CONTENTS

Cover Page
Title Page
Dedication
Epigraph
Major Characters
Introduction

Prologue Lynching at the Brooklyn Bridge

PART I • COUNTERINSURGENCY, April 2003 to March 2004

1. “What kind of people loot dirt?”
2. A Broken Chain of Command
3. “You work with the Americans, you die.”
4. A Backwater Problem
5. Valentine's Day Massacre

PART II • SIEGE, March to May 2004

6. “They can’t do that to Americans.”
7. Mutiny
8. The Tipping Point
9. Faint Echoes of Tet
10. Farmers or Shooters?
11. Avoiding the Perfect Storm
12. Many Die, They Are Gone
13. Easter with the Dark Side
14. “You wanna shoot at me? This ain’t no picnic!”
15. Fallujah: A Symptom of Success
16. Two-Faced Sheikhs and Imams
17. Lalafallujah
18. Strategic Confusion
19. The Jolan Graveyard
20. A Deal with the Devil

PART III • REVERSAL, May to October 2004

21. The Bomb Factory
22. “Keep the noise down.”
23. All of This for Nothing?

PART IV • ATTACK, November to December 2004

24. The Watchdogs
25. Merry-Go-Round at the Jolan
26. Phase Line Henry
27. The House from Hell
28. Five Corporals

Epilogue By Inches, Not Yards, January to May 2005

Conclusion No True Glory
Where Are They Now?

Order of Battle for Operation Phantom Fury
Notes
Bibliography
Acknowledgments
About the Author
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Copyright Page
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    Lance Corporal Toby Gray, KIA
    Corporal Carlos Perez-Gomez, WIA
    Corporal Timothy Connors
    Lance Corporal Abraham Simpson, KIA

Corporals are the backbone of the infantry.
Supposing you and I, escaping this battle,
Would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal,
So neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost
nor would I urge you into the fighting where men win glory.
But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us
In their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them,
Let us go on and win glory for ourselves, or yield it to others.

Homer, *The Iliad*

To high officials given glory, from them much is expected.
MAJOR CHARACTERS

Abizaid—General (four stars) John P. Abizaid, U.S. Army, commanded CentCom, or Central Command, which included all U.S. forces in Iraq. He reported directly to Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and spoke directly with President George W. Bush, General Richard Myers, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Ambassador Paul Bremer.

Bremer—Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III was the president’s envoy to Iraq and director of the Coalition Provisional Authority or CPA. He was responsible for the policies, plans, and budget for the reconstruction of Iraq and its return to sovereignty. Bremer reported to the president through the secretary of defense.

Conway—Lieutenant General (three stars) James T. Conway, USMC, commanded the I MEF or First Marine Expeditionary Force in Iraq. I MEF consisted of an air wing, a logistics command, and a ground command—in this case the 1st Marine Division. Conway reported to Lieutenant General Sanchez, the Joint Task Force commander in Baghdad. Conway also spoke directly with Gen Abizaid. He rarely spoke with Bremer.

Drinkwine—Lieutenant Colonel Brian M. Drinkwine commanded the paratrooper battalion in Fallujah from September through mid-March. He implemented the second extended American strategy for Fallujah.
Janabi—Abdullah Al Janabi was a businessman and a fundamentalist Sunni cleric who emerged as the central insurgent leader in Fallujah. For over a year he also met with American military leaders in Fallujah, including General Mattis.

Sanchez—Lieutenant General (three stars) Ricardo S. Sanchez commanded Joint Task Force 7 (JTF 7) in Baghdad. He directed all American and other Coalition forces in Iraq. Sanchez reported directly to Abizaid.

Suleiman—Lieutenant Colonel Suleiman Al Marawi commanded a poorly trained Iraqi battalion in Fallujah. He was a strong, proud leader who believed Janabi was bringing destruction and death to the city.

Mattis—Major General (two stars) James N. Mattis commanded the twenty-two thousand Marines of the 1st Marine Division. He reported directly to Conway. Mattis was the ground commander at the April battle for Fallujah. He rarely spoke with Abizaid, Sanchez, or Bremer.

Rumsfeld—Secretary of Defense Donald R. Rumsfeld was responsible for defense policy worldwide and, after approval by the president, for authorizing Gen Abizaid to carry out major operations. Abizaid in turn would authorize Sanchez, who would authorize Conway, who would direct Mattis to take command of the ground battle. Rumsfeld spoke directly with President Bush, Gen Myers, Gen Abizaid, and Ambassador Bremer. He would occasionally talk with Sanchez but rarely with Conway or Mattis.

Toolan—Colonel John Toolan commanded Regimental Combat Team 1, usually numbering four battalions and about six thousand Marines. He was the tactical commander for the April battle of Fallujah and the Marine who met daily with the Iraqis, especially Suleiman. He implemented the third extended American strategy for Fallujah.

Wesley—Lieutenant Colonel Eric Wesley was the executive officer of the 2nd Brigade, 3rd Infantry Division. During the summer of 2003 he assisted in designing and implementing the first extended American strategy for Fallujah.
INTRODUCTION

THE OBSCURE, HARDSCRABBLE INDUSTRIAL city of Fallujah erupted into the major battle of the Iraqi insurgency, involving fifteen thousand combatants and claiming 153 American and thousands of Iraqi lives. Fallujah provides a cautionary tale about mixing the combustible ingredients of battle and politics. This book describes how it came to do so and why.

The twenty-month struggle for Fallujah had four phases. The first phase began immediately after American forces toppled Saddam Hussein from power in April 2003. That act also toppled the five million Sunnis who had long dominated the twenty million Iraqi Shiites and Kurds. In the aftermath many Sunnis refused to believe they had been removed from power. These former regime elements joined forces with radical Islamic fundamentalists to attack the Americans. Fallujah quickly emerged as a center of the insurgency.

During the summer and fall of 2003, four separate American units in Fallujah applied the classic doctrine for fighting insurgents: namely, they tried to win the hearts and minds of the people who were providing the sea of support in which the insurgents swam. The Americans, though, had little money to spend on economic development; they lacked support from Iraqi leaders; and they responded to attacks with overwhelming firepower, all of which, despite their good intentions, caused resentment.
The second phase began in March 2004, when four American contractors were killed and their bodies mutilated in broad daylight in the heart of the city. The United States Marines were ordered to seize the city, but then, due to international outrage over televised reportage of the assault, were told to stop. For six weeks the Marines engaged in fierce but inconclusive siege warfare.

In the third phase the city was handed over to former Iraqi generals who claimed they could restore order. The Sunnis of Fallujah, the generals explained, were a good people who wanted to be left alone to live under their own leaders. But instead of proclaiming peace, Fallujah promptly began exporting murder. The insurgents who controlled the city ignored the hapless generals, while the arch-terrorist Abu Musab al Zarqawi set up headquarters and dispatched suicide bombers to other cities. Fallujah appeared on nightly news reports to resemble the lair of the monster Grendel, a city of whippings, kidnappings, and beheadings.

In the fourth phase, in the fall of 2004, the Marines were again ordered to seize Fallujah. Hundreds of foreign fighters, drawn to Iraq to fight the infidel invader, awaited them. The Marines—America’s shock troops—responded with a full measure of force. The jihadists decided to fight from inside the houses, so once the battle was over, Fallujah’s residents returned to a wrecked city.

The extended battle brought to the fore the complex tenacity of the insurgency, the absence of Iraqi leadership, the miscalculations in senior American planning, and the fortitude of the American infantryman.
PROLOGUE

LYNCHING AT THE BROOKLYN BRIDGE

THE WEDNESDAY-MORNING TRAFFIC IN FALLUJAH was its usual blue-smoke and horn-blaring self. The sidewalks were packed with unemployed men in scruffy dishdashas or old work trousers and faded shirts, many smoking and most lounging around, with no money, no job, and no prospects. The assassins drove west down the four-lane highway, cluttered with old cars carelessly double-parked, beeping their horn, waving their AK automatic rifles, and gesturing to other drivers to get out of the way. The truck stopped in the middle of the street, and half a dozen men jumped out, some with kaffiyehs wrapped around their faces, others not caring who identified them. One man threw a grenade down the street; the small explosion did not injure anyone but succeeded in driving the onlookers to cover.

“Americans coming!” a man shouted. “Get out of here!”

The gunmen ran to the side of the street and hid in the doorways to the small shops.

Around noon Los Angeles Times reporter Tony Perry was ambling down the main corridor in the 1st Marine Division headquarters in western Iraq, inquiring about the latest situation reports. The division commander, Major General James N. Mattis
“Mad Dog Mattis” to his grunts—ran a small headquarters staff, all of whom knew one another. It was a slow news day, and Perry was looking for a story.

“There’s a garble from a Humvee crew reporting heavy smoke in downtown Fallujah,” a lance corporal told him. “Here we go again.”

Fallujah lay thirty miles to the east of the division headquarters. Perry didn’t want to waste a day pursuing a hunch, so he stepped outside, flipped open his cell phone, and dialed Los Angeles. Maybe the home office had picked up something. An officer walking by overheard Perry describing the situation in Fallujah and called a regiment of Marines stationed a mile outside the city.

“Ed, the lance corporal rumor net has a reporter here spun up about your favorite city,” the officer said. “You got anything?”

Fluent in Arabic, Captain Ed Sullivan was the regiment’s liaison officer with the city. He had heard nothing. He checked with the operations center next door.

“Is Fallujah acting up again?” he asked.

“Negative. All quiet,” the watch officer replied.

Sullivan walked back to his office, where a sergeant at the adjoining desk was pointing at his computer.

“Reuters is running a story that vehicles were hit downtown.”

Sullivan went back into the ops center.

“Something’s happening. I’ll call the mayor and the police chief. Can we get a UAV launched?”

The ops center was showing no Marine vehicles on patrol in the city. An unmanned aerial vehicle could be flying over the city in twenty minutes, quicker than an armored patrol could be assembled and dispatched. Sullivan picked up the phone to reach the mayor.

Back at division headquarters, Perry told the division staff that his L.A. office had confirmed the story on the wire. He immediately asked to go to Fallujah, making a mental note to plug into the lance corporal net wherever he traveled.

At the same time the chief of staff of the division, Colonel Joseph F. Dunford, received a call from the division’s higher headquarters, the Marine Expeditionary Force (MEF). “Baghdad has reports of Americans killed in Fallujah,” the MEF officer said. “What are you getting?”

Dunford walked from his tiny office into the operations center, where video from a UAV was tracking a mob swarming around two smoking vehicles; the red flames from the burning tires stood out vividly. The UAV circled slowly, its telephoto camera zooming in on a mob beating inert bodies, the sticks repeatedly rising and falling. On an adjoining screen a satellite TV feed showed Iraqi men and boys stomping a body that was charred black and shriveled by the flames.

To Dunford, the scene didn’t make sense. No Marine unit was reported in the city. Besides, it was a court-martial offense to travel with fewer than four vehicles. Those twisted corpses couldn’t be Americans.
Without informing the Marines in advance, four American contractors escorting a supply run had taken a shortcut through Fallujah, the most dangerous city in Iraq. They were driving in two Mitsubishi Pajero sport utility vehicles on the main thoroughfare, Highway 10. Even in morning traffic it would take only twenty minutes for them to pass through town. The four were members of the North Carolina–based Blackwater Security Consulting company. They were capable men. Scott Helvenston, a former SEAL, had participated in the four-hundred-mile endurance race called the Raid Gaulouise. Jerry Zovko, who was fluent in five languages, had served in the 82nd Airborne Division. Michael Teague had won the bronze star in Afghanistan. Wesley Batalona had served both as a paratrooper and as a Ranger.

The contractors crept along in the dense traffic, passing on their right the main police station and the walled compound of the city council, formerly the headquarters for the Baath Party. The Government Center in midtown was the final landmark where the contractors could have turned back, had any Iraqi policeman waved them down. No Iraqi, though, raised a hand to warn them.

Minutes later, emerging from the doorways of shops, insurgents dashed into the street and sprayed both vehicles. (Some claimed an Iraqi police pickup had been leading the SUVs and had sped away at the last minute.) With no armor plating on the vehicles, the four men inside were riddled with bullets. They had had no chance to fire back.

The firing ceased, the shooters drove off, and a crowd of men and boys approached. When an American with bullet wounds in his chest staggered out and fell to the ground, he was kicked, stomped, stabbed, and butchered. A boy ran up with a can of gasoline, doused the SUVs, and struck a match. The black smoke pointed like a finger up into the sky, attracting a swelling crowd.

Egged on by older men, boys dragged the smoldering corpses onto the pavement and beat the charred flesh with their flip-flops to show that Americans were scum under the soles of their shoes. A body was ripped apart, and a leg attached to a rope was tossed over a power line above the highway.

Colonel Dunford reached General Mattis, who was out in the field, by radio. “A mob in Fallujah has killed some American contractors. It looks like a scene from Somalia,” Dunford said. “Baghdad wants us to go in.”

“What’s your take?” Mattis asked.

“The contractors are dead,” Dunford said. “If we go in to get their bodies, we’ll have to kill hundreds, including kids. Captain Sullivan says the police chief promises to return the bodies. I recommend we stay out.”

“Where does the MEF stand?”

“General Conway thinks we should let the mob exhaust itself,” Dunford said. General James T. Conway commanded the Marine Expeditionary Force. He was Mattis’s direct boss.

“That’s it, then,” Mattis said. “Rushing in makes no sense.”

The macabre carnival in Fallujah continued all day, the crowds spurring on one another, shouting, “Viva mujahedeen! Long live the resistance!” Two of the charred corpses were dragged behind a car through the souk, past rows of small shops and hundreds of cheering men, to the green trestle bridge that the Americans called the Brooklyn Bridge. There the mob hung the bodies from an overhead girder, two black
lumps dangling at the end of ropes.

Crowds in the souk and along the highway were swept up in the murderous atmosphere. No police tried to restore order; no fire truck put out the flames smoldering around the SUVs; no ambulance came for the bodies. When two Iraqi nurses tried to take the bodies to a hospital, they were told to leave or be shot. At dusk the remains of three bodies were dumped in a cart pulled by a gray donkey for a final triumphal haul down Highway 10. Men and boys followed the cart yelling shwaretek, meaning “Americans, you’ve lost your nerve.”

Technicolor video of the ghoulish scenes, taped by the UAV, was played at the division, at the MEF, at higher headquarters in Baghdad, and at ops centers in Washington. Frustration and anger built hour by hour. In Fallujah crowds proud to show their handiwork greeted Iraqi photographers. Graphic footage was sold to the networks in Baghdad and broadcast worldwide. The next day’s front-page photos were stunning: young men smiling and waving as if their soccer team had won a championship match, while behind them dangled the blackened corpses of Americans.

From the division’s point of view, the lynching was a tragedy, not least because it could have been avoided. The four Americans lost were added to the list of dozens killed in the past year in the Fallujah area. Conway, Mattis, Dunford—all had seen the maimed and the burned. They focused on the issues, not the emotions. War took its capricious daily toll. If you couldn’t absorb casualties and keep the mission foremost in your mind, you were in the wrong business. Sending an armored force downtown amid rampaging men and boys would have meant inviting more killing, more agony, and more screams for revenge. There were no lives left to be saved: the war had claimed four more victims.

The Marines had a plan they wanted to stick with. For months American forces had been venturing into the city only in brief forays in armored vehicles; meanwhile the opposition had strengthened. Over the next several months the Marines intended to move back into Fallujah on foot, district by district, bringing with them Iraqi forces. The rub for the past year had been that the Iraqi police and National Guard had refused to be seen with Americans, yet they had also failed to control the city. The Marines intended to coax the Iraqi forces into joint patrols, regaining control of the city by slipping in “all quiet like the fog.”

Seeing no reason to alter that plan, Dunford sat down and wrote an e-mail to be used on the evening news in the States. “We’re not going to overreact to today’s violence,” he wrote. “We have a methodology of patient, persistent presence. We will identify who was responsible, and in cooperation with Iraqi security forces, we will kill them.”
The Iraqi police returned three bodies the next day, and the fourth corpse was recovered the following day. The CIA and military intelligence began to match the faces of the ringleaders to names and addresses. More than twenty names were placed on a list of targets for future raids. Two brothers, for instance, lived in a wealthy compound that was dotted with date trees on the eastern bank of the Euphrates. They would be easy to take down. Another ringleader operated a computer and photo shop in the center of the city. Reading his e-mails and samizdat would be revealing. He would be a tough target, though, requiring the expertise of Task Force 6-26. The special operations commandos would need a few weeks to plan and rehearse their raid. If the Marines took it step by step, the ringleaders would be arrested or killed over the course of the next month.

General Conway’s senior was Lieutenant General Ricardo S. Sanchez, the Joint Task Force commander in charge of all coalition forces. Sanchez wanted swift, visible retaliation for thelynchings: for instance, bomb the Brooklyn Bridge. Conway rejected that option—he wanted to use the bridge to run convoys. All right then, the JTF staff in Baghdad replied, bomb the computer shop. No, the Marines replied, we want to read those records, not burn them. Besides, it’s an e-mail café, with kids wandering in and out. Well, the JTF came back, bomb the compound on the Euphrates. No, the MEF replied, families live there, and the ringleaders might not be home when the bombs come calling. When every suggestion for immediate action was rebuffed, JTF headquarters grumbled that the Marines were too reluctant to apply force.

Don’t push us, the MEF staff said. Give us a few weeks to pick off the ringleaders when they least expect it. To rush into a city of 280,000 made no strategic sense. Once they occupied the city, what would they do with it? You could do anything with a bayonet except sit on it. The sensible plan was to gain control gradually, leaving Iraqis—not Marines—in charge. Not the right answer, the JTF staff replied. You guys in the field don’t grasp the international significance. The mutilation was not a tactical matter; the political symbolism was huge, and the analogy to Somalia was on the lips of television pundits and in newspaper commentaries.

A decade earlier the United States had intervened in Somalia’s tribal wars in order to save millions from starvation. But a resentful tribe eventually turned on the military peacekeepers and butchered twenty-four Pakistani soldiers. At the urging of the United Nations, American soldiers set out to arrest the tribe’s leader and were trapped in a fierce firefight. When it was over, a vengeful Somali mob dragged the corpse of an American soldier through the streets. American revulsion hardened into determination not to aid such a barbaric country. The mutilation forced a policy review in Washington, resulting in the withdrawal of all American forces from Somalia.

Once again tremors from a mutilation were being felt in official Washington. President George W. Bush was reported to be furious. For a gleeful mob to hang Americans like pieces of charred meat mocked the rationale that the war had liberated grateful Iraqis. The mutilation was both a stinging rebuke and a challenge. National pride and honor were involved. The president’s envoy to Iraq, Ambassador L. Paul Bremer III, went on television in Baghdad to denounce the atrocity, vowing that the “deaths will not go unpunished.” The spokesman for the JTF, Army Brigadier General Mark Kimmitt, followed up by saying the attack on Fallujah would be “overwhelming.” Write an order for the Marines to attack, General Sanchez told his
staff, and I don’t mean any fucking knock-before-search, touchy-feely stuff.

After six months in the States, the MEF had just returned to Iraq and, the week before, taken responsibility for a province the size of North Carolina, with two million people and thirteen cities. Now Conway was receiving orders, which he believed to be a mistake, about one city. Over the past year Conway had developed a solid rapport with General John P. Abizaid, who was in charge of the Central Command. CentCom commanded all American forces throughout the Middle East. Both Conway and Abizaid had open personalities, and when they issued orders, they explained their reasoning, which won them the loyal support of their staffs. Conway called Abizaid to get some background about what was going on.

“I’ve discussed this with Secretary Rumsfeld, Jim,” Abizaid said. “This one’s coming from way up the chain of command. Way up.”

To the Marines, Fallujah was notable for having no American base inside the city. Consequently, allowing themselves a few months to move in seemed a prudent tactical matter. But to Abizaid and Rumsfeld, Fallujah was a city, constantly in the news, that had slipped out of control. That situation was unacceptable—tantamount to secession from the new Iraq. Abizaid had visited the province in November to personally threaten Fallujah’s leaders, following repeated attacks on Americans, but his warning had no effect. On a second trip in February his convoy had had to pull out of Fallujah under gunfire.

Rumsfeld and Abizaid, with Ambassador Bremer in strong support, had recommended to President Bush that Fallujah be seized immediately. The president ordered the Marines “to go get those responsible,” with no waiting, no delay. The president was not told that the Marines disagreed with his order to rush in.

The last time American troops fought street by street had been twenty-six years before in Hue City. That battle had raged for a month, and blocks of houses were leveled. Hundreds of Americans and thousands of Vietnamese had died. The Marines knew that in Fallujah rough stuff lay ahead. They wished others understood that.

On April 2, 2004, the MEF received a written order from the JTF to conduct offensive operations against Fallujah. That settled the matter. The time for talking was over. The Marines had had their say, and General Abizaid had made his decision. If President Bush wanted the city taken, their mission was to take it.

The Marines saluted, turned about smartly, and let slip the dogs of war.
PART I

COUNTERINSURGENCY

April 2003 to March 2004
“WHAT KIND OF PEOPLE LOOT DIRT?”

THROUGHOUT MOST OF IRAQ, the latter days of April 2003 was a time of great joy. Saddam Hussein’s murderous regime had collapsed; the shooting and bombing had stopped; and people could go anywhere they pleased and say anything they wanted. In Baghdad, the American forces were greeted with smiles, waves, and shouts of joy. On the eastern bank of the Euphrates near the French embassy, wealthy Sunni suburbanites—anxious to win favor—led American Marines to the estates of Deputy Prime Minister Tariq Aziz and high-level generals. When the giant Stalin-esque statue of Saddam, arm raised and mustache bristling, fell in Firdos Square, Americans and Iraqis alike were pulling on the ropes. April 2003 was an interlude of good cheer, reminiscent of the liberation of Paris in 1944—a moment in time when people forgot their wants and their fears and flocked to the streets to cheer the soldiers.

In Fallujah, though, the residents did not cheer when paratroopers from the 82nd Airborne Division drove into the city in late April. In Baghdad, looters as numerous as locusts had stripped every government building, even carting away bricks. In Fallujah, the windows and electric fixtures at the Baath headquarters at the Government Center remained intact. Most looting was confined to the industrial sector, and only the poor people who lived south of Highway 10 greeted the Americans with smiles. Across the Euphrates south of the city, the large estates of prominent Baathists and army officers stood empty but untouched, securely guarded by the curlcuc Baathist symbol on the courtyard gates. Saddam’s apparatchiks did not consider themselves defeated. They