

Throughout the fight, Navy corpsmen provided critical medical assistance to the wounded Marines. Corpsman Third Class Jesse P. Hickey, attached to Corporal Alvarez's squad, accompanied Alvarez and his Marines as they ran across 75 meters of gunfire. Taking cover in Building 4, Corpsman Hickey responded to calls for assistance at Building 6, rushing 25 meters across the kill zone to the insurgent stronghold. Hickey assisted a wounded rifleman from the first fire team that entered the building, helping him back to the casualty collection point in Building 4. While there, Hickey provided medical assistance and also helped Marines perform "buddy aid" to injured comrades. Hickey and the other platoon corpsman then responded to another call for aid from Building 6, where wounded Marines had gathered near the doorway.¹⁰⁴

As Hickey began to treat a team leader from the platoon's 3d Squad, a grenade detonated nearby and ignited an incendiary grenade within the leader's pockets. The Marine's leg burst into flames. Despite suffering from shrapnel wounds, Corpsman Hickey disposed of the incendiary and then extinguished the Marine's burning leg. Helped by another Marine, Hickey also treated and bandaged the shrapnel wounds of a fellow corpsman. Surveying the situation, he spotted more wounded Marines near Building 6's door and went to assist them. Pronouncing three of the Marines dead, he designated them for routine evacuation and cleared weapons and equipment from the doorway to prevent them from being used by insurgent fighters. Spotting a wounded Marine just inside the doorway, Hickey carried him back to Building 4. Inside the casualty collection point, Corpsman Hickey continued to provide medical aid to the wounded Marine he carried back from Building 6, despite losing the use of his right arm from shrapnel injuries. Hickey would have continued to provide assistance had he not been ordered to



Painting by CWO-2 Michael D. Fay
Art Collection, National Museum of the Marine Corps, Triangle, VA
*LCpl Joshua R. Mooi of 2d Platoon, Company F, Battalion 2/1,
posthumously received the Navy Cross.*

board an evacuation aircraft. On board, he refused painkillers, stating that his wounded comrades needed them more than he did.¹⁰⁵

The fighting lasted about an hour. Five Marines from Battalion Landing Team 2/1 were killed in action during the ambush: Second Lieutenant Donald R. McGlothlin, Corporal Jeffrey A. Rogers, Corporal Joshua J. Ware, Lance Corporal Roger W. Deeds, and Lance Corporal John A. Lucente. Second Lieutenant McGlothlin posthumously received the Silver Star Medal. Lance Corporal Deeds and Lance Corporal Lucente posthumously earned the Bronze Star Medal with Combat "V." Corporal Rogers and Corporal Ware received the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with Combat "V." Lance Corporal Mooi received the Navy Cross. Corporal Alvarez, Staff Sergeant Homer, and Corpsman Third Class Hickey received Silver Stars.¹⁰⁶

Ten other Marines were wounded. Following the fight, physician's assistant Lieutenant James L. Anderson, USN, recalled, "Some of them required surgery. Most of them had minor shrapnel wounds. Some had fractures; we actually had some that had an amputation." The death toll would have been substantially higher but for the actions of the Marines and corpsmen who crossed open fields of fire multiple times, provided medical aid, and helped bring their comrades to the casualty collection point. Also

Navy Cross Citation for Lance Corporal Joshua R. Mooi

The President of the United States takes pleasure in presenting the NAVY CROSS to

LANCE CORPORAL
JOSHUA R. MOOI
UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS

for service as set forth in the following:

CITATION:

For extraordinary heroism as Grenadier, 2d Platoon, Company F, Battalion Landing Team 2/1, 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable), Regimental Combat Team 2, 2d Marine Division, II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward), in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in New Ubaydi, Iraq, on 16 November 2005. During Operation Steel Curtain, 21 enemy personnel engaged Lance Corporal Mooi's platoon with grenades and automatic fire from several fortified buildings. Lance Corporal Mooi repeatedly exposed himself to reinforce engaged Marines in one of the heavily fortified buildings. He attacked the enemy at close range with grenades and his rifle to personally recover four wounded Marines and destroy fierce adversaries who were determined to fight to their death. On six occasions, Lance Corporal Mooi willingly entered an ambush site to pursue the enemy and extricate injured Marines. Often alone in his efforts, he continued to destroy the enemy and rescue wounded Marines until his rifle was destroyed by enemy fire and he was ordered to withdraw. Lance Corporal Mooi's relentless and courageous actions eliminated at least four insurgents while permitting the immediate care and evacuation of more than a dozen Marines who lay critically or mortally wounded. His valiant efforts were essential to saving the lives of 10 Marines and inspired the Company to destroy 18 insurgents in the battle that ended further enemy resistance during Operation Steel Curtain. Lance Corporal Mooi's outstanding display of decisive leadership, courageous actions, and total devotion to duty reflected great credit upon him and were in keeping with the highest traditions of the Marine Corps and the United States Naval Service.



Photo by Cpl Michael R. McMaugh

A U.S. Army Sikorsky HH-60M Black Hawk medical evacuation helicopter comes in for a landing outside Ubaydi on 14 November 2005.

decisive were the actions of the U.S. Army's 571st Air Ambulance Company, which provided crucial medical evacuation support throughout Operation Steel Curtain. When needed, one of the company's UH-60 Blackhawks arrived in the combat zone within 20-25 minutes to evacuate injured Marines and soldiers. Evacuation operations were also performed by Marine UH-1Ns and CH-46Es. Captain Brian J. Gilbertson, Company F's forward air controller, received the Bronze Star with combat "V" for his efforts in both coordinating the medical evacuation and coordinating the air strikes that ultimately destroyed the insurgent strongholds southeast of Ubaydi on 16 November.¹⁰⁷

By 20 November, Battalion Landing Team 2/1 had successfully cleared the city and began to return to al Asad Air Base, where it rejoined the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit. To provide security in the Ubaydi area, Task Force 3/6 established two more battle positions, Battle Position Chapultepec and Battle Position Tripoli, alongside Battle Position Belleau Wood. To man it, Lieutenant Colonel Alford attached the 2d Platoon of Company I to his battalion's Weapons Company, creating a provisional rifle company designated "Whiskey" Company.¹⁰⁸

Throughout Operation Steel Curtain, Regimental Combat Team 2 relied on the full combat power of the Marine rifle battalion. Task Force 3/6 and Battalion Landing Team 2/1 also relied on supporting M1A1 Main Battle Tanks, LAV-25 Light Armored Vehicles, AAV-7A1 Assault Amphibian Vehicles, and close air support from the 2d Marine Aircraft Wing, as well as the U.S. Air Force, Army, and Navy. The Marines of Regimental Combat Team 2 remained careful about how they utilized their firepower. Nevertheless, Marines found many combat arms associated with so-called "conventional" combat to be useful in the counterinsurgency fight in al-Qaim. As First Lieutenant Dowden recalled, the presence of his platoon's M1A1 Abrams tanks could often calm a situation down, as insurgents realized they had no effective means for battling them or for hiding from them. Tanks provided Marines with a direct fire capability up to 4,000 meters, thus allowing them to be precise in their use of fires. Captain Pitchford, commander of Task Force 3/6's Company L, recalled, "They have a great capability of keeping the enemy a little bit concerned."¹⁰⁹

During both Operations Iron Fist and Steel Curtain, Marines made extensive use of close air support provided by both fixed-wing and rotary-wing assets to destroy



Photo by Cpl James P. Aguilar

Close air support provided by Marine fixed and rotary aviation assets was critical to the success of both Operations Iron Fist and Steel Curtain. In this image an AH-1W Super Cobra gunship from Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 369 is prepared for takeoff from Camp Al-Qaim during Operation Steel Curtain.

heavily fortified insurgent positions and also to provide casualty evacuations from the battlefield. During the first three days of Operation Steel Curtain, over 6,000 pounds of ordnance were dropped on targets in the Task Force 3/6 sector of operations alone. Support came from aircraft from the Marine Corps, Navy, Army, and Air Force. Rotary-wing assets included Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 369's UH-1N Huey and Bell AH-1W Cobra gunships, based at Camp Al Qaim. Other rotary-wing support came from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 266's CH-46 Sea Knights and Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 466's CH-53 Super Stallions. Fixed-wing support was provided by Boeing F/A-18D Hornets from Marine All Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 332 and Boeing AV-8B Harriers from Marine Attack Squadron 223 and from Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 163 (Reinforced), the aviation combat element of the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit. Support also came from U.S. Navy Northrop Grumman F-14 Tomcat fighter bombers* and U.S. Air Force Boeing

F-15E Strike Eagle bombers and General Dynamics F-16 Fighting Falcon fighters. To prevent confusion and delays, four to five communications pathways were made available to air officers in the field.¹¹⁰

The system utilized for coordinating close air support during the Second Battle of Fallujah the previous year served as the basis for Operation Steel Curtain, and air officers were briefed by veterans of that engagement. Major Mark A. Lister, air officer for Regimental Combat Team 2, was instrumental in coordinating the air support operations. Forward air controllers utilized both Type I and Type II close air support. In Type I strikes, the forward air control can see both the target and the attacking aircraft. In Type II strikes, air controllers need to see either the target or the aircraft providing support before directing an air strike. Battalion air officers ensured that the aviation assets did not come into conflict with one another in order to insure that ordnance did not fall on friendly targets.¹¹¹

The pilots encountered numerous challenges. Although the Marines had made significant efforts to clear the city of civilians, pilots nevertheless had to be careful about

*Operation Steel Curtain would be one of the last combat missions for the venerable aircraft.



Photo by LCpl Sheila M. Brooks

A Marine F/A-18D fighter-bomber from Marine All Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 332 flies above Al-Asad Air Base in 2005. Hornets were among several types of aircraft that provided close air support during Operation Steel Curtain.

causing civilian casualties and also damaging buildings of religious significance such as mosques. The close-quarter urban combat also meant that aviators needed to rely on their equipment and contact with forward air controllers to deliver their ordnance. As one noted, “There were explosions going off everywhere. It looked like fireworks on the ground. I didn’t know what was enemy, what was friendly. All I knew was my [weapons systems officer] in the back said, “That’s the target.” Aviators utilized satellite guided bombs, laser guided bombs, missiles, rockets, and aircraft mounted machine guns.¹¹²

As they had during the Second Battle of al-Fallujah, Coalition forces warned civilians in al-Qaim of the impending offensive and strongly encouraged them to evacuate the city. By the time Operation Steel Curtain began, many had left on their own accord to neighboring towns. Nevertheless, a number remained in the city. While Marines in the air and on the ground undertook every effort to avoid harming civilians, the close-quarter nature of the fight and the insurgent’s use of civilians as human shields meant that civilian casualties did occur throughout the battle for al-Qaim. A number of incidents illustrate the challenge and difficulties of fighting in such an environment. The first occurred in Husaybah toward the beginning of the operation. As Battalion Landing Team 2/1 advanced through the southern area of the city, one of its companies came under fire from insurgents positioned in a steeple atop a building. The Marines of the company called for support from First Lieutenant Dowden’s tank platoon. One of the tanks fired on the

steeple and destroyed it. Dowden recalled,

As soon as I blew the top off that building, I look down and I see what look like 20 or 30 kids start walking out of the bottom of the building, one dude with a big old white flag, and then a couple other woman that were there, and I was like ‘You’ve got to be kidding me!’ You know? You just had me freaking shoot a school!’ I was mad, I was livid, I was just shaken. And right before I get on the radio to just start screaming at these guys, I see this guy walk out, right behind all the kids, with a freaking RPK on his shoulder and a bunch of fatigues on, right behind the kids, just walk right on by, and a freaking black ski mask. And I was like...words probably not [suitable] on your little recording there.¹¹³

In another incident during the operations in Husaybah, on 8 November 2005 an Iraqi man approached a force of Marines and Iraqi Army soldiers asking them to help him rescue civilians who were trapped in the rubble of a building destroyed by a Coalition air strike the previous day. There they found two survivors, an adult male and a young girl, who were quickly sent to Camp Al Qaim for medical treatment. Five other bodies were found in the rubble. The Iraqi who first alerted the Marines to the trapped survivors informed them that insurgent forces had stormed into the home, killed two of its occupants, and then locked the remainder in a lower floor. They then used the house as a base to launch an attack against the

Marines and Iraqi Army soldiers advancing through the town. Unaware that civilians were trapped in the building, the U.S. forces called in an air strike to destroy the insurgent stronghold.¹¹⁴

A similar incident to one faced by First Lieutenant Dowden occurred on 15 November 2005. During the morning, Marines from Battalion Landing Team 2/1 received fire from insurgents positioned in a building during their assault on New Ubaydi. The Marines called in an air strike against the position, though it had limited impact. However, the shooting stopped following the strike, and two men carrying white flags ran out of the building and entered another structure nearby. Fifteen civilians, “including women, children, and elderly,” subsequently exited the building formerly held by the insurgent fighters.¹¹⁵

Many of al-Qaim’s inhabitants found themselves caught in the middle of the fight between the Coalition and the insurgency, and even a single family could convey divergent attitudes. In November, an al-Qaim resident named Abdul Aziz told *Washington Post* reporter Ellen Knickmeyer of an air strike that killed his daughter. He told her, “I don’t blame the Americans. I blame Zarqawi and his group, who were using my daughter’s house as a shelter.” His grandson was more direct in assigning blame to the Americans, however: “She was killed in the bombing by the Americans.”¹¹⁶

Insurgents often killed civilians and blamed the deaths on the U.S. forces. Townspeople were frequently pressured and intimidated by insurgent fighters to blame Americans for all civilian deaths. The Marines of both Battalion Landing Team 2/1 and Task Force 3/6 were all too aware that the efforts to clear the district would come to naught if they alienated and angered the local populace and consequently, undertook every effort to be discriminating and careful with their use of fires. Tragically, the fog of war, the battle’s urban setting, the close-quarter nature of the fighting, and the insurgents’ use of human shields meant that civilians were killed during the operation.¹¹⁷

Operation Steel Curtain came to conclusion on 22 November 2005. Some 200 insurgents were killed in action over the course of the clearing operations. With Battalion Landing Team 2/1 returning to al Asad, the task of providing security in the region fell to Task Force 3/6 and its attached Iraqi forces. With the battalion stretched to the limit across the al-Qaim District, the coming weeks proved to be as decisive for the overall success of the al-Qaim campaign as the clearing operations conducted during the opening weeks of November.

Securing the Gains of Steel Curtain

By the end of November 2005, Task Force 3/6’s battle positions stretched from the Syrian border to Ubaydi. Along with Camp Gannon at Husaybah and Camp Al Qaim to the district’s south, the battalion also maintained two positions in Husaybah (Beirut and Hue City), three in Karabilah (Tarawa, Guadalcanal, and Chosin), two in Sadah (Iwo Jima, Khe Sahn), and three in the Ubaydi region (Tripoli, Belleau Wood, and Chapultepec). All were manned by platoon-sized formations from the battalion’s rifle companies (I, K, L, and “Whiskey”). On the other side of the Euphrates were three more positions manned by light armored reconnaissance Marines and assault amphibian Marines: Guam, Tinian, and Saipan.

The battalion’s primary objective was to ensure that the 15 December national parliamentary elections took place in a safe and secure environment. Achieving a lasting solution to the security problems in the region meant that clearing the district, as difficult and as costly as those operations had been, would not be enough. The district would have to be held using constant patrols, forward battle positions, and partnering with both the Iraqi Army and local police forces. The battalion’s resources were limited however, and by stretching his platoons over so large a region, Lieutenant Colonel Alford faced the possibility that one of his unit’s formations could be overrun by a focused insurgent attack. Provisioning the battle positions would require, in the battalion commander’s own words, acts of “sheer willpower.”¹¹⁸

As noted above, the battle positions were located within the major population centers of the district. The key to their success was forging working partnerships with Iraqi forces. “I was death if I caught a lieutenant that had a squad out without Iraqis with them,” Colonel Alford recalled. Iraqi Army units had fought alongside both 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, and Battalion Landing Team 2/1 as they advanced through the al-Qaim District. The Iraqis fought hard and did not run, as had happened during the First Battle for al-Fallujah. However, the fact that the soldiers of the 1st Brigade, 1st Division, were predominantly Shi’a Iraqis presented an obstacle to providing security to the majority Sunni region during the final phases of the al-Qaim campaign. Since the American invasion, Iraqis in al-Anbar Province had perceived the United States as an occupying power seeking to disenfranchise the country’s Sunni populace and allow them to be placed under the domination of the country’s majority Shi’a. The presence of the predominantly Shi’a army in al-Anbar only reinforced this perception. For many in the province, the presence of the Iraqi Army did



Illustration by Vincent J. Martinez

By December 2005 Task Force 3/6 had spread its units in battle positions throughout the al-Qaim District. Company L manned positions in Husaybah while Company I manned positions in eastern Karabilah. Company K manned positions in western Karabilah and Sadah. “Whiskey” Company manned the positions in and around Ubaydi. Meanwhile, a company of light armored reconnaissance Marines patrolled the north bank of the Euphrates.

not necessarily place an “Iraqi” face on operations but a “Shi’a” face, creating the impression that two occupying armies were present, the American and the Shi’a.¹¹⁹

Realizing this state of affairs, Alford and his cultural advisor, Major Edwin O. Rueda, set about incorporating Sunnis in security operations in the region. To accomplish this they pursued two interconnected courses of action. First, the overall Coalition commander in Iraq, General George M. Casey Jr., USA, authorized the creation of a new Iraqi brigade. Second, Alford forged an alliance with the tribes of the region. Doing so meant that Alford would be able to draw on Sunni recruits for the brigade, paramilitary organizations raised by U.S. Army Special Forces known as the Desert Protectors, and the local police force.¹²⁰

As noted earlier, five tribal groups dominated the al-Qaim region: the Abu Mahal, the Karbuli, the al-Jurghafe, the Ubaidi, and the al-Salmi. “What Saddam always did was give all the money to one tribe, usually the Abu Mahal, and they’d oppress the other ones,” Alford recalled. “So we treated all the tribes the same. That was new, that was [Major Rueda’s] suggestion to me.” Shortly after the completion of Operation Steel

Curtain, Alford and the leaders of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines began to meet with the local sheikhs. However, the battalion leadership committed itself to the goal of only forging an agreement with all five tribes, thus avoiding the mistake of repeating Ba’athist policies of pitting different tribes against one another. At the first meeting however, representatives of only three of the tribes attended. In Alford’s words, “I picked my shit up and I walked out.” He subsequently told the district mayor “when you get all five tribes, call me.” At another meeting held the following week, four of the five tribes sent representatives. Once again, Alford refused to deal unless all five attended. The following week, representatives of all five tribes attended a meeting and subsequently forged a cooperative arrangement with the Marines of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines.¹²¹

Among the most notable outcomes of the tribal alliance was the 3d Brigade, 7th Division. The unit was comprised largely of Iraqis from the Abu Mahal. Furthermore, General Casey guaranteed that the force would remain in al-Qaim for two years and would not be deployed to another part of Iraq, as had been the norm with other units of the Iraqi Army. The approach marked a general

shift in how the Coalition had been fighting the Iraq War since the eruption of the insurgency in 2003.

Since the fall of the Ba'ath regime in April of 2003, a tension had existed in America's postwar policies in Iraq. L. Paul Bremer's Coalition Provisional Authority sought to dissolve all remnants of the Ba'athist state, a vision best represented by the sweeping measures to dismiss Ba'athists from government organizations and dissolve the Iraqi Army.¹²² Almost from the beginning, however, U.S. commanders in the field found themselves having to modify this approach and adapt to realities on the ground. In Mosul, the U.S. Army 101st Airborne Division commanded by Major General David H. Petraeus, reinitiated local governance as quickly as possible, with little change to the local social structure of the region. Following the First Battle of al-Fallujah, Lieutenant General James T. Conway stood up the paramilitary Fallujah Brigade, against Bremer's wishes, as a means of providing local security. While the effort ultimately failed to provide a lasting solution in al-Fallujah, it nevertheless demonstrated that the new state structures being created to take the place of the old regime were largely inadequate in the face of the aggressive insurgency. Consequently, both Marines and soldiers looked for alternative means to bring stability and fight the insurgent forces. Frequently, this required looking for assistance from traditional tribal leaders who were answerable neither to state institutions nor the government in Baghdad.¹²³

Doing so ran a multitude of risks. Many of the tribal leaders represented anti-modernist, often anti-democratic elements within Iraqi political culture. Sheikh Sabah of the Abu Mahal tribe frankly told Marines during an interview in 2009, "We are not a democratic nation, and democracy does not suit us at present. It's going to take 10, 15, to 20 years for the people to understand the meaning of democracy."¹²⁴ Despite these attitudes, the Marines in al-Anbar began to realize that stability could not be achieved unless they worked to empower these local forces and divide them from the insurgents. "I knew that we were fighting this war wrong," Alford noted. By creating an Iraqi Army unit that would be posted in the region, made up predominantly of individuals from that region, 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, and the Coalition command created a force that could potentially strengthen local and regional interests at the expense of national unity. However, in doing so, both Alford and Casey demonstrated a keen understanding of the cultural and social elements of al-Anbari society and how those elements could be utilized to provide better security and defeat al-Qaeda forces in the region. Locals noticed outsiders, provided intelligence, and helped build trust between Iraqis and Americans.¹²⁵

Creating army and police units also allowed the Marines of Task Force 3/6 to weaken the informal militias and other independent security organizations operating within al-Qaim District. While organizations such as the Katab al-Hamsa were opposed to al-Qaeda in Iraq, they nevertheless represented a source of instability and were unaccountable to the local government in the region. Furthermore, the mistrust that existed among the tribal groups in al-Qaim was only exacerbated by the presence of armed elements loyal to specific tribes, in particular the powerful Abu Mahals. Tribal leaders frequently moved about the district with armed escorts brandishing weapons, often in pickups laden with heavy weapons. The armed groups also aggravated tribal feuds. For example, in December the leader of the Salmani tribe accused the Katab al-Hamsa of threatening and targeting him and his tribe.¹²⁶

Shortly after the completion of Operation Steel Curtain, Lieutenant Colonel Alford declared, "We will not allow a militia to operate in this area. If you are not a part of the Iraqi Army or the U.S. Marines, you will not be allowed on the streets with weapons." He went on to state to a reporter, "I'm going to stomp on their livers here in a couple of days if they don't cut it out." Marines recognized that local rivalries, local interests, and local customs played a significant role in shaping the insurgency. Alford also recognized that the tribes held the key to authority in the district. At the same time though, he knew that a lasting solution could only come if official, state-sanctioned organizations held a monopoly on the use of force and the ability to provide security.¹²⁷

Many of the sheikhs who would later align themselves with the Coalition in 2006 and 2007 noted that the initial inspiration for what would be called the "Anbar Awakening" could be traced to the events that occurred in al-Qaim in fall of 2005 and winter of 2006. "At the beginning of 2006, the Abu Mahal tribe in al-Qaim, that was the first spark, between Abu Mahal and al-Qaeda," noted Sheikh Ali Hatim Abd al-Razzaq Ali al-Sulayman al-Assafi, head of the National Salvation Front political party.¹²⁸ In 2009, the vice chairman of the Anbar Provincial Council, Kamis Ahmad Abban al-Alwani, noted that the Awakening's origins could be traced to al-Qaim. "The first time they started killing the terrorists was in the al-Qaim area, in the Abu Mahal and Karabla tribes. These tribes resisted and killed the terrorists in that area only. They had support from the national guard and the army over there."¹²⁹ Colonel Said Muhammed Muad al-Fahadawi, director general of Iraqi Special Weapons and Tactics concurred with this assessment: "Going back to the Awakening—to be honest and for history—the Awakening started in al-Qaim in the middle of 2005. The Abu Mahal tribe revolted and started to awaken."¹³⁰



Photo by LCpl Sheila M. Brooks

Iraqi citizens line up at a polling site in Husaybah for the national parliamentary elections on 15 December 2005.

The Marines laid out their battle positions in order to better align themselves with the particular tribal groups in al-Qaim District. Lieutenant Colonel Alford subsequently partnered one of his companies with each of the five major tribes. Company L aligned itself with the Albu Mahal in the Husaybah area. Company I was coupled with the Karbulis in Karabilah. Company K was given responsibility for the al-Salmani tribe in Sadah. “Whiskey” Company was linked with the Ubaidi tribe in the towns of Ubaydi. The al-Jurghafe tribe, predominant in the area linking Sadah and Ubaydi, was placed under the responsibility of Task Force 3/6’s assault amphibian platoon. This division did not align perfectly, as no one area of al-Qaim District was homogenous, and members of all the different tribes lived side by side. Thus, the platoons at the various battle positions throughout the district were tasked with representing the interests of the various tribes within the larger areas of responsibilities of each rifle company.¹³¹

The results of partnering and living among the Iraqis in al-Qaim became apparent fairly quickly. For example, the platoons of Company K worked so closely with the local Iraqis that they began to identify themselves with the concerns, issues, and attitudes of the dominant tribe near their particular battle position. The company’s 3d

Platoon was given responsibility for the Karbulis; 1st Platoon for the Albu Mahal in Sadah; and Weapons Platoon, operating from Battle Position Iwo Jima, was responsible for the Salmoni tribe. Captain Heatherman recalled, “The cool thing was that [my platoon commanders] started to argue amongst each other in defense of their tribe . . . it was perfect, exactly what I wanted.” As a result, the company was able to acquire a detailed and accurate picture of the social relationships within its area of responsibility. Ultimately, the constant presence of Marines in the district’s towns restricted the insurgents’ freedom of movement and their ability to impose their will upon the region’s populace. As more time passed, insurgents could no longer know who in the districts they could trust to support them and who in the area would turn them over to the Marines.¹³²

On 15 December, Iraqis went to the polls to vote in the first national elections to be held under the new constitution. To prepare, the Iraqi government declared 13–15 December a national holiday, closed the borders to all traffic, save vehicles shipping in food, fuel, and medical supplies, and instituted a curfew from 13–17 December. The turnout was far more substantial than it had been during the referendum vote held two months before. An official in eastern Karabilah estimated there were over 3,000

voters, though the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, believed this number to be a little high. Throughout al-Anbar Province, Sunni turnout was nevertheless far greater than in previous polls, with 75 percent of the electorate, or some 12 million Iraqis, casting a vote. The numbers were so high that reserve ballots had to be utilized. The election ultimately produced a Coalition government led by Nouri al-Maliki.¹³³

The battalion remained in al-Qaim until its relief in place by 1st Battalion, 7th Marines. The months were marked by continuous patrols, joint operations alongside Iraqi Army and local security forces, and constant interaction with the district's population. While this period focused on stability operations, the region nevertheless remained a dangerous place. On 14 February 2006, Corporal Rusty L. Washam and Lance Corporal Matthew R. Barnes were killed in a roadside bombing. The two Marines, serving with Headquarters and Service Company on a battalion personnel security detail, were killed when their Humvee was destroyed by a suicide bomber.¹³⁴

3d Battalion, 6th Marines, began its return to the United States in mid-March as elements of the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, relieved its companies. Company L returned to Camp Lejeune on 20 March and Company I returned the following day. The remainder of the battalion returned to the United States on 23 March. In the words of the battalion's command chronology, "The Marines were very much torn between getting home to friends and loved ones as soon as possible, and leaving the city that they had put so much effort into for the previous seven months."¹³⁵

Conclusion

Following its fall 2005 deployment to al-Qaim, the 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, declared that "TF 3/6 was able to eradicate the insurgency in their AO.* The al Qaim region is no longer a stronghold for insurgents or foreign fighters in Iraq. The actions of TF 3/6 from October to December of 2005 have made it possible for security and stability operations (SASO) to take place in the al Anbar Province for the first time since the end of the war."¹³⁶

It is difficult to determine exact Coalition casualty figures for the operations in al-Qaim. Coalition casualty cards often did not specify the specific location where soldiers were killed. Thus, Marines killed in al-Qaim were frequently listed as having been killed in "al-Anbar Province." The reporting information also listed the ultimate place of death (such as Bethesda Naval Medical Hospital) and not the place where a mortal wound had been inflicted. Nevertheless, the al-Qaim operations

sparked a general downward trend in Coalition deaths in the area following 2005. In 2004, a little over a dozen Coalition soldiers were killed in action serving in al-Qaim. In 2005, over 30 were killed in action in one of the towns of the al-Qaim District. In 2006, fewer than 10 were killed in action. When the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, relieved 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, in March 2006 the region was significantly more stable and secure in comparison to the preceding two years.¹³⁷

The Marine Corps' operations in the al-Qaim District from the fall of 2005 into the winter of 2006 would prove significant for a number of reasons. First and foremost, they successfully established a secure environment throughout the region and disrupted the insurgency's ability to use the area as a logistical hub. Neither Operation Iron Fist nor Operation Steel Curtain destroyed the insurgency, but they certainly delivered it a severe blow and the security operations conducted from December into the first months of 2006 prevented the region from once again reverting to insurgent control. Significantly, Lieutenant Colonel Nicholas F. Marano, commander of 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, pursued the same overall approach to security operations as Lieutenant Colonel Alford did with his own battalion, deploying his forces throughout the battle positions established the previous year. From these, the battalion's Marines continued to conduct foot patrols and ensure that they interacted with the local populace. One example of the effectiveness of this particular approach was in the high number of improvised explosives detected and detonated by Marines. The majority of these were uncovered due to phoned-in intelligence from al-Qaim locals.¹³⁸

Beyond establishing security in the region, the operations in al-Qaim served as a model for future Marine Corps operations throughout the rest of al-Anbar Province. In late 2006, the Marines of 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, under the command of Lieutenant Colonel William M. Journey, confronted the rapidly collapsing situation in ar-Ramadi, al-Anbar's capital city. In preparing for his battalion's deployment, Journey used 3d Battalion, 6th Marines' al-Qaim operations as a model. Sitting together on Alford's front porch at Camp Lejeune, the two discussed Alford's experiences in western Iraq. It was a testament to how lessons and experiences could be quickly transmitted across the Marine Corps' close-knit organization. As Alford himself commented later, "Our families, our friends, we've spent many, many hours over the last twenty years drinking beer together and, on occasion, sipping a glass of whiskey talking about this stuff . . . that's a unique thing about the Marine Corps that you need to understand."¹³⁹

*Area of Operations

Lieutenant Colonel Journey utilized many of the same tactics and techniques as Alford had. He was afforded considerable latitude and flexibility by his commander, Colonel Sean B. MacFarland, USA, of the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division. Like Lieutenant Colonel Alford, Journey believed that the “key terrain is the population and in securing the population, i.e., improving the security and stability.” Journey also integrated Iraqi soldiers within his own battalion at the platoon level, creating what he termed a “combined action battalion.” Marines lived in ar-Ramadi itself in an array of combat outposts from which they conducted constant foot patrols. Furthermore, 1st Battalion, 6th Marines, demonstrated to the residents of ar-Ramadi that the Marines would not be leaving the city.¹⁴⁰

Another approach developed by 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, in al-Qaim also had long-reaching consequences: cooperation with the local tribes. In surveying the cultural landscape of al-Qaim District, the Marines of Alford’s battalion quickly discerned that important fissures existed within what were believed to be insurgent forces. It soon became apparent that the “red-on-red” fighting was between the jihadist insurgent forces and local militias affiliated with the tribes of the region. Upon discovering this, the Marines of 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, successfully exploited the divisions between local tribal fighters and foreign fighters to their advantage. Able to draw on local intelligence and then build security forces using local Iraqis, the Marines succeeded in isolating the insurgent forces and winning the trust of the populace. In short, the Marines transformed al-Qaim into an environment hostile to the insurgency.

This approach, carried out on a much larger scale, would form the foundation for the U.S. campaign to defeat the insurgency throughout al-Anbar Province. As noted above, many of the leaders of the al-Anbar Awakening movement cited al-Qaim and the Abu Mahal tribe as the initial inspiration for their own decisions to enlist with the Marines and fight al-Qaeda in Iraq. Between 2006 and 2008, both I MEF (Forward) under Major General Richard C. Zilmer and II MEF (Forward) under Major General Walter E. Gaskin Sr. would work alongside al-Anbar’s tribes in a cooperative campaign against al-Qaeda in Iraq. As in al-Qaim, tribal sheiks encouraged their members to enlist in the police forces, insuring that Iraqis from the communities of al-Anbar would be given responsibility for security and acquiring intelligence.

The keys to the Marines’ success in al-Qaim lay in the critical thinking skills of their leaders, and their common sense, patience, and persistence as they discerned a more accurate picture of the fighting in the region. At the same time, the Marines at al-Qaim demonstrated an aggressive stance toward the insurgents and did not hesitate to utilize the full combat power of the Marine Corps’ rifle battalion to defeat them in battle. While the Marines focused on minimizing civilian casualties and protecting the populace, they were also aware of the consequences that could ensue if they relied on the indiscriminate use of firepower in a cramped urban environment. Still, they readily drew upon close air support, heavy armor, and firepower in the battles against the insurgent forces. The al-Qaim campaign thus attests to the adaptability and effectiveness of Marine Corps forces in counterinsurgency operations.



Photo by Cpl Ken Melton

A Marine from 2d Platoon, 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance, breaks down a door while on patrol in Husaybah during Operation Steel Curtain.

APPENDIX A

The Battle of Al-Qaim September 2005 – March 2006

II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) (Multinational Force-West)

MajGen Stephen T. Johnson

13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable)

Col James K. LaVine

2d Marine Division

MajGen Richard A. Huck

| | |
|---|----------------------------|
| 2d Marines (Regimental Combat Team 2) | Col Stephen W. Davis |
| 3d Battalion, 6th Marines (Task Force 3/6) | LtCol Julian D. Alford |
| 2d Battalion, 1st Marines (BLT 2/1)* | LtCol Robert G. Oltman |
| 1st Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion | LtCol Robert R. Kosid |
| 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment (U.S. Army) | LtCol Larry Swift, USA |
| 4th Squadron, 14th Cavalry (U.S. Army) | LtCol Mark A. Freitag, USA |

2d Marine Aircraft Wing (Forward)

BGen Robert E. Milstead

| | |
|--|-------------------------|
| Marine Aircraft Group 26 | Col David J. Mollahan |
| Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 369 | LtCol Thomas D. Weidley |
| Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 163 (Reinforced)** | LtCol Jeffrey K. Mosher |
| Marine Medium Helicopter Squadron 266 | LtCol Joseph E. George |
| Marine Heavy Helicopter Squadron 466 | LtCol John H. Celigoy |
| Marine All-Weather Fighter Attack Squadron 332 | LtCol David A. Wilbur |
| Marine Attack Squadron 223 | LtCol Andrew G. Shorter |
| 571st Air Ambulance Company (U.S. Army) | Maj Eric J. Rude, USA |

2d Force Service Support Group (Forward)

BGen Ronald S. Coleman

| | |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|
| Combat Logistics Battalion 2 | LtCol Bruce E. Nickle |
|------------------------------|-----------------------|

*Under operational control of Regimental Combat Team 2, from 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable)

**Under operational control of 2d Marine Aircraft Wing, from 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit (Special Operations Capable). Squadron was reinforced with AV-8B Harriers from Marine Attack Squadron 211.

APPENDIX B

3d Battalion, 6th Marines Staff List September 2005 – March 2006

Commanding Officer

LtCol Julian D. Alford

Executive Officer

Maj Toby D. Patterson

Sergeant Major

SgtMaj Scott L. Theakston

Principal Staff Officers

Administrative Officer (S-1)

Intelligence Officer (S-2)

Operations Officer (S-3)

Air Officer

Logistics Officer (S-4)

Communications Officer (S-6)

2dLt Jeremy M. Nelson

Capt Eric D. Marshall

Maj Christopher P. O'Connor

Capt Scott A. Cormier

Capt Kirk M. Spangenberg

1stLt Eric J. Muckin

Subordinate Unit Commanders

Headquarters and Service Company

Company I

Company K

Company L

Weapons Company

Capt Justin J. Ansel, Jr.

Capt Conlon D. Carabine

Capt Brendan G. Heatherman

Capt Richard H. Pitchford

Capt Clinton A. Culp

APPENDIX C

Battalion Landing Team 2/1 Staff List September 2005 – March 2006

Commanding Officer
LtCol Robert G. Oltman

Executive Officer
Maj John W. Hatala

Sergeant Major
SgtMaj Sylvester D. Daniels

Principal Staff Officers

| | |
|------------------------------|-------------------------|
| Administrative Officer (S-1) | 1stLt James G. Van Zant |
| Intelligence Officer (S-2) | Capt Daniel M. Buckland |
| Operations Officer (S-3) | Maj Kyle M. Stoddard |
| Air Officer | Capt Erik J. Bartelt |
| Logistics Officer (S-4) | Capt Thomas D. Parmiter |
| Communications Officer (S-6) | 1stLt Kevin G. Graves |

Subordinate Unit Commanders

| | |
|--|--|
| Headquarters and Service Company | Capt Ronald L. Lobato |
| Company E | Maj Ramon J. Mendoza Jr. (KIA 14Nov05) 1stLt Nathan B. Chandler Capt Kemper A. Jones |
| Company F | Capt Ross A. Parrish |
| Company G | Maj Edward C. Greeley |
| Weapons Company | Capt Dale A. Highberger |
| Combined Anti-Armor Team Red | 2dLt Richard W. Mott |
| Combined Anti-Armor Team Blue | 2dLt Daniel E. Grainger |
| 81mm Platoon | 1stLt Benjamin P. Wagner |
| Battery C, 1st Battalion, 11th Marines | Capt Richard A. Royse |
| 1st Platoon, Company E, 3d Assault Amphibian Battalion | 1stLt John T. Bidwell |
| 2d Platoon, Company B, 1st Light Armored Recon Battalion | 1stLt Duncan T. Varda |
| 1st Platoon, Company A, 1st Combat Engineer Battalion | 1stLt Daniel J. Ponzo |
| 2d Platoon, Company D, 1st Tank Battalion | 1stLt. Matthew D. Dowden |
| 3d Platoon, Company A, 1st Reconnaissance Battalion | 1stLt Brad N. Fultz |

APPENDIX D

Chronology of Major Events Al-Qaim Campaign

| | |
|-----------------------------|--|
| April–May 2003 | Operation Iraqi Freedom: Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime collapses in the face of a rapid Coalition assault into Iraq. |
| 12 May 2003 | The United States establishes the Coalition Provisional Authority to administer a post-Saddam Iraq and lay the foundation for a new democratic state. |
| 20 March 2004 | I Marine Expeditionary Force is stood up as the Multinational Force-West (al-Anbar Province) in western Iraq. |
| 31 March–30 April 2004 | First Battle of al-Fallujah. |
| 14 April 2004 | Elements of 3d Battalion, 7th Marines, ambushed by insurgents in the al-Qaim District. Corporal Jason L. Dunham sacrifices himself to save the lives of fellow Marines in the fighting, an act for which he will be posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. |
| 16 October 2004 | A car bomb kills a Marine, two soldiers, and their translator in the al-Qaim District. |
| 8 November–23 December 2004 | Second Battle of al-Fallujah. |
| 27 March 2005 | II Marine Expeditionary Force (Forward) relieves I Marine Expeditionary Force as the Multinational Force-West. |
| 11 April 2005 | Suicide bombers attack a U.S. facility in al-Qaim. |
| 7 May–14 May 2005 | A task force from Regimental Combat Team 2 conducts Operation Matador to neutralize insurgent activity in the al-Qaim District. |
| 17 June–22 June 2005 | Regimental Combat Team 2 conducts Operation Spear against insurgent forces in al-Qaim. |
| 23 August–10 September 2005 | 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, relieves 3d Battalion, 2d Marines, as the principal Marine Corps unit posted to the al-Qaim District. The reinforced battalion is designated Task Force 3/6. |
| 1 October–5 October 2005 | Task Force 3/6 conducts Operation Iron Fist to clear the towns of Sadah and eastern Karabilah of insurgent activity. |
| October 2005 | Task Force 3/6 establishes battle positions in Sadah and eastern Karabilah. |
| 15 October 2005 | Task Force 3/6 provides security during the referendum for the new Iraqi constitution. |
| 1 November–2 November 2005 | Battalion Landing Team 2/1 (ground combat element of the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit) is placed under operational control of Regimental Combat Team 2 and deploys to al-Qaim. |

September 2005 – March 2006

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 5 November–9 November 2005 | First Phase of Operation Steel Curtain: Task Force 3/6 and Battalion Landing Team 2/1 clear and secure Husaybah. |
| 10 November–13 November 2005 | Second Phase of Operation Steel Curtain: Task Force 3/6 and Battalion Landing Team 2/1 clear and secure western Karabilah. |
| 14 November–22 November 2005 | Final Phase of Operation Steel Curtain: Battalion Landing Team 2/1 and the U.S. Army's 1st Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment clear Old Ubaydi and New Ubaydi. |
| 16 November 2005 | 2d Platoon, Company F, Battalion Landing Team 2/1 ambushed by insurgents in New Ubaydi. Five Marines are killed in action during the attack. Lance Corporal Joshua R. Mooi crosses the ambush zone six times to rescue fellow Marines. He receives the Navy Cross for his actions. Four other Marines receive the Silver Star for their actions during the engagement. |
| 20 November 2005 | Battalion Landing Team 2/1 returns to the 13th Marine Expeditionary Unit. |
| 16 November 2005–24 March 2006 | Task Force 3/6 conducts security and stability operations from battle positions arrayed across the al-Qaim District. |
| 15 December 2005 | Task Force 3/6 provides security during the Iraqi parliamentary elections. |
| 5 January 2006 | General Robert Magnus, Assistant Commandant of the Marine Corps, visits Task Force 3/6 in al-Qaim. |
| 29 January 2006 | Donald C. Winter, Secretary of the Navy, visits Task Force 3/6 and observes operations in al-Qaim. |
| 24 March 2006 | 3d Battalion, 6th Marines, completes relief in place with 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, and returns to the United States. |

Notes

1. See Lieutenant Colonel Kenneth W. Estes, *U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004–2005: Into the Fray* (Washington DC: History Division, United States Marine Corps, 2011), 1–4, hereafter Estes, *Into the Fray*; Intvw with Lieutenant General James T. Conway, 21 June 2005 and 7 July 2005, hereafter Conway intvw, in Chief Warrant Officer-4 Timothy S. McWilliams and Lieutenant Colonel Kurtis P. Wheeler, eds., *Al-Anbar Awakening, Volume I: American Perspectives, U.S. Marines and Counterinsurgency in Iraq, 2004–2009*, (Quantico: Marine Corps University Press, 2009), 42–43, hereafter cited as *Al-Anbar Awakening, Volume I*.
2. Estes, *Into the Fray*, 19. Austin G. Long, “The Anbar Awakening,” hereafter Long, “The Anbar Awakening,” in *U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004–2008: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, ed. Nicholas J. Schlosser (Washington DC: History Division, United States Marine Corps, 2010), 179–93, hereafter *U.S. Marines in Iraq 2004–2008: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*; Ahmed S. Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency in Iraq* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), hereafter Hashim, *Insurgency and Counter-Insurgency*.
3. Intvw with General James N. Mattis, 17 June 2009, hereafter Mattis intvw, in *Al-Anbar Awakening: Volume I*, 22–28; Conway intvw, 43; Thomas E. Ricks, *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 313–20, hereafter Ricks, *Fiasco*.
4. Estes, *Into the Fray*, 31–52; Major Alfred B. Connable, “The Massacre That Wasn’t,” in *U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004–2008: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, 75–81; Conway intvw, 49–54; Mattis intvw, 34–37; Bing West, *No True Glory: A Frontline Account of the Battle for Fallujah* (New York: Bantam Books, 2005), hereafter West, *No True Glory*; Carter A. Malkasian, “Signaling Resolve, Democratization, and the First Battle of Fallujah,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 29 (June 2006): 423–52; Lieutenant General Ricardo S. Sanchez, *Wiser in Battle: A Soldier’s Story* (New York: Harper Collins, 2008), 333.
5. Estes, *Into the Fray*, 53–78; West, *No True Glory*; Jason Burke, “Hidden War on Border with Syria: As Scores Are Killed in Northern Town and Fallujah Ceasefire is Strained, Jostling for Power Intensifies,” *The Observer*, 25 April 2004; Lieutenant General John F. Sattler and Lieutenant Colonel Daniel H. Wilson, “Al Fajr: The Battle of Fallujah, Part II,” in *U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004–2008: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, 95–103; Jonathon F. Keiler, “Who Won the Battle of Fallujah?,” in *U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004–2008: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, 105–109.
6. Estes, *Into the Fray*, 87–104; David Cloud and Greg Jaffe, *The Fourth Star: Four Generals and the Epic Struggle for the Future of the United States Army* (New York: Crown Publishers, 2009); Carter A. Malkasian, “Counterinsurgency in Iraq: May 2003–January 2007,” hereafter Malkasian, “Counterinsurgency in Iraq,” in *U.S. Marines in Iraq, 2004–2008: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, 15–27; Malkasian, “A Thin Blue Line in the Sand,” *Democracy: A Journal of Ideas* 5 (Summer 2007), 48–58.
7. Estes, *Into the Fray*, 93; Captain Scott Cuomo, “The Wild, Wild West: Iraqi Lessons for Afghanistan,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 93 (2009): 22–30, hereafter Cuomo, “The Wild, Wild West.”
8. Colonel Stephen W. Davis intvw with Lieutenant Colonel David A. Benhoff, 20 May 2005, Marine Corps Historical Center (MCHC), hereafter Davis intvw.
9. Bing West, *The Strongest Tribe: War, Politics, and the Endgame in Iraq* (New York: Random House, 2008), 98–102; Peter Spiegel, “‘Oil Spot’ Replaces ‘Whack-a-Mole’ Strategy,” *Financial Times*, 30 November 2005; Mark Moyar, *A Question of Command: Counterinsurgency from the Civil War to Iraq* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 233–34, hereafter Moyar, *A Question of Command*; Ricks, *Fiasco*, 419–24; Major Brendan G. Heatherman, intvw with author, 28 June 2011, hereafter Heatherman intvw.
10. Cuomo, “The Wild, Wild West,” 22–24.
11. For a description of Camp Gannon and for quotation, see Major Richard H. Pitchford intvw with the author, 23 August 2011, hereafter Pitchford intvw. See also Sergeant B.J.C. Bookwalter intvw with Lieutenant Colonel Craig H. Covert, 19 November 2005 (MCHC), hereafter Bookwalter intvw.
12. Edwin O. Rueda, “Tribalism in the Al-Anbar Province,” *Marine Corps Gazette* 90 (2006): 11.
13. Faleh Abdul Jabar, “Sheikhs and Ideologues: Deconstruction and Reconstruction of Tribes under Patrimonial

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14. Ibid.
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The logotype reproduced on the back cover has as its major element the oldest military insignia in continuous use in the United States. It first appeared, as shown here, on Marine Corps buttons adopted in 1804. With the stars changed to five points, the device has continued on Marine Corps buttons to the present day.

A photograph of a Marine in a UH-1N Huey helicopter cockpit, looking through a night vision device. The view outside the cockpit shows a city, identified as Ubaydi, Iraq, with a river and agricultural fields. The image is semi-transparent, allowing text to be overlaid.

About the Author and Acknowledgments

Nicholas J. Schlosser is a historian at the Marine Corps History Division. He received his doctorate from the University of Maryland in 2008. He is the editor and compiler of the History Division publication *U.S. Marines in Iraq 2004–2008: Anthology and Annotated Bibliography*, published in 2010, and co-editor of *Counterinsurgency Leadership in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Beyond*, published in 2011 by the Marine Corps University Press.

This project could not have been completed and published without the invaluable and professional efforts of the History Division staff. The manuscript was edited by Andrea L. Connell and Wanda J. Renfrow. Layout and design was created by Vincent J. Martinez. The author would also like to thank Colonel Kurtis P. Wheeler, whose preliminary research on this topic helped provide a strong foundation on which to build this study. The following individuals also provided helpful advice and assistance with the manuscript: chief historian Charles D. Melson; senior editor Kenneth H. Williams; managing editor Shawn H. Vreeland; and historians Paul D. Westermeyer, Thomas M. Baughn, Fred H. Allison, Annette D. Amerman, and Chief Warrant Officer-4 Timothy S. McWilliams. Finally, the author would like to thank the staff of the Marine Corps Archives at the Gray Research Center.

History Division
United States Marine Corps
Washington, DC
2013
PCN 10600009200

A UH-1N "Huey" helicopter from Marine Light Attack Helicopter Squadron 369 flies above the city of Ubaydi on 16 November 2005. The Marine pictured is Cpl Caleb Love.

Photo by Cpl James P. Aguilar

