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By PAMELA HESS, Pentagon correspondent

Published: Sept. 13, 2004 at 6:30 PM

WASHINGTON, Sept. 13 (UPI) -- The U.S. Marine general responsible for Fallujah opposed the April attack on the city as well as the order to withdraw his troops before they had gained control of it.

Lt. Gen. James Conway, the outgoing commander of the 1st Marine Expeditionary Unit, told the Washington Post he resisted called for revenge after four American security workers were killed and mutilated in Fallujah March 31. Instead, civilian authorities, Coalition Provisional Chief Paul Bremer and the White House, decided to send the Marines in to capture or kill the perpetrators.

Well into the siege on the city -- after President George Bush called a meeting at Camp David with his top security advisers -- Conway was ordered to withdraw his troops.

In their place, Conway was pressed into crafting something called the Fallujah Brigade, a band of largely former Iraqi military soldiers who were supposed to keep order in the city. Fallujah became a "no go" zone for U.S. forces, although there are frequent battles on the edge of the city, and the Fallujah Brigade became a large part of the problem -- even enforcing a decree by a local sheik that anyone wearing the uniform of the U.S.- backed Iraqi National Guard would be killed.

Two ING battalion commanders were kidnapped Aug. 9. At least one of them was killed after being forced to make a videotaped confession of collaboration with the United States, and his body dumped in downtown Fallujah.

The Fallujah Brigade was officially disbanded last week, but the foundation had been laid at least a month ago. Officials from the 1st Marine Division told the replacement ING battalion commanders the brigade would be taken apart by Aug. 21, and the local police would be disbanded as well.

The plan was to clear the city of any Fallujah Brigade and police members who could be convinced



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to cooperate with the U.S. military and to the government in Baghdad. They were invited to join the new Iraqi army or the highway patrol, respectively. Any one who did not want to join those units was expected to turn in their uniforms, weapons and ID cards.

The intention was to turn Fallujah into a blank slate -- that is, anyone who appeared on the street with a gun or in a uniform would be considered fair game if Baghdad asked U.S. forces to go back in and clear the city.

That order has yet to be given, but the Marines situated around Fallujah have stepped up the pace of operations in the last week. News reports say at least 15 Iraqis were killed in fighting there Monday.

Fallujah was a sore point for most of the 25,000 Marines in Anbar Province since April. At least seven battalions were sent to the fight there after the contractors were killed, and they were drawn into at least a three-week "siege" of the city, although they all point out that humanitarian aid was being allowed into the city and citizens were free to leave.

Most Marines interviewed believed they were within three or four days of beating back the insurgent force in town when they were pulled out by civilian authorities, who believed the operation was alienating Iraqis.

More telling is the fact that senior commanders universally said in interviews -- all of them on condition of anonymity -- if they were making the decision, they would not have gone into Fallujah at that time under those conditions.

It is a basic U.S. military tenet to choose the time and place of a battle. The streets of Fallujah may be an unavoidable and tricky battlefield, but the immediate aftermath of the March 31 killings was not the time to fight, they said.

First, that robbed them of the element of surprise. It was well known -- because it was announced from press podiums in Baghdad -- that U.S. forces were going in to find the perpetrators and bring Fallujah under control.

Second, it "taught" the insurgents that their provocative acts could draw the United States into an urban battle when they wanted it, rather than the other way around.

Third, finding the individuals whose faces were on the videotape of the contractor killings is in essence a police job. Fallujah being the tribal city that it was, it would be easy under peaceful conditions to have local police find the identities of the killers and arrest them. Hunting down a handful of men and boys is not the best use of U.S. military capabilities.

A senior Marine official told Marines just rotating into Iraq in July that U.S. forces were ordered into and out of Fallujah for political reasons, but it was "nothing to gnash your teeth about." Marines are there to follow the orders of civilian authorities.

Combining Fallujah with fighting in southern Iraq against the militia loyal to cleric Moqtada Sadr, 51 Marines, 68 soldiers and six Navy men died in action in April.

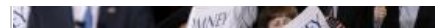
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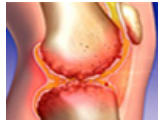
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