

From: North County Times, August 22, 2006

Mattis: Success in Iraq now a test of wills

By: MARK WALKER - Staff Writer

CAMP PENDLETON -- The war in Iraq is now a test of perseverance, the commanding general of Marine Corps forces in the Middle East said Monday.

"It is mostly a matter of wills," Lt. Gen. James N. Mattis said during an exclusive interview with the North County Times. "Whose will is going to break first? Ours or the enemy's?"

Mattis said he has no doubt of U.S. resolve but no clear idea how long it will take to root out the insurgency. He said he plans to go to Iraq soon to talk with Marine commanders and frontline troops to get a complete picture of the war.

"Let me get more time over in the theater for a better feel for how long this is going to take," the general said during the 45-minute session in his new office at Camp Pendleton where he commands the I Marine Expeditionary Force as well as overseeing Marine forces in Iraq.

The general said he understands Americans' increasing impatience with the war and frustrations over repeated deployments, but said establishing a date for withdrawal would send the wrong message.

"If we put a timeline on it, than the enemy knows exactly what we are going to do and will wait until the deadline comes," he said. "Marines don't know how to spell the word 'defeat.' We will stay sturdy and we will continue to fight and protect the Iraqi people no matter what is thrown in our path."

Mattis, who led the Marines in the invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 and led the 1st Marine Division in the invasion of Iraq and march to Baghdad in early 2003, said he was once asked by an Iraqi when he would leave that country.

"I said I am never going to leave. I told him I had found a little piece of property down on the Euphrates River and I was going to have a retirement home built there.

"I did that because I wanted to disabuse him of any sense that he could wait me out."

'Extremely complex fight'



General James N. Mattis, commander of Marine forces in Iraq and new commanding general of I Marine Expeditionary Force during an interview at Camp Pendleton on Monday.

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With Marines sitting up on railroad tracks above him, Commander of the 1st Marine Division Major Gen. James Mattis visits a Marine held position to see how the fighting was going on the northwest side of Fallujah, Iraq on Wednesday, April 7, 2004.

HAYNE PALMOUR IV Staff Photographer
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The debate has long passed as to whether the Iraq war can be won on a strictly military basis, said Mattis, who also led Marines forces in the battle for the insurgent stronghold city of Fallujah in April 2004.

"A military solution is not possible," he said. "This has been vigorously debated and resolved among Marine and Army senior leadership. We have never thought this would end with a military solution and that is why the need for ... diplomats is just as important as expeditionary military forces."

Understanding the ordinary Iraqi, for instance, remains vital to U.S. success, he said.

"It's not that difficult but without it you can't win the will of the people, and if you don't at least neutralize their support for the enemy, than all you are doing is fighting and fighting. You don't really have a purpose to your fighting if you can't connect with the people."

Today's Marines are the best educated and trained in the history of the service and part of his job is to make sure that continues as the conflict in Iraq goes on, Mattis said.

"Wars like this are winnable but you have got to have a sophisticated approach and you've got to have very sturdy and spiritually sturdy Marines who can keep their balance in the face of an extremely complex fight."

As an example, Mattis talked of a Marine unit that had just seen several of its members wounded in a roadside bomb explosion yet took the time to wave to Iraqi children after the dead and injured were evacuated and it was leaving the area.

"It's not a small issue to wave to kids after just seeing your buddies blown up, but that shows on the most pedestrian level the kind of sturdiness that is needed in what is just a morally bruising environment where the enemy hides among the people."

New goals

Mattis assumed command of Marine Corps Forces Central and the I Marine Expeditionary Force last week from Lt. Gen. John F. Sattler following a two-year stint at Quantico, Va., as commander of combat development.

Once Sattler handed over those commands eight days ago, Mattis said, his foremost obligation became delivering to Gen. John Abazaid, commander of all U.S. forces in Iraq, whatever he needs from the Marines.

His second obligation, he said, is to the more than 25,000 Marines and sailors who make up the I Marine Expeditionary Force, a force whose units are now returning from Iraq following their third assignment there since 2003.

"For the I MEF, it is to ensure that the force which has carried a very significant part of the fight in this war has what it needs so that in an uncertain world we're all certain of one thing: if there's trouble, the I MEF can handle whatever is assigned to us to do."

Among the challenges he faces at Camp Pendleton is helping decide the fate of seven Camp Pendleton Marines and a Navy corpsman accused of premeditated murder and kidnapping in the death of an Iraqi man in April.

Pretrial hearings for those men are slated to start soon, and as commanding general, Mattis will determine whether their cases should move forward to courts-martial. If that happens and they are convicted, the 55-year-old general will also help decide the appropriate punishment.

He also will help decide whether Marines from another Camp Pendleton unit will face criminal charges in the deaths of 24 civilians in the Iraqi city of Haditha in November. Because the general is the "convening authority" under the military justice system for those cases, that subject matter was off-limits during the interview.

New battlefield manuals

Until now, the Marine Corps and Army have been conducting the war in Iraq and Afghanistan using a more than two-decades-old manual for fighting an insurgency. That's about to change with the introduction of a pair of manuals, one written by Mattis, the other co-written by him.

Last month, the Marine Corps published a Small Unit Leaders Guide to Counterinsurgency he authored. Later this year, a 250-page updated version of the "Small Wars Manual," written by Mattis and Army Lt. Gen. David Petraeus, will be published.

"The Small Wars Manual has stood the test of time, but much of our thinking was directed against a communist insurgency," Mattis said, explaining the rationale for the updated version.

"War's fundamental nature hasn't changed since Alexander the Great fought, but you must adapt to different techniques and what we have written and largely completed is a new approach to counterinsurgency that addresses the specific characteristics of what we face today."

As the military establishment is in the midst of conducting an assessment of the war and identifying mistakes that have been made in preparation for future conflicts, Mattis said, the degree of cooperation between the Army and Marine Corps today is unprecedented.

"We have never had a closer relationship with the Army, never," he said. "The circumstances and the shared approach to war fighting and the integration of units in each other's formations has never been greater. As a result, we now approach many of the problems with the same experiences and same goals."

Cultural and geographic sensitivity

Another hallmark of Mattis' most recent work at Quantico that is now being implemented under his direction as a force commander is greater training in cultural awareness and sensitivities and language skills.

"We have to be able to make a cross-cultural connection," said Mattis, whose personal library once numbered more than 2,000 books before he gave at least half away.

Mattis has been involved in the development of a Center for Advanced Operational and Cultural Learning for officers and senior enlisted men and woman. The center has divided the world into subregions that Mattis said are referred to as the "arch of instability."

By the time an enlisted Marine makes sergeant, he or she will be expected to have taken at least 300 hours of instruction, he said.

"We now have the same expectation of our noncommissioned officers as we do of our field-grade officers -- that they will be able to read the cultural terrain," he said. "It is more important now in a time when you don't seize terrain and when the army against you doesn't come at you in mass formation."

Leadership changes?

Mattis said he has not decided whether he will make any immediate changes in the command structure among Marine forces in Iraq, where Maj. Gen. Richard Zilmer is the current leader of the

I Marine Expeditionary Forces Forward.

"I need to get back out there and get my own personal situational awareness," he said during the interview, where his personal effects such as plaques and awards remain lined up on the floor waiting to be hung. "I will be going out soon and will be all ears."

The dangerous western Iraqi province of Anbar, the region where the Sunni Arab insurgency is the strongest and where the Marines have been on station since the invasion, is his destination. The Defense Department on Monday reported that two Marines and sailors were killed in combat operations there on Sunday. To date, nearly 7,000 Marines have been killed or wounded since the 2003 invasion.

Despite the continued attacks against U.S. forces from insurgents, many of whom are linked to the al-Qaida terrorist group, Mattis said, those opposing U.S. forces know they face a formidable foe.

"Al-Qaida is confronting a very difficult challenge and is daily paying a bloody price as they try to terrorize the Iraqi people into some sort of acquiescence to their rule."

Re-equipping on pace

A report being issued on Wednesday by the Center for American Progress in Washington is expected to outline shortfalls in Marine Corps equipment, including armored personnel carriers, aircraft and other major components used to move and protect Marine forces.

Mattis said he is optimistic that as long as Marine leaders clearly identify their needs, congressional appropriators will provide the money to replace aging hardware and pay for more modern equipment.

"We have to keep pace because this is going to be a long fight," Mattis said, adding he does not expect the Marine Corps will go lacking for materials it needs.

Thanks to the community

Mattis said there was "no place I'd rather be than back here with the I MEF where we have the best training and best-led Marines and sailors in the world."

He also said he is particularly grateful for the support shown by ordinary North County residents, merchants, church and support groups for the troops and their families.

"We live in a community that supports us and our Marines deeply appreciate the support that comes from all quarters," he said.

His assignment back to Camp Pendleton marks the return of Marine commander whose reputation as an aggressive battlefield commander and a blunt-talking leader preceded him.

"We keep on charging and we will continue to do so," he said. "I have no doubt about that whatsoever."

-- Contact staff writer Mark Walker at (760) 740-3529 or mlwalker@nctimes.com.

AT A GLANCE:

Gen. James N. Mattis

Born: Richland, Wash.

Schooling: Attended Central Washington University; graduate of Amphibious Warfare School, Marine Corps Command and Staff College and the National War College

Years of service: 1972 until the present

Battles: Operation Desert Storm, Operation Enduring Freedom, Operation Iraqi Freedom

Last assignment: Marine Corps Combat Development command and Deputy Commandant for Combat Development at Quantico, Va.

Current assignment: Commander, U.S. Marine Corps Forces Central Command and all Marines in Iraq and commanding general of the Camp Pendleton-based I Marine Expeditionary Force

QUICK QUOTES:

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-- Lt. Gen. James N. Mattis