

In Iraq, their weapon is data

Marines fight with what they know

BY JOE SWICKARD

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FALLUJAH, Iraq -- Inside a stronghold that commands a stretch of land between the river and the desert, the Hobbits work wonders in a windowless chamber.

As a battle raged miles away last week, the Hobbits knew the arena intimately, down to the concrete building from which the enemy threw gunfire at their fellow Marines. It was the Hobbits' collected data that allowed a circling jet to launch a bomb at the structure, imploding the building and killing the gunmen inside.

In the ongoing fight against insurgents in Iraq's Anbar province, the Hobbits -- six Marines with computers and self-designed databases who compile information about the enemy, its strength and its position -- have a clear mission as part of the Michigan-based 1st Battalion of the 24th Marine Regiment.

"We want to know their backyards and houses better than they do," said Lance Cpl. Curtis Mejeur, 21, of Grand Rapids.

Mejeur is a Grand Valley State University student back home in Michigan. In Iraq, he is a member of the 1/24th's Alpha Company, and a Hobbit -- one of four certified-smart and computer-wily lance corporals led by a corporal and a sergeant who, together, provide some of the magic necessary for modern combat.

"Use of intelligence is at the heart of this generation of warfare," said the 1/24th's commanding officer, Maj. Daniel Whisnant of Kalamazoo, himself a former intelligence officer. "The Hobbits are key to that."



From left, Lance Cpl. Curtis Mejeur, Lance Cpl. Joshua Clayton, Lance Cpl. Matthew Robinson, Lance Cpl. Ryan Brown and Sgt. Jeremiah Howe are part of the computer savvy group. (Photos by DAVID P. GILKEY/Detroit Free Press)

**Following Michigan's
Band of Brothers**

The six are small and slight Marines -- most are shorter than 5-feet-7 and the tallest towers at maybe 5-9 -- in a corps world of Buick-sized beef and brawn.

But with their skills and smarts, they take tactical intelligence and put it to effective use killing and capturing insurgents who have turned the area around Fallujah into one of the most dangerous sectors in Iraq.

Whenever information is gathered, Whisnant's directive is clear: "Get that to the Hobbits."

Through regular patrols, census-taking and other methods, Alpha Company -- which operates across the Euphrates River from Fallujah -- provides information to allow the Hobbits to assemble and analyze a detailed portrait of the people, the terrain and the buildings.

Unlike the intense urban environment of Fallujah, Alpha's region covers riverside estates and farms, scattered neighborhoods and open desert, where the occasional village or settlement can be found.

The gunfight last week showed the power of the intelligence information in action.

Tapping into a database created by Lance Cpl. Joshua Clayton, a 22-year-old computer programmer from Grand Rapids, the Hobbits were able to locate and describe the buildings the insurgents were using.

Working in the operations center beside Whisnant and his team, the Hobbits helped link their buddies in the firefight with other Marine leaders at other bases along the command chain and up to the pilot ready to strike from above.

Whisnant said the Hobbits' database also has led to the arrest and capture of dozens of other "bad guys."

"We're able to know who belongs here and who doesn't," he said.

A different kind of fighting

The Hobbits were drawn from the usual complement of riflemen in the Grand Rapids-based company that is part of the 1/24th on its deployment to

Free Press staff writer Joe Swickard and photojournalist David P. Gilkey are in Iraq to cover the 1st Battalion of the 24th Marine Regiment -- Michigan's Band of Brothers -- as it conducts military operations in Anbar province. The battalion's 700-some Marines constitute the largest deployment of Michigan Marines since the war began in 2003.

Staff writer John Masson and photojournalist Stephen McGee are covering their families and loved ones left behind on the home front.

Come back to the Free Press in the weeks ahead for dispatches from the war front; go to www.freep.com to see videos and previous reports on the Band of Brothers.

Meet the Hobbits

Iraq.

They enlisted to be go-get-em gun-carrying grunts, but their test scores and personalities fit with plans to move military thinking toward analysis of the complex environment of anti-insurgent warfare.

It was during the battalion's five months of training in the Mojave Desert that the men were singled out and publicly proclaimed the Hobbits.

The name doesn't bother the guys.

"I like the name," said Lance Cpl. Matthew Robinson, 21, of Grand Rapids. "I like being a Hobbit. It doesn't bother me being short. In fact I like it."

Sgt. Jeremiah Howe, 29, of Redford Township -- who works for the Transportation Security Administration at Metro Airport -- said the Hobbits aren't mouse pad warriors: They regularly go out on multiday combat operations.

It's all part of the mission, said Robinson. When he enlisted, it was with thoughts of guns-up action, not computer warfare.

"I had no idea," he said. "I thought I'd just come over and go against the bad guys. I still do -- in a different way."

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The following are the members of Alpha Company in the Michigan-based 1st Battalion of the 24th Marine Regiment who are known as the Hobbits -- working to compile information and create databases to help battle insurgents around Fallujah:

- **Sgt. Jeremiah Howe**, 29, Redford Township, TSA employee at Detroit Metro Airport

- **Cpl. A.J. Tyink**, 22, Holland, UPS employee and Grand Valley State University student

- **Lance Cpl. Joshua Clayton**, 22, Grand Rapids, computer programmer

- **Lance Cpl. Ryan Brown**, 21, Allegan, plans to be a chef and restaurateur

- **Lance Cpl. Curtis Mejeur**, 21, Grand Rapids, Grand Valley State University student

• **Lance Cpl. Matthew Robinson**, 21, Grand Rapids, plans to be social worker

Joe Swickard