

Marines in Iraq: The warriors' way

They maintain a monastic devotion to making right choices and sparing innocents amid the chaos of Iraq, says a former officer.

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June 6, 2006

ON APRIL 6, 2004, Cpl. Jason Howell, a Marine squad leader who had arrived in Iraq three weeks before, was enduring his baptism of fire in what later became known as the "first battle of Fallouja." Howell, who had not eaten in 18 hours or slept in 36, was running on nothing but adrenaline. His dehydrated spittle, caked around the side of his mouth, was dirty white. Kneeling on a roof, he saw a flash of movement. An Iraqi child put his face out the window.

Exhausted, Howell found himself unable to process the Arabic word he had learned for "stop." Without thinking, he screamed. The child pulled the curtains as Howell automatically raised his weapon to shoot. Then Howell blinked. An instant later, clarity returned to his thoughts. The corporal, who was in his first of what would become many days of combat, had almost shot an innocent.

"I don't know exactly why I didn't pull the trigger," said Howell, who now serves with the L.A. County Sheriff's Department. "It all happened so fast. It was a combination of training, instinct and luck."

As the furor grows over allegations that Marines killed 24 Iraqi civilians last November — including women and children — the origins of Howell's discipline are worth examining.

The Corps is the smallest of the United States' military services, and it also has the highest enlisted-to-officer ratio (about 10 to 1). Because of this, a much higher level of responsibility is placed on corporals and sergeants, or noncommissioned officers. In each Marine infantry battalion, which is the primary combat element, an average of 60 noncommissioned officers lead squads or a unit of similar size. As squad leaders, they assume responsibility for the lives — and split-second decisions — of about a dozen men.

Marines are legendary for their monastic devotion to the warrior ideal. The mottos inked on their bodies — Death Before Dishonor, Make Peace or Die, Always Faithful — function as physical scriptures for their choice of religion, like scapulars, phylacteries or "What Would Jesus Do?" bracelets. The ancient Spartans, who sacrificed at the battle of Thermopylae to defend the Greeks from the Persian onslaught, are venerated as saints within the Corps. The Spartan Way is a stoic faith.

SINCE THE FALL of 2001, 26 active duty and nine Marine Reserve infantry battalions have rotated into and out of Afghanistan and Iraq as units for seven-month tours of duty. As new recruits join a battalion, seasoned noncommissioned officers either gain rank toward senior billets or leave the Corps for civilian life. Although the exact numbers remain classified information, unit casualty reports suggest that about 50 separate rotations of Marine infantry battalions have been tested in combat over the last four years.

Using those statistics as a bare minimum, at least 3,000 corporals and sergeants have served combat tours as infantry squad leaders. Not to mention hundreds more who cut their teeth as combat replacements, convoy security escorts, translators, intelligence collectors or instructors for the new Iraqi army. When the histories are written, we will learn that the exact number of young Marines thrust into

positions of leadership — amid an international media spotlight — is actually much higher.

Several Marines have already been convicted in the court of public opinion in the Haditha case. As military investigators evaluate these allegations, those on the sidelines should avoid castigation of an entire system because of the errors of a few. Consider the rush to judgment of 2nd Lt. Ilario G. Pantano, who was charged with murder at an April 2004 checkpoint shooting, or the nameless Marine in a Fallouja mosque who was seen on video killing an insurgent thought to have been booby-trapped. Both were eventually exonerated of all charges.

Responsible critics of the Iraq war say that we misappropriated U.S. military resources in making an unnecessary choice to topple Saddam Hussein's regime, a choice that has plunged young soldiers and Marines into the amorality of a protracted counterinsurgency. But placing too close an association on the Haditha massacre with the war's politics ignores the thousands of troops who have navigated the chaos and still made the right decisions.

Accuracy in the application of deadly force is the foundational creed for any who protect and defend their society. Discerning combatant from innocent is the greatest challenge for all who have engaged in this kind of war. Like spiritual perfection, the warrior ideal is often an impossible thing to fully achieve. But as we condemn the handful who have backslid in their pursuit of the Spartan Way, we should not forget to esteem the thousands who, like Cpl. Jason Howell, have kept their honor clean amid Iraq's insanity.

Originally published with The Los Angeles Times (latimes.com)

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