



U.S. Army Soldiers enter a building in Fallujah, Iraq, during Operation al Fajr (New Dawn) on Nov. 9, 2004. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. 1st Class Johancharles Van Boers)

The Battle of Fallujah

A Reflection on Resilience

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As the 20th anniversary of 9/11 approaches, I think back to my younger days in the Army and appreciate the roads I have traveled to get to where I am today. I can appreciate now the lessons learned from combat. The resilience. The camaraderie. The way we fought not just to survive but to protect each other. This is what I want for my young Soldiers now: To know what it's like to love your squad so much you'd risk your life for them. This is the real meaning of being a Soldier. And this article details the events that allowed me to truly learn that lesson.

Death Platoon

When I was a young specialist, I was a combat engineer in a unit known as "Death Platoon." My platoon was

attached to an infantry unit and deployed for a year with Alpha Company, 2nd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, in 2004. As combat engineers, we served as demolition experts since this was before the heavy use of Explosive Ordnance Disposal Soldiers.

Once we set boots on the ground, we set up shop at Forward Operating Base (FOB) Normandy, an Army post close to the Iranian border. The platoon operated with little oversight or intrusion from outside elements as 2-2 Infantry's leadership allowed us to operate more independently than most traditional combat engineer platoons. This immediate isolation forced us into a tight-knit group, allowing us to build the bonds that ultimately saved our lives.

Team Building

At FOB Normandy, we were housed on the second floor of a two-story building. This floor was a large open bay with no doors and blown out holes where windows should have been. There was no electricity, running water, or even stairs to access the second floor. We had to climb a rope to even get to it. Eventually, we acquired a generator, which helped quality of life tremendously, and ultimately built stairs and even acquired furniture, which allowed us to hold movie nights on a small computer screen.

As we settled into our temporary home, we found ourselves assigned a mix of demolition, convoy security, foot patrols, and FOB security missions. During this time, the other units of our mother battalion were stationed more than 200 kilometers away. We would sporadically get news from command of the casualties they sustained and friends we would never see again. It was slow at first, but as the activity and hostility of the conflict in Iraq increased, so did the number of names they passed down to us.

A New Mission

As insurgent activity increased throughout Iraq, we received orders to move to an undisclosed location to prevent potential uprisings. As we packed our belongings, we couldn't help but be hopeful for better living conditions, but were instead greeted with cots on the desert sand and our vehicles in a circular security formation. As we sat and waited for missions that never came, our bond as a platoon strengthened. We had no means of outside communication and had to rely on each other for socialization. We played chess, card games, shared stories about our families and plans for the future, and listened to each other's music (even though some of my fellow Soldiers' tastes in music were terrible).

But we endured together and never felt alone



Death Platoon's sleeping arrangements in the desert of Iraq, 2004. (Photo courtesy of Sgt. Maj. Kyle Matus)



Death Platoon before invading Fallujah, Iraq, 2004. (Photo courtesy of Sgt. Maj. Kyle Matus)

because we were always watching each other's backs. We were united and faced every challenge together. This bond we built was crucial in the months to come. It would be tested and strengthened during the Battle of Fallujah.

Entering Fallujah

The first Battle of Fallujah took place in April of 2004 when insurgents killed and mangled the bodies of four Blackwater contractors, capturing the events on video. The insurgents hung their burned bodies from a bridge as a sign of their superiority (Gettleman, 2004). After the battle, control was given back to the Iraqi government, but insurgent numbers in the city grew. And in November of 2004, the bloodiest battle of the Iraq War took place: The Second Battle of Fallujah. Its mission was to eradicate the insurgent infestation (Villa, 2019).

Our mission orders stated the city of Fallujah had been overrun by insurgents who fortified the city and its surroundings with minefields and obstacles, making it impossible for the light Marine units to penetrate. Death Platoon received the call to move quickly to Fallujah with 2-2 Infantry and link up with the U.S. Marines, who were responsible for that area of operations. These actions meant Death Platoon was once again on the move across Iraq.

We brought three mine-clearing line charges (MCLCs) with M113 personnel carriers to penetrate the enemy's minefields. Ultimately, we kept two MCLCs and allowed the Marines to use the third. The plan was for Death Platoon to breach one side of the city while the Marines breached the opposite simultaneously, but like most things in war, things did not go according to plan.

When the call to action rang out, the Marine's breach failed because their MCLC would not fire. The weight of the mission's success



Soldiers of 1st Platoon, Alpha Company, enter and clear a building during heavy fighting, Nov. 9, 2004, in the Askari District of North Eastern Fallujah. (Photo courtesy of David Bellavia)

now rested on our ability to successfully breach the city's outer edge and clear a path for entry. We refused to let the mission fail and were able to clear a lane in and out of the city for the entire 2-2 Infantry and Marine units to use. Once we entered the city, we turned our focus to urban warfare and house-to-house combat.

The Fall of Leadership

Upon entering the city, we selected a house on the inside of the city's perimeter from which to base our operations and keep pushing forward. We were in the city for but a few hours when the war became very real for us. The command sergeant major (CSM) of 2-2 Infantry exited his vehicle to help strategically park in front of the new operations house when an enemy sniper killed him, causing a ripple effect in leadership.

The death of a leader can be devastating to a unit. Not only does it slow down operations, it also solidifies the reality that no one is safe from the horrors of the battlefield. No matter your rank or experience, everyone is mortal in war.

Shortly after the CSM died, we completed night operations with the company and found ourselves surrounded by insurgents in an open city square, just steps away from our operating base. While defending our position, the executive officer took control of the weapon system on the tracked vehicle he was riding and was killed by a rocket propelled grenade while pushing the enemy back so the team could get through.

As the fighting intensified, platoons from the compa-

ny conducted house-to-house operations to clear out the city. The commanding officer was killed when he entered a house where insurgents sat in ambush.

It was strange to think this young captain had just promoted some of us only days prior to leaving FOB Normandy. He chatted with us daily and appreciated the advantages of having combat engineers attached to his command. And in an instant, he was gone. It would take the strength of our close-knit bond to press forward and keep attacking after such heavy losses.

As we continued our house-to-house-clearing objective, we found a small closed door. My squad leader and I stacked to breach and entered as two insurgents fired at us at close range. The interesting thing here is that my squad leader and I crossfired and shot the insurgent diagonal from our respective positions -- we were more concerned with saving each other rather than protecting ourselves. The bond between us, built and strengthened from our training and previous months of suboptimal conditions ("embracing the suck"), ultimately allowed every member of Death Platoon to walk out of the house that night alive and together.

Reflection

David Bellavia was awarded a Medal of Honor for his actions with 2-2 Infantry during the Second Battle of Fallujah ("Medal of Honor," n.d.). At one point during the fighting, after his unit had suffered several casualties, he was asked if he was okay. He lied and said yes because he wasn't thinking about himself, he was thinking about

his fellow Soldiers and the fact they needed him because they had to continue fighting. They still had to complete their mission (Bellavia, 2006).

As the battle for the city raged on, the resiliency every Soldier needed to keep picking themselves up, house after house, and continue the mission came from months of crucial team building. Gone was the need for self-preservation, and in its place was a desire to protect

the Soldiers on our left and right. To make sure they returned home to their families. It was the first time I felt a part of something greater than myself.

And this is what I want for every young Soldier coming up the ranks. Love your country and your fellow Soldiers above yourself. When this happens, you'll truly be ready to defend this great nation and make sure your brothers and sisters in uniform make it back home. ■

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