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# Lessons learned in Iraq: the Battle of Zarqa

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## Story Highlights

- With the trappings of World War I and II tactics and 21st Century weaponry, the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment's fight in January 2007
- Captain Brent Clemmer's C Company was the tip of the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment spear on Jan. 28, 2007. He had tested the limits o
- Warriors to life-savers: Patriot Battalion Soldiers were wary of the first group of Shiite fighters who walked out of Zarqa under white flag

Editor's note: This is a three-part account of the Battle of Zarqa, also called the Battle of Najaf in some sources. Background information and portions of this article were drawn from the Fort Lewis Battle Command Training Center 2008 video documentary of the Battle of Zarqa. The full video and other training and leader development information is available on <https://StrykerNet.army.mil> to AKO account holders.

FORT LEWIS, Wash. - With the trappings of World War I and II tactics and 21st Century weaponry, the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment's fight in January 2007 to recover a downed Apache helicopter south of Najaf stands as unique among Operation Iraqi Freedom engagements.

Counterinsurgency operations carry their own metrics, different from those that measure success in combat against an enemy who stands and fights. But by all military standards, Lt. Col. Barry Huggins' 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division Stryker battalion achieved a smashing success in what might have been the most traditional battle of Operation Iraqi Freedom. It ended in such a one-sided victory for U.S. and Iraqi forces that anticoalition media attempted to frame it as a "massacre" - until details came to light of the enemy's plans, detailed preparations and prodigious arsenal of weapons and equipment.

On Jan. 28 and 29, 2007, a fanatic and well-armed Shiite paramilitary faction stood and fought in southern Iraq against two companies of 2-3 Inf. augmented with engineers, 8th Iraqi Army elements and two Special Forces detachments, on a compound the insurgents had prepared for months. Riddled on three sides with deep trenches, high berms and antitank positions and protected on the fourth by the Euphrates River, nearly 600 Jund as-Sama', "Soldiers of Heaven," fired all of their considerable ordnance and launched one assault after another throughout the night in attempts to surprise and outflank the Patriot Battalion task force. For the Shiite fighters, they had begun an apocalyptic battle they believed would hasten the return of the Mahdi, the 12th Imam.

In the end, the most important metric was the casualty count: 250 enemy fighters killed, 81 wounded and 410 detained and not a single 2-3 Inf. Soldier hurt or killed. Sophisticated, relentless firepower defeated superior numbers on ground of the enemy's choosing. As the company commander of the lead element, Capt. Brent Clemmer, now a major enrolled at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, Calif. paraphrased a Ranger epigram, "Forget the fair fight."

Every commander's most optimistic intent on the battlefield had been realized - decisive victory with no loss of life to his unit.

What cannot be measured occurred at the end of the battle. Defining "agility," American Soldiers seamlessly shifted into humanitarian operations. The Charger Company first sergeant, 1st Sgt. Viriato Ferrera, hastily organized detainee and casualty collection points at the outskirts of the village. He was shocked to see women and children join the trickle of demoralized fighters, which turned rapidly into a stream and then, a flood.

Within minutes of surrender, 2-3 Inf. Soldiers began a 10-hour struggle to save the lives of the same Jund as-Sama' members they had battled all night long. Along with them came hundreds of their wives and children, completely taxing the unit's medical supplies and personnel.

Some of the Patriots said they felt fated to take part in the surreal mix of fighting and lifesaving in Zarqa, since their involvement in the episode happened by chance.

The situation

The Patriot Battalion, which had already moved in late December from Mosul to Baghdad, had been detached from 3rd Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division to 4th Brigade, 25th Infantry Division to assist with its large southern battle space. Spartan Brigade

leaders had asked for reinforcements based on the identification of several targets by intelligence during the Ashura season, the commemoration of the battle of Karbala in 680 A.D., during which the Muslim prophet Muhammad's grandson, Husayn ibn Ali, died. As the holiest day of the year among many Shiites, it represents a key moment in their historical separation from Sunni Islam. Ashura is marked by pilgrimages to Karbala by Shiite faithful who often become targets for Sunni zealots.

The Soldiers of 2-3 Inf. had been on their own journey.

"We'd been on a long odyssey for the last week and a half before this whole thing started," Clemmer said. The battalion left FOB Liberty in Baghdad for Karbala "on a 15-minute string," and hadn't returned to refit and resupply. Meanwhile, two of Clemmer's three C Company platoons lost vehicles in the course of subsequent movements.

"We weren't supposed to even be with the brigade we were with at the time," said the company commander. "There weren't any other Strykers down there at (Forward Operating Base) Kalsu when it happened. Who would have come to the rescue"

On Jan. 28, 4th Bde., 25th Inf. Div. received a call for help from Operational Detachment Alpha 563, a Special Forces team that had answered an earlier call from another SF A-team, 566, in Zarqa, a village south of Najaf. The following account is taken from the introduction to the DVD produced by the Leader Development Team in the I Corps Battle Command Training Center at Fort Lewis:

Iraqi police received a tip that Jund as-Sama' based in Zarqa were planning to assassinate Shiite leaders including the Grand Ayatollah al-Sistani and Muqtada al-Sadr, during Ashura.

Provincial authorities reported the information to the 8th Iraqi Army, which sent a scout platoon with American advisers to conduct reconnaissance and report on the gathering in Zarqa. Once on site, the Iraqi scouts were attacked by a battalion-sized element with small arms and heavy machine guns. The scouts requested assistance.

U.S. Army SF Detachment ODA 566 arrived at 8 a.m., Jan 28. The ODA reported a large insurgent element had occupied hasty fighting positions in existing drainage canals and was placing effective small arms, machine gun and rocket-propelled-grenade fire on the Iraqi Forces.

ODA 566 requested reinforcements. A joint patrol of Iraqi SWAT and another SF detachment, ODA 563, moved to the site. After close air support from F-16s and A-10s failed to disrupt the insurgent defense, ODA 566 requested attack aviation. An attack weapons team of two AH-64 Apache helicopters departed FOB Kalsu and arrived at 12:30 p.m., simultaneously with the arrival of Hillah SWAT and ODA 563. Coordinated attacks began on the insurgent positions.

At about 1:30 p.m., one of the Apaches was shot down near the enemy position, killing both pilots. Insurgent direct fire, now augmented with mortars, prevented the SF from securing the aircraft. The coalition forces on site established an overwatch of the crash site, and effectively fixed the insurgent force with direct fire, additional attack aviation and continuous close air support.

The 4th Bde., 25th Inf. Div. commander, Col. Mike Garrett, directed that his attached Stryker battalion task force answer the call.

"The best force I've got, the most ready force to move 97 kilometers quickly into this unknown situation is the Strykers that are attached to me," Lt. Col. Adam Rocke, current 2-3 Inf. commander, then the 3rd Bde., 2nd Inf. Div. operations officer, paraphrased Garrett.

#### Movement to Zarqa

Huggins got the call and said he could have his companies together in 15 minutes. They had planned to conduct raids that night anyway, so the planning sequence was already completed. When Clemmer's radio squawked, in fact, he thought it was part of the rehearsal for that night's operation.

"No sir, it's not a practice, sir," said the voice of his operations sergeant. "Brigade's calling us and there's a helicopter down."

"We're focused on a helicopter needs to be recovered," Huggins said. "We get the word that there's an (SF) ODA at the scene securing it and there's some light contact. About an hour later we get the word to launch. I send the initial company forward, Charlie Company with Brent Clemmer, and he's moving within 10 minutes of that launch. I assemble the logistics support trains with my Bravo Company and my battalion TAC. We're still trying to figure out the situation on the ground."

As orders to saddle up moved through the companies, the common expectation among the Soldiers was that they would be back in their racks at FOB Kalsu by midnight. No one had heard of the brisk fighting going on 100 kilometers to the south.

Charger Company left an hour after the launch order and Blackhorse followed a half hour later with Huggins, the TAC and battalion support trains in tow. The way south from FOB Kalsu took C Company through the city of Hillah, which they found full of Ashura pilgrims. The movement halted in its tracks.

"There's a couple thousand people flailing themselves, big banners and everything else," Clemmer said. "Here's where some of the lessons of Mosul came into effect because we had worked with the police so well."

The Iraqi police escorted the fast-moving Stryker convoy around the crowds and with the help of its escort, had quickly cleared the city and resumed its pace. Clemmer's company made it to the outskirts of Zarqa in about 90 minutes total, despite the slowdown in Hillah.

As he arrived on site, Clemmer saw a humvee with steer horns mounted on the grill along the road. "It was Special Forces, no doubt about that," Clemmer said. "I roll in there, jump out of the truck and the first thing I hear is .50 cal down the road just going off. So much for a secure site."

A brief hand-off of control of the site focused on the recovery operation at hand.

"We go and confirm we have two people in the helicopter, and that was the most important thing - make sure the two guys were there," Clemmer said. "We were there. No one else was going to get to them. It took hours to get them out, but we were going to get them out."

## Forget the fair fight: Part 2: 'It was like a match lit up'

Captain Brent Clemmer's C Company was the tip of the 2nd Battalion, 3rd Infantry Regiment spear on Jan. 28, 2007. He had tested the limits of his Stryker vehicles to cover the ground from FOB Kalsu to Zarqa, leading his Charger-Company convoy on a 97-kilometer dead gallop in 90 minutes.

Almost as soon as the convoy arrived at 5:30 p.m. to take control of the crash site of an AH-64, automatic fire erupted, touching off a fire fight that would last all night.

The situation was confusing at first. Iraqi 8th Army and SWAT elements had been heavily engaged in the hours prior to the arrival of the small task force and were unable to provide a detailed picture of the battleground.

A berm complex, a series of tree lines and a small cluster of farm buildings obstructed views of what Patriot Soldiers later learned was a fortified compound at the edge of a hardened village full of zealots prepared to fight to their deaths.

"The SF did a good job covering the crash site by fire," said Staff Sgt. Brian Butler, then weapons squad leader of 2nd Platoon, C Co., "but they didn't have the means to build a perimeter around it. The only enemy they were seeing were the ones trying to go out to the crash site to get the pilots."

The twilight had turned to darkness, through which the Charger platoons prepared to maneuver around the helicopter. Clemmer issued orders to his platoon leaders to envelop the crash. As the platoons stepped off, AK-47s opened up from four huts to the north.

"The SF was still in control of the birds at that point," Butler said. "That's when the first Hellfire went off." "It was like a match lit up," said Staff Sgt. Robert Bales, team leader in C Company's 1st Squad, 1st Platoon. "It looked like a toy with a candle lit underneath it. Fire straight up."

By 5:45 p.m., the Charger platoons had formed a horseshoe around the downed Apache. They had begun the assault in their Strykers, then dismounted to sweep back across the site. Until then, there had been no mortar- or rocket-propelled-grenade fire to argue against tactical exposure.

By a few minutes after 6 p.m., they had secured the site enough to let the engineers do their work. Sappers traveling with C Company recovered the first pilot while Patriot Soldiers provided cover.

The battalion commander, Lt. Col. Barry Huggins, arrived with Capt. Bill Parsons' B Company, which was task-organized with recovery vehicles and his own engineer platoon.

Charger Company's 1st Platoon took up positions on the eastern side of the chopper while 2nd Platoon settled to the Southeast, directly in front of the still-burning wreckage. Third platoon occupied berms to the west.

Small-arms fire started almost immediately from farther to the southeast. As the platoons were aligned, only 3rd could answer to suppress it without firing through its

own lines.

"The bad guys were not afraid to shoot a lot but had no (aiming lights) and were poorly trained," Clemmer said. "The result was they shot high. Most of my guys will tell you they had parts of the trees around us falling onto them, cut down by enemy fire."

Clemmer called forward his company mortar section and oriented his section sergeant, Staff Sgt. Scott Muetz, on the targets to the east and southeast. Muetz and his section leader, Staff Sgt. Larry Neal, had endured merciless ribbing from the rest of the battalion for their insistence on training on their guns while artillery Soldiers in OIF were used overwhelmingly as infantry assets. Every Charger mortarman was thankful that night for his long hours of training and certification on the guns. With its thicket of deep trenches, Zarqa was more than anything an indirect-fire fight.

"All we had visual on was a little farm shack," Muetz said. "(The compound and village were) farther back in. But at first we were wondering, 'What's all this firing about'"

The mortar section fired missions and alternately dug in. By the early morning, the 60 mm tubes were ensconced inside fighting positions. The platoons on the crash-site perimeter were also using shovels in throwback defensive tactics.

"The cool part about this was World War II style, you dug in," Bales said. "Guys were out there digging a fighting position in the ground. You're taking a shovel and digging as fast as you can."

"It's no problem digging when you have rounds zinging by and the vehicle behind you is getting hit," Muetz said. Soon after he arrived, Parsons conducted a reconnaissance-in-force and placed his engineer platoon in security overwatch on the main road into the site known as ASR Miami. Soon after he arrived, he conducted his own battle handoff with ODA 563 personnel.

En route from FOB Kalsu, Parsons had already attended to convoy security by sending his executive officer, 1st Lt. Patrick Horan, and a small team to neutralize a machine-gun ambush at a choke point along their route to Zarqa. By the time they arrived on the high ground where the enemy position had been sited, the machine gun and its crew were gone.

While B Company settled in, Huggins moved his command post and battalion support trains forward near the C Co. mortar section, now fully engaged in firing 60 mm missions. He was still unaware of the village in front of him, hidden behind the complex of farm shacks and a grove of date palms. After receiving Clemmer's initial reports of spirited resistance and a thorough report from Capt. Roy Kempf, team leader of ODA 563, Huggins began to grasp the capability and dedication of the enemy still menacing the downed Apache in his battle space.

### The plan changes

Huggins decided to modify the mission to engage the large concentration of enemy fighters they had encountered; he called in Parsons and Clemmer and issued an order to destroy enemy forces in the vicinity, while continuing recovery operations.

"We had not yet completed the recovery of the crash site, but had the site well secured," Huggins wrote later in his commander's summary of the battle. "I developed a plan to

coordinate the airspace and allow close-air support, mortars, and rotary-winged aircraft all to participate in the fight. (I) figured we had a lucrative target and should develop it."

"One of the main reasons we were successful," Parsons said, "was Lt. Col. Huggins' simple but effective plan that fixed the enemy and facilitated coordination between the different units on the ground."

He assigned the Joint Theater Air Control System to Parsons to coordinate air assets and ordered him to lead his company south to seal off the bottom of the site. With Blackhorse Soldiers in place by 9 p.m., C Company to the west and the river to the east, Huggins concentrated air power on the northern sector to complete the box around the compound.

"They had a kill box where aircraft were looking for their own targets and calling to make sure everything was clear," said C Co. fire support NCO, Staff Sgt. Jason Sims. "We had our indirect fires to the west of that, fixed wing and Spectre (gun ships) coming in. They were deconflicting themselves for the most part."

Muetz's mortar section switched to 120 mm rounds with low charges to keep the rounds below the flock of swirling aircraft. The Stryker mortar variant delivered round after pinpoint round to foil a number of insurgent attempts to regroup or mount charges.

"Those 120s were dead on," Bales said. "We were getting (target) refinements from Spectre that were no refinements at all with the 120s. They were just dead on, just that accurate."

"We were hearing reports that we'd killed a hundred in this trench line and I'm saying 'Come on now, who's slinging this bull'" Clemmer said. "I've been in Iraq twice now and we've never faced 100 bad guys. It ended up being incredibly accurate, but in our minds, a hundred guys!"

Meanwhile, the careful work continued of extricating the second Apache pilot from the wreckage. Along with ducking enemy fire, the helicopter itself created a greater danger to the engineers attached to Charger Company.

"One Apache has so much (unexploded ordnance)," Butler said. "There was UXO scattered all over that field. I didn't want to blow up trying to dig in so we didn't dig in our hasties."

At 10:27 p.m., brigade engineers accomplished the solemn task of securing the remains of the second pilot. "My infantry was forward fighting and those studs got the bodies out," Clemmer said. "This was not an easy or pleasant task."

#### Fire superiority

As the night wore on, despite the murderous volume of fire from all sides and above, the Soldiers-of-Heaven fighters showed incredible resiliency.

"There was a north-south running road with a big berm, behind which they were able to run and reinforce behind and a trench line that also ran east and west," Butler said. "They'd come up on that berm and we'd shoot them; they'd pull that guy back, do buddy aid on him and replace the guy. So as they were taking casualties they were pulling guys back."

A half-dozen times during the night, enemy fighters made suicidal rushes, some getting to within 100 to 150 meters of Patriot positions, Butler estimated. Every time, they were cut down by the weapons platform most available at the moment.

"Throughout the night, the enemy came up out of their positions and would come towards us," Clemmer said. "It wasn't fair and that was fine with me. As 3rd Battalion, 75th Infantry (Rangers) used to say, 'forget the fair fight.' Our thermals would see them and that .50 cal and the remote weapon station is wicked, wicked, wicked."

Specialist Rodrigo Moreno had a front-row seat with 2nd Platoon, C Company directly in front of the crash site.

"When we were shooting I kind of stood up a little bit and tried to shoot," Moreno said, "but I remember when they were dropping the 500 pounders, we got up on our knees even though bullets were still going over us and we got blown back."

"We had so much control, we were bringing munitions in as close as we could according to military standard," Sims said, "having the control and confidence and everybody knew where everybody was on the battlefield."

It was clear that no amount of fanaticism would stand up to the sophistication and fire superiority of the array of U.S. weapons systems.

As midnight passed, Huggins directed B- and C-Company commanders to offer surrender terms over the public address systems in their command Strykers. They promised a lull to allow enemy fighters to gather themselves and come forward. Instead, the insurgents used the time to regroup and counter-attack.

"By (1 a.m. the enemy) was re-engaging with heavy machine guns and repositioning forces," Huggins said. "We re-engaged with all assets. Among other things, we hit a truck carrying ammunition; it continued to cook off for half an hour. At another point, we hit an underground cache, with sympathetic detonations and small-arms ammunition cooking off for some time afterwards."

The battle wanes

The volume of fire decreased through the early hours of Jan. 29, to the point that by some time between 3 and 4 a.m., 1st Sgt. Viriato Ferrera said it stopped altogether.

"That was the point where I think we broke their will," Ferrera said.

Tarps and more recovery equipment arrived with ammunition resupply, allowing the sappers to complete their work dismantling the helicopter and loading the pieces onto two flat racks.

In the early morning the dangerous mission of trench clearing fell to B Company. Huggins' battle plan from the beginning was for a Blackhorse assault from the south in the morning.

"At first light my 1st Platoon, led by 1st Lt. Austin Jones, moved up the eastern side of the objective to prevent some enemy from escaping," Parsons said. "Then we got on-line, all four platoons, and cleared the trenches."



While B Company mopped up the southern trenches, Clemmer was preparing his company for daylight assault from the west. He dismounted with his platoons and advanced to the berm closest to the compound. Charger Soldiers were going through final checks before the attack.

"I'm right behind my middle platoon, and we're prepping hand grenades," Clemmer said. "We're going to go over the berm and seize this foothold to establish our support-by-fire line for B Company."

As they popped up to go over the berm, fires that had burned overnight met another arms cache that exploded immediately in front of the C Co. position.

"Everyone was hitting the deck, diving over berms," Clemmer said. "The next thing that happens is you start seeing white flags coming out. I'm looking up and my 2nd Platoon leader is in front of me saying, 'Sir, they're surrendering.'"

### Zarqa: Forget the fair fight - Part 3: Warriors to life-savers

Patriot Battalion Soldiers were wary of the first group of Shiite fighters who walked out of Zarqa under white flags.

Special Forces officers had warned Huggins of the Soldiers of Heaven using flags of truce in attempts to sucker U.S. forces into ambushes, word of which he passed through his subordinate commanders.

Huggins' plan before the surrender called for B Co. to clear trenches and assault from the south in the early morning hours of Monday, Jan. 29. For C Co. to assume unobstructed positions from which it could support Blackhorse Soldiers by fire, its platoons were forced to move forward, then intended to pivot on-line and orient with fields of fire across the trenches and the southern edge of the village.

Clemmer had dismounted and was following his 2nd Platoon forward on foot when the white flags appeared. After fighting throughout the night the Chargers took cover on line behind a berm, distrustful of their enemy. Clemmer ordered his platoons to halt in place to let the situation develop, ensuring this surrender was genuine.

"Everyone was exhausted at this point," said C Company platoon leader, 1st Lt. Steve Smith. "Everyone was tense and waiting to see what would happen. We'd been shot at all night by these guys."

First Lieutenant Jon Lowe's 2nd Platoon, B Company Soldiers moved out to clear the largest swath of the Blackhorse sector. Lowe "had a tougher task because they had to clear a portion of the rubble-strewn village that was more heavily populated," Parsons said, as well their share of the trench line. Lowe's platoon also linked with the right flank of C Co. to prevent fratricide. The companies swept forward across the open areas south and west of the village and into the village itself without major incident.

"The fight was out of the enemy," Parsons said.

Parsons' B Co. was still clearing forward of its fighting positions from the previous night

when the small group surrendered to C Co. Within a few minutes, the group in the C Company sector grew bolder.

"My assessment later is they were the bravest ones," Clemmer said. "They probably thought we would kill them."

The operational pause was the first chance for the 2-3 Inf. Soldiers to get a good look at what was in front of them, their first pictures that weren't through the sites of weapons. It was their first realization that there was a village ahead rather than a few random farm buildings.

Two women followed the first group out of the village. When the Americans held their fire for the first several minutes, more followed.

The Charger 3rd Platoon sergeant, Sgt. 1st Class Tausala Faamausili, was the first to see severely wounded villagers ahead, calling out "We've got three litter urgents." From that point, the floodgates opened.

"All of the sudden we go from five or 10 people to 50, then 100," Clemmer said. "Now two platoons are fully engaged from putting the pins back in grenades, calling the trucks up, whipping the concertina wire off the trucks to start building some pens."

Clemmer did a quick handoff with his first sergeant, who set up detainee- and casualty-collection points. The company commander culled out two squads from each platoon and pushed forward to continue clearing the village, while 1st Sgt. Viriato Ferrera took charge of the rest to quickly organize a field medical site.

Shifting on the fly

With no formal order or declaration, the mission of the first sergeant's half of C Company shifted from combat to humanitarian operations.

"I took most of my combat lifesavers, my emergency medical technicians," Ferrera said. "As I started getting flooded with people I called everybody else up and said, 'Look, I need your CLSs, I need all your EMTs down here. I need your medics down here with me.'"

Huggins directed Parsons' company to keep its medics in case his Blackhorse Soldiers met resistance in the trenches. Every other able bodied medic or Soldier with medical training streamed into the impromptu aid station to help.

The battalion surgeon, Lt. Col. Dean Pedersen, prepared his medical-evacuation-variant Stryker to receive patients, then moved out to start categorizing the wounded.

"I jumped into sort of a triage mode," Pedersen said. "I let the medics do what treatment they could and just became an adviser, running from medic to medic saying 'Here, do this, do that ... This woman we need to evac urgently; this one isn't going to make it no matter what we do, go to the next.' There were all kinds (of injuries); the extent of the injuries were massive - extremity amputations to bullet wounds to fractured pelvis, intra-abdominal wounds."

By 9 a.m., the pens were filling fast. There seemed an unlimited number of seriously wounded.

"I had the vehicles positioned so that the people getting treated weren't in view of the detainees," Ferrera said. He set up a field surgical site with Pedersen treating the most seriously wounded.

"Once we started getting the initial casualties in we identified some litter-urgents we had to get out of there," Ferrera said. "I started calling battalion requesting a bird because we needed to get them air evacuated out of there because they were going to pass away."

The sun appeared blood red that morning, Clemmer said, in part because of sand in the air from desert winds. By the time the three medevac helicopters approached, the formation with the call sign "Spirit 11" flew into a full-on sandstorm, somehow touching down exactly on the landing zone that had been scratched out for them.

Weather conditions allowed only one medical sortie, however, with the three birds taking 16 of the worst injured. Two died, but 14 were saved as a direct result of the heroic efforts of the Spirit 11 pilots.

#### Clearing the village

Charger Company Soldiers not engaged in the medical effort moved into the village. Clemmer said it looked like a scene from hell, wrought by the combination of Air Force and Army weapons, from indirect and his own direct fire.

The scene in the village invaded all Charger Soldiers' senses at once.

"I've tried to forget the smell," Clemmer said. "The coppery, charred, sickly sweet smell of it all was overpowering. My radio-telephone operator, Spc. (Zachary) Parsons, and I were moving all around the town and had to keep passing by a couple of the worst spots. He'd just keep lighting the smokes and passing them to me. They were a great distraction to the carnage."

Clemmer wasn't a smoker, but inhaled an entire pack as he and his RTO surveyed the damage.

Bill Parsons' Blackhorse Soldiers encountered the same scenes in the southern sector of the village they cleared.

"I just couldn't understand, faced with this overwhelming firepower, why someone would stand and fight to your death," Parsons said.

Their own plentiful supply of arms and ammunition had apparently given the cult members a false security. Most of the dead were fully outfitted for combat.

"I thought when we were coming up on the objective that like a lot of times it was going to be pretty hard to tell who were combatants and who were not," said Staff Sgt. Brian Butler, weapons squad leader in 2nd Platoon of C Co., "but it wasn't actually. About 95 percent of everybody who was fighting against us, they had some gear on. They had full kits on and they were fully armed. It was clear cut: bad guys here, good guys there. If you were male, you were fighting. That's the way they were doing it. Older males and younger, teen-age and above, they were all kitted up. They had night observation devices, sniper rifles - they had everything."

One C Co. squad gunned down a Soldiers-of-Heaven fighter carrying an AK-47 as he dashed toward a heavy machine gun.

Another squad returned fire as they cleared a building, killing a holdout who attempted to ambush its members.

But these were the exceptions. Most combatants were too injured, exhausted or shell shocked to resist.

"One by one we started pulling these males out," said platoon leader, 1st Lt. Gregory Weber. "About 50 percent of them had some sort of injury, whether it was minor with shrapnel and scratches to some amputees, loss of hearing and eyesight."

After a while, however, the clearing operation morphed with the humanitarian. As Soldiers pulled out the injured, it became apparent to their horror that these fanatics had brought their families to the fight.

"Once we started clearing the town we actually started carrying people back out," said Staff Sgt. Bales, a team leader in 1st Platoon, C Co. "We'd go in, find some people that we could help, because there were a bunch of dead people we couldn't, throw them on a litter and bring them out to the casualty collection point."

Heavy toll

From mid-morning through mid-afternoon, the medical aid station brimmed with bloody customers. The Charger first sergeant estimated that 90 percent of the wounded and detainees were combatants, about half of those humiliated at their loss, but most of them visibly grateful to no longer be fighting.

The nature of the casualties demonstrated the precision of U.S. firepower. Huggins said the highest battle-damage estimate of noncombatants killed was 10, a statistic verging on miraculous considering the ordnance visited upon the Shiite fighters, testimony to the accuracy of U.S. weapons and the remarkable discipline exercised by the pilots, artillerymen and Soldiers pulling the triggers.

"I was glad for the pilots that they saw it from afar because we were dealing with most of that," Butler said. "They did an outstanding job of target discrimination because most of the dead were all enemy (combatants)."

As the day wore on, the relentless flow of casualties took its toll on C Company's stores of supplies.

"That's the first time I saw the MEV completely empty of all first aid equipment," Ferrera said. "We went completely black on equipment and first aid supplies."

The number and nature of the wounded also took an emotional toll.

"The hardest thing they had to deal with (among) all the guys that were treating that day, as well as myself because I have four children, was treating the children," Ferrera said.

He stopped one NCO from fleeing after treating a 5-year-old girl with a grievously injured arm.

"I need you here to do your job, Sergeant," he told the exhausted, overwhelmed medic. "These people need you." That was probably the largest battle that day - treating the children."

Faamausili, who was named an "Armed Forces Real Hero" by the Rainier Chapter of the American Red Cross for his combat- and lifesaving actions that day, found two children dead along the road leading to the village. The platoon sergeant's men watched as he wrapped them in a rug and, eyes glistening, gently placed them away from traffic.

"Just the grief on his face for the loss of a child's life," Clemmer said. "The guy's almost 6'6" and 300 pounds, and in this tender way wrapping up someone who had been killed, treating them like his own kids. I try to get most of the images of that place out of my head, but that's one of the few that always sticks there."

Ferrera stayed on task but remembered thinking at the end of the day, "Why would you bring your family, your children to something like this if you know what you were going to do"

By 3 p.m., they had treated most of the wounded and around 4 p.m., transferred responsibility for them and the site to the Iraqi Security Forces.

Pedersen, exhausted by his lifesaving efforts, knelt and took a moment to catch his breath. He had trouble getting back on his feet.

#### Aftermath

Interrogators' interviews with detainees began to paint an intelligence picture later confirmed by materials collected at Zarqa. The Soldiers of Heaven were a Shiite splinter group that had prepared and trained for combat. They had imminent plans to travel to Najaf and murder three Shiite leaders during Ashura to foment strife and exacerbate an already tenuous security environment that some were in January 2007 calling a civil war in Iraq.

"This is a cult who had bought this farm, like the Branch Davidians," Huggins said. "It was their base. They had stockpiled medical supplies, ammunition, a significant number of weapons, literally hundreds and hundreds of small arms, RPGs.

I don't know what the result would have been had all those folks been assassinated during Ashura. It's probably not unreasonable to assume that a collapse would have ensued. And it was headed off because they shot a helicopter down and we got sucked into what went from a search-and-rescue to a recovery to a hasty defense to an attack to humanitarian relief."

The current commander of 2-3 Inf. saw the battle as validation for the tactics, configuration and agility of the Stryker brigade combat team.

"Zarqa demonstrated that we have an expeditionary mindset, a mindset unlike any other unit in the Army today," Lt. Col. Adam Rocke said. "It shows that a Stryker infantry task force is capable of doing things that no other unit in the Army is capable of doing, exemplifying flexibility, agility and lethality like no other unit."

Rocke said the battalion's exceptional chain of command helped the SBCT produced the

one-sided victory.

"Leadership is paramount," he said, "leaders who are seasoned, who understand commander's intent and who act with disciplined initiative and who understand the offensive mindset."

The ability to conduct full-spectrum operations and transition to humanitarian activities proved how unique Stryker Soldiers are, he said.

That sentiment was shared by the NCOs who were there, many of whom remain in the Patriot Battalion.

"I've never been more proud to be a part of this unit than that day," Bales said now a member of 2-3 Inf. headquarters, "for the simple fact that we discriminated between the bad guys and the noncombatants and then afterward we ended up helping the people that three or four hours before were trying to kill us. I think that's the real difference between being an American as opposed to being a bad guy, someone who puts his family in harm's way like that."

Clemmer, who won a Silver Star for his leadership through all phases of the complex battle, saw it as a moral victory as well as a tactical one.

"There is not an army in the world, in my opinion, that can go from taking pins out of grenades and throwing them over trenches to receiving wounded, treating the wounded and taking care of an enemy that we had killed throughout the night - treating enemy combatants with that humanity."

For its actions in the Battle of Zarqa, 2-3 Inf. has been submitted for the Valorous Unit Award. The recommendation received the endorsement of the current commanding general of Central Command, Gen. David S. Petraeus, and is awaiting final approval at Human Resources Command.

Don Kramer is a reporter with Fort Lewis' Northwest Guardian.