Troops Blast Music in Siege of Fallujah

By THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

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FALLUJAH, Iraq (AP) -- In Fallujah's darkened, empty streets, U.S. troops blast AC/DC's "Hell's Bells" and other rock music full volume from a huge speaker, hoping to grate on the nerves of this Sunni Muslim city's gunmen and give a laugh to Marines along the front line.

Unable to advance farther into the city, an Army psychological operations team hopes a mix of heavy metal and insults shouted in Arabic -- including, "You shoot like a goat herder" -- will draw gunmen to step forward and attack. But no luck Thursday night.

The loud music recalls the Army's use of rap and rock to help flush out Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega after the December 1989 invasion on his country, and the FBI's blaring progressively more irritating tunes in an attempt to end a standoff with armed members of the Branch Davidian cult in Waco, Texas in 1993.

The Marines' psychological operations came as U.S. negotiators were pressing Fallujah representatives to get gunmen in the city to abide by a cease-fire.

Six days after negotiations halted a U.S. offensive against insurgents in the city, the Marines continue carving out front line positions and hope for orders to push forward. Many are questioning the value of truce talks with an enemy who continues to launch attacks.

"These guys don't have a centralized leader; they're just here to fight. I don't see what negotiations are going to do," said Capt. Shannon Johnson, a company commander for the 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment. Word of truce talks last week forced his battalion to halt its plunge into the northeast section of the city just hours after arriving to back up other Marines.

In the meantime, perhaps the fiercest enemy -- everyone here seems to agree -- is the boredom, and worst of all the flies that pepper this dusty Euphrates River city west of Baghdad. Marines burn them, using matches to turn cans of flammable bug spray into mini blow torches. They also try to kill them by sprinkling diesel fuel over fly colonies. They joke about calling in airstrikes.

Fallujah's front lines remain dangerous.

On Friday, insurgents fired several mortars at U.S. forces. One of the shells blasted a chunk out of a house where Marines are positioned, filling the building with dust and smoke. No one was injured.

A short time later, an F-16 jet dropped a 2,000-pound bomb on the city, sending up a massive spray of dirt and smoke and destroying a building where Marines had spotted gunmen.

"The longer we wait to push into the city, the more dangerous it's going to be," said Cpl. Miles Hill, 21, from Oklahoma, playing a game of chess with a fellow Marine in a house they control.

"They (the insurgents) have time to set stuff up." He guesses the insurgents are likely rigging doors with explosives, knowing Marines will kick them in during searches if they sweep the city.

Up on the roof, Pfc. James Cathcart, 18, kept watch from a sandbagged machine-gunner's nest Friday. His platoon commander passed along
word that troops found a weapons cache that included a Soviet-made sniper rifle with a night-sight.

"A night-sight, sir?" he said, surprised that insurgents had the technology. His commander told him to keep his head down. "Everyone here wants to push forward. Here, you're just a target," Cathcart said.

The young Marine looked out over grim city blocks around a dusty soccer pitch and a trash-strewn lot, as a rain shower passed over. He said during the long hours of duty, he wonders what the insurgents are doing, how many there are and if they're watching him.

Adding to the eerie feeling up, he said, are the music and speeches in Arabic that come over mosque loudspeakers.

Unable to advance farther, Marines holed up in front-line houses have linked the buildings by blasting or hammering holes through walls between them and laying planks across gaps between rooftops, a series of passageways they call the "rat line."

Lying on his stomach on a rooftop and wearing goggles and earplugs, a Marine sniper keeps an eye to his rifle sight. His main task in recent days has been trying to hit the black-garbed gunmen who occasionally dash across the long street in front of him. To dodge his shots, one of the gunmen recently launched into a rolling dive across the street, a move that had the sniper and his buddies laughing.

"I think I got him later. The same guy came back and tried to do a low crawl," said Lance Cpl. Khristopher Williams, 20, from Fort Myers, Fla.

Others have run across the street, hiding behind children on bicycles, said the sniper. In his position -- reachable only by scaling the outside ledge of a building -- he sits for hours with his finger poised on the trigger of a rifle that fires 50-caliber armor-piercing bullets with such force that the muzzle flash and exiting gasses from the weapon have blackened the bricks around the gun.

On the street in front of his position sits a car riddled with bullets, where the bloated, fly-infested bodies of three armed men have been left. The vehicle was shot up by Marine gunmen before the sniper set up his position.

Along the front line, Marines have been firing warning shots to scare away dogs chewing on corpses. In some cases, the troops have wrapped bodies in blankets and buried them in shallow graves.

At night, the psychological operations unit attached to the Marine battalion here sends out messages from a loudspeaker mounted on an armored Humvee. On Thursday night, the crew and its Arabic-language interpreter taunted fighters, saying, "May all the ambulances in Fallujah have enough fuel to pick up the bodies of the mujahadeen."

The message was specially timed for an attack moments later by an AC-130 gunship that pounded targets in the city.

Later, the team blasted Jimi Hendrix and other rock music, and afterward some sound effects like babies crying, men screaming, a symphony of cats and barking dogs and piercing screeches. They were unable to draw any gunmen to fight, and seemed disappointed.