

The Kill Zone: Moving Wounded in Fallujah

The first thing you notice is the silence. An unnerving, horrible quiet without the sound of voices, car engines, children playing, or televisions. Even the birds are wise enough to have gone elsewhere. And yet we are in a city with a population of 300,000, in the middle of the day.

We passed the last mujahedin patrol two blocks ago, and they waved us through when our escort told them what we were there for. To evacuate wounded, and to collect the dead.

We drop out of the truck and start walking, our passports held high in our otherwise empty hands. We leave our Iraqi driver and enter the crushing quiet of the Kill Zone, the no man's land between the rebels and the American forces, somewhere inside the town of Fallujah.

The team is made up of me, a British woman, and an Iraqi woman. As we walk, I grab the Brit's hand and squeeze it. "For luck," I say, and I think I will remember the wink she gives me for the rest of my life.

No one, and I mean no one, is on the empty streets. A dry fear fills my throat as we advance into the dusty war zone for a few excruciating blocks. Then a man opens the door of a house, gesturing frantically with wild eyes. We can see what he is pointing at: to our left, the street is followed by a low brick wall, which ends at a four-way intersection. In the middle of the crossroads lies a young man, covered in blood, a Kalashnikov still slung around his body.

The man from the house then motions around the corner, up the street away from the victim, and says in a thick Arabic accent, "Americans!" Then he makes a hand gesture of a gun firing. So to retrieve the young man will mean walking into American sniper fire.

We creep along the wall until we are almost at the end where the intersection begins. If we carefully look through cracks in the masonry, we can see them: three U.S. Marines in shooting positions, about a block away, aiming straight down the street toward the victim. The situation is further complicated by a car that stands abandoned between the prone man and the soldiers, with all four doors hanging open as if the occupants have suddenly fled. Around it are scattered several RPG's and rockets. So if we attempt to do anything, the Americans will assume we are enemy fighters.

We decide to attempt communication with them. The Brit tries first. "HELLO!", she yells. "Can you hear me?"

No response.

I give it a try. "We are a medical emergency team! We want to retrieve this man in the street!"

Maybe it's the American accent. "Go ahead!" yells a soldier.

"Okay! We're coming out! Don't shoot!" I reply.

We leave the safety of the wall and enter the street. The three Marines simply stare at us. We go to the victim and immediately see that he is gone: rigor mortis has even set in. Leaving his weapon lying on the ground, we pick him up and start to carry him through the dead streets back toward the waiting truck. After we have gone about a block, one of the Americans yells from behind us, "Hey!"

We stop.

"Drop your weapons!"

I want to laugh. But it's not funny. Or maybe it is. "We don't have any weapons!"

He nods. "Oh. Okay!"

We resume hauling the corpse to the truck.

Entering Fallujah was difficult, but not impossible. We came in along the back roads, following the scintillating Furat river (called the Euphrates by the colonizers), past beautiful date groves, villages of clay houses, and herds of goats. The air is marvelously dry, clean, and bright, the polar opposite of Baghdad's choking, fume-ridden skies. It is a fantastic and timeless landscape.

We are an international group, bringing much-needed medical supplies to the town in a chartered bus. There are journalists from Canada, Pakistan, and England, as well as activists from England, Wales, and Australia. There are also four Iraqis, two journalists and two translators.

Along the way, we pass a stream of vehicles headed the opposite direction, evacuating women, children, and the elderly. On our own path we are joined by minivans and pickups carrying medical and other supplies into the besieged city. Each vehicle bears a banner with the name of the town or neighborhood that is making the donation. Local people stand by the roadside, offering water and food to anyone helping their city. At one point, a group of young boys literally throws bread and rolls into our bus, hitting us in the heads. The murderous military operation against Fallujah has indeed united Iraqis in solidarity.

As we get closer, every crossroads is guarded by groups of masked mujahadeen wielding rifles. They wave us on and shout "Afye!", or "Bravo!" in Arabic. The people's spirit is strong here, and they intend to fight to the death against the Americans.

This venture has been arranged by a friend of ours, a Palestinian activist and professional bodyguard who has contacted a mosque in Fallujah to ensure our safety. He is tall, with a moustache, tiny glasses, and a paunch, and given to relentless chainsmoking. He is also, incidentally, barking mad. But in some situations, it's only the craziest people that you can trust.

When we finally arrive in Fallujah, we go immediately to a hospital, which is really a converted clinic, and deliver the medical supplies. We have brought suture kits, blood bags, bandages, and blankets, among other items. The hospital staff help us unload the cargo, and we haven't been there ten minutes before casualties start arriving.

A car screeches around the corner and slams to a stop in front of the hospital. Volunteers scramble for stretchers while young mujahadeen, faces covered by khaffiyas, scan the horizon. A family: a mother and two children, are removed from the vehicle. They have all been shot, and are screaming in pain. We help bring them inside the already crowded building.

The man in charge of the clinic, an exhausted Iraqi who speaks fluent English and was trained as a U.N. coordinator, explains that he has very little supplies to work with, and that it is almost impossible to cross the town to move people or medicines, due to American troops. We are also shown an ambulance that he tells us was shot up by the soldiers, as was the driver. The vehicle has bullet holes in the front windows, sides, and top, and the driver has a bandage on his head.

Our Palestinian guide soon wades through the crowd to find us. "I need volunteers!", he shouts, his preferred method of communication, "Now!"
"To do what, exactly?", someone enquires.
"Retrieve wounded persons!" he replies.

My hand goes up, and the next thing I know, myself, the Brit, and the Iraqi woman are standing in the back of a flatbed truck, with a grimly smiling Fallujah man next to us who waves a Red Crescent flag and sings "Allah akbar, God is great", as we roll towards the Kill Zone. Somehow, his singing makes me feel better. A fighter holding an RPG-7 waves at us as we pass him.

We return successfully to the hospital with the dead fighter, to find that the Palestinian has driven an ambulance through American sniper positions to move wounded people to the hospital. He returns shortly, his mission accomplished, and the shooting victims are carried into the building.

By now night has fallen. Nevertheless, on the next ambulance run, our same team of three volunteers to help. As we mount the vehicle, I squeeze the Brit's hand a second time and she winks at me. Then away we go. The Palestinian drives murderously fast, and as we wheel around one corner, he yells, "Snipers!" and we all hit the floor of the van.

But there are no shots fired, and we arrive at another clinic in a different part of town to move wounded patients to the main hospital. We run with rolling gurneys through the dark, there being no electricity in Fallujah at the moment, and load the patients to the ambulance, for another harrowing ride back.

As soon as we arrive and begin unloading the patients, the hospital staff tell us that there is a pregnant woman in premature labor that needs to be brought from her house. And so we are off again, to another part of town. This time there is no warning from the driver. Only a rifle crack as American snipers open fire on our ambulance.

Riding in the back, I can see the flash of the gun as bullets pierce the walls of the vehicle above our heads. Thank God I am on the floor. Another shooter blows out our headlights, and I hear the Brit, who is in the front seat, scream as pieces of engine spray into the cabin. Then they take out our front tires. It is madness, we are in a clearly marked ambulance, with a flashing, noisy siren, and they are shooting at us. We in the back huddle on the floor, clutching each other like lovers as another bullet rips into the engine. The driver throws the vehicle into reverse, hitting a curb at tremendous speed and taking out the rear tires. We screech back to the hospital on rims alone, with my breath pounding in my ears.

That's the last trip for that night, as the ambulance is, for the moment, beyond repair. We watch more casualties of the attacks arrive in private cars, including a severely burned man who was hit by cluster bombs, breathlessly praying as he is carried inside.

It is now late, and since there is not much we can do at the clinic, we retire to our quarters for the night. We are led along dark streets, keeping close to the walls, while red and orange military flares shoot overhead and rocketfire is heard in the distance. We are put up in a family's house, where we sit down to a much needed dinner in Fallujah.

The next morning we begin to load our bus, the same one we came to Fallujah in, with wounded people to take to Baghdad hospitals. While this is transpiring, the Iraqi woman whom we went out with the day before runs up to me. "The same mission as yesterday, the same place they want us to go," she says. "Do you want to do it?" I agree, and advise that the same three of us should go.

We jump on board the same flatbed truck, carrying a white Red Crescent flag. Our favorite mujahadeen, a boy of eleven years who is already a seasoned fighter, shouts to us that nothing will happen to us, that they will protect us and that God is on our side. We roll back towards the Kill Zone, on the same route as the day before. On the way, I squeeze the Brit's hand. She winks at me.

Again we leave the truck and walk slowly through empty streets. We see where the dead man was that we picked up the day before. The abandoned car and rockets have disappeared. But now there are many more soldiers.

Where before there were a few Marines, now there are scores. A whole line of houses are occupied, and soldiers are visible on every roof, scanning the horizon with field glasses. We leave the truck and start walking, repeating the same lines: "We are an international emergency medical team! Please do not shoot us!"

Three Marines run down the front stairs of a house and approach us very cautiously. They take up positions on the street and nervously eye us. Their team leader, sweaty and covered with dust, looks me over incredulously, an American man standing in front of him in an orange baseball cap and jeans. "What in the fuck are you doing here?", he asks. I could well ask him the same question, but I don't. "We're here to evacuate wounded people," the Brit replies. "There aren't any around here," he says. We tell him we have to look anyway, and he says okay and returns to the house that he and his men are operating out of.

Nearby, we find a middle-aged man lying dead in the street. He is clearly unarmed, but shot in his neck and side by a sniper. As we begin to remove the body, his family pours out of a nearby house, all of them hysterical with grief and fear. They want to know why someone didn't come earlier, why he had to die, and if they themselves can safely leave. It is a very difficult situation, and the Iraqi woman with us does an excellent job of keeping everyone calm. The Brit and myself return to the Marines, to negotiate the evacuation of the family, who are one half-block away from the soldiers.

The Marines also ask us a favor: they have a family in a house that they are occupying, and they cannot give them food or water. Can we evacuate them as well? We agree, and our Iraqi comrade goes inside with the soldiers to talk to the second family.

The Brit and I wait for her on the curb, the only two people on the otherwise empty streets. The day is hot and dry, and it seems bizarre to be just sitting there in the middle of a war. But strange as it sounds, I feel that we are doing the right thing: for the people living in Fallujah, it is literally hell on earth. And if we can be of help, by virtue of our nationality or our skin color, in getting innocent people out of harm's way, then that is what we are going to do.

As the family in the occupied house emerges, automatic gunfire starts up very close by, and the Marines tell us we are going to have to get this thing done fast. We bring the first family out of their house and group the two families together, then load them all onto the truck that we came in on, as well as a new, functioning ambulance that has just arrived. We also put the slain father and the bodies of two dead fighters in the back of the ambulance, where due to space, we are forced to ride. The stench of death is almost overpowering and a cloud of flies accompanies us back to the hospital.

By then it is time to leave Fallujah. The bus that we came in on is loaded with injured persons, including the burn victim from the night before, and we say our goodbyes to the hospital staff. Word is sent out to the mujahadeen guarding the roads to let us through safely, and we begin the journey back to Baghdad.

There is only one hitch on the return trip, when we take a wrong turn on the outskirts of town and run into a bunch of fighters who don't know who we are. It seems that the city's defenders are not centrally organized, working in small groups, and these folks haven't heard about us. They literally come out of the woodwork brandishing Kalashnikovs and pistols, pointing them at the bus and demanding to know what we are doing there, a bunch of foreigners on a bus leaving Fallujah. Are we evacuating wounded Americans? Are we spies? It is very tense for a few moments, but luckily the bus is filled with wounded locals, who explain indignantly to the gunmen what is going on, and we are then free to go.

Our first stop in Baghdad is at the Italian-run hospital, to drop off the most severely injured people. An Italian friend meets us there and she greets me in her usual fashion. "Fuck you bastard," she says, "I am worrying about you all the night." Yeah, well, I was worrying about me all the night too.

Photos by Donna Mulhearn