

Fallujah: A Touchstone Battle

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Executive Editor's note: The following article received 3rd place in the 2025 Leatherneck Magazine Writing Contest. The award is provided through an endowment by the Colonel Charles E. Michaels Foundation and is being given in memory of Colonel William E. Barber, USMC, who fought on Iwo Jima during World War II, and was the recipient of the Medal of Honor for his actions at the Battle of Chosin Reservoir during the Korean War.

The Marine warrior is not found in a military occupational specialty. They are not bound by a specific geographic marker or line. They do not require shrapnel fragments or enemy fire hurling toward them, nor blood spilling into dust and gravel. Marine warriors

are not relative; they do not manifest or dissolve based on external circumstances or conditions.

In September 2003, I met a young man in Boston, Mass. He was strong, disciplined and, frankly, he was arrogant. He was not a Marine. None of us were. We sat together at Boston's Military Entrance Processing Station, contemplating what it would mean to be one—what it would take to turn our plans into a solid and never-changing reality. This particular recruit was annoyingly gung-ho, without even knowing what “gung-ho” meant. Frustratingly enough, he was able to back up his bravado. He would leave Parris Island, S.C., as the Company Honor Graduate, earning a meritorious promotion to lance corporal. Though he was not from my home state, his proximity in Massachusetts placed him at my recruiting station in Nashua, N.H. This meant I would meet him again during

recruiting assistance while awaiting combat training. He had only become surer of himself—more intense, more insufferable. The type of lance corporal who demanded that junior Marines speak to him at parade rest.

I wouldn't see him again until I was stationed in Okinawa nearly a year later. Unexpectedly, from the pages of *Stars and Stripes*, the young lance corporal stared back at me. He died in November 2004—Fallujah, Iraq.

Touchstone battles can be examined in multiple ways: the precedence they set for tactics and operations, their reaffirmation of foundational principles or their cascading effects on future engagements. All these approaches apply to the 2004 Battle of Fallujah. But what about the literal meaning of a touchstone? A touchstone tests purity. Historically, it was used to confirm the authenticity of precious metals—to verify their virtue.



SSGT JONATHAN C. KNAUTH, USMC

Marines with 1st Bn, 8th Marines, 1stMarDiv, prepare to patrol through Fallujah, Iraq, during Operation Al Fajr on Nov. 26, 2004.

By the marks it leaves, we determine if what we hold is valuable and true.

How could any battle make such a claim? How could any war claim purity? Who looks at Iwo Jima's devastation and labels it pure? Who sees the Marines freezing at the Chosin Reservoir and exclaims, "With certainty, this is true. This is virtue." War is, by all accounts, hell. It is pain and suffering and mistakes, often bloody ones. And yet, virtue emerges from trials and purity through fire. That is what a touchstone battle truly is: It purifies and proves value through trials. The mark it leaves testifies to what occurred and to what the Marine Corps has become because of it. What battle demonstrates this more than Fallujah?

I am not a historian who has examined the intricacies and timelines of the conflict, nor am I a battle-worn Marine who has been engulfed by the chaos and pain of war. However, I have worn the uniform of the Marine warrior for nearly 22 years and have seen more of what the Marine Corps has to offer than most. I witnessed, in real time, the devastating groundswell the Battle of Fallujah caused throughout the Marine Corps. I have friends who were physically and mentally scarred. The echoes of those lost can still be heard in the silence of Marines every November as the Birthday message is played and the battle is mentioned.

Fallujah tested far more than just the Marines who put boots on the ground. The warrior community as a whole had to grow and reaffirm itself. We had to face the reality of belonging to a fraternity whose business is war. We were no longer an organization that simply talked and dreamt about the glorious battles of our forefathers—battles that established our prestige and reputation. We were fighting our battle. And our Marine siblings were paying for it, as our forefathers did, with their blood. This battle tested and demonstrated the Marine's virtue as a warrior. It also reaffirmed that Marines are still up for the challenge of living up to the title.

Society and American culture affirm this reality. Fallujah has often been used as shorthand in fiction to establish a character's toughness and resolve. Frank Castle, "The Punisher," most recently played by Jon Bernthal, has been depicted as the embodiment of the relentless Marine. He had fought in Fallujah prior to his anti-hero arc. His role as Shane Walsh in "The Walking Dead," long had fans assuming his character there also must have been in Fallujah, a ruthless battle-hardened image that likely helped Bernthal land the role of Frank Castle later.



LCPL TREVOR R. GIFT, USMC

A Marine with 1st Bn, 8th Marines, 1stMarDiv, maintains watch from a building in Fallujah, Iraq, on Nov. 10, 2004.

Bob Swagger, played by Mark Wahlberg in the TV version of "Shooter," is another Marine whose backstory leans on Fallujah to convey his experience and competence. Similarly, Rip Taggart ("SIX"), Marc Spector ("Moon Knight") and John Triton ("The Marine") all share this background. The movie "Battle: Los Angeles" went a step further than simply using it for character development; it intentionally recreated the battle for its fictional setting of alien-invaded Los Angeles, Calif. Aaron Eckhart, who plays Staff Sergeant Michael Nantz, was told by Director Jonathan Liebesman after being shown real footage of Marines in Fallujah, "This is what the movie is going to look like."

Our cultural consciousness clearly sees Fallujah as a touchstone battle—not just within the Marine Corps but for Americans. It reaffirmed to all that U.S. Marines are warriors. It showed the world that Marines hold up as authentic, as pure as gold or silver.

Now, whether Fallujah revealed that the Marine Corps was still the same fearsome fighting force that rushed into Belleau Wood in decades past or simply realigned us as a force worthy of that comparison, I cannot say. However, I can confidently claim that the mark it left proved genuine precious metal. I looked into the eyes of the young man in the paper that day and saw it when I had not seen it before. I was realigned. Even now, as I stand in the twilight of my career, his memory still steers me truer, myself refined by the battle that took a brother.

I would eventually serve in Iraq and Afghanistan, but I was blessed to do so

from the relative safety found behind the wire. Now, I find myself surrounded by young Marines who did not join expecting to go off to either of those battlefields. They talk to me with a sort of awe and amazement, knowing that I was there and that I knew Marines who fought in Fallujah. The battle their heroes fought, on TV and in movies.

Besides making me feel ancient, it reminds me just how significant that battle was in American history. To them, it is another glorious tale of Marine grit and determination—a battle for the history books and the silver screen. A battle that testifies to what a Marine warrior truly is.

Marine warriors are not relative; they do not manifest or dissolve based on external circumstances or conditions. They exist in various states of rawness and refinement. They exist throughout the Corps, preparing for the time they are called to leave their mark—on the world and on their fellow Marines.

Author's bio: GySgt Jason E. LaCount enlisted in the Marine Corps in 2003 as an air traffic control communications technician. His first duty station was Marine Corps Air Station Futenma with Marine Tactical Air Command Squadron 18 until 2006. He then transferred to MCAS Cherry Point, where he deployed to Al Asad Air Base, Iraq, from 2007 to 2008 in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

He retired from the Marine Corps September 2025. LaCount is also a regular contributor to the American Legion's monthly magazine. 🇺🇸