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## HADITHA: The Sins of Generals

# An open letter to General Michael Hagee, Commandant of the Marine Corps (2003-2006)

Bob Weimann | October 11, 2008 | [Pdf version](#)

“... the world of today is lacking courage, the valor of leadership, and self-sacrifice of those in command...Neither a nation nor an Army is a mechanical contrivance, but a living thing, built of flesh and blood and not of iron and steel. Courage is its driving force; for if human history be consulted, it will immediately be discovered that in the past all things worth while began their lives by some one man, or woman, daring to do what others feared to attempt.”

--J.F.C. Fuller, *Generalship: Its Diseases and Their Cure*

**On May 25, 2006, you, General Hagee,** as US Marine Corps Commandant, depart for Iraq. You will remind Marines to “do what is right” in response to allegations of civilian deaths in the Iraqi city of Haditha. The theme of your speech, entitled “On Marine Virtue”, is that Marine’s core values are honor, courage, and commitment. You define honor as “the moral courage to do the right thing in the face of danger or pressure from other Marines”.

You know that the Marine Corps places a high value on a principle of “leadership by example”. Like most principles, leadership can be abused for the purposes of political expediency. I believe you, General Hagee, are guilty of the sin of misrepresenting your Haditha Marines for the purposes of serving your political superiors. You failed to set the example for others who focused on the politically correct instead of the realities of combat. In addition, your actions and the actions of your leadership in relation to the Haditha legal proceedings not only represent bad leadership but also constitute unlawful command influence.

Some three months before, on February 10<sup>th</sup>, a *Time* magazine reporter, Tim McGirk, contacted military sources in Baghdad about the circumstances of the Haditha incident. Word got to Washington within days, according to General Peter Pace (then chairman of the Joint Chiefs) and an investigation was launched. The CMNC-I (Commander Multi National Corps – Iraq) investigation, led by Army Colonel Gregory Watt, concluded on March 3, 2006.

Within two weeks from the completion of Col. Watt’s report, the Marine Corps officially requested an investigation, and NCIS was sent to Haditha. Lt. General Peter W. Chiarelli appointed Army Maj. General Eldon Bargewell to investigate two major aspects of what happened in Haditha: training and preparation of Marines prior to the engagement and the reporting of the incident at all levels of the chain of command.. On March 20<sup>th</sup>, Tim McGirk’s story in *Time* was published.

[The Watt investigation](#) is remarkable because it addresses the specific allegations raised by Tim McGirk. Col Watt is tasked with:

- a. Determine whether any law of armed conflict violations were committed
- b. Determine whether Coalition forces complied with the Rules of Engagement in effect at the time
- c. Were any violations of the law of armed conflict committed by insurgents?

In his investigation, Col Watt finds no violations to the Laws of Armed Conflict or the basis for any of the allegations. His findings conclude:

.No, there are no indications that CF [Coalition Forces] intentionally targeted, engaged and kill non-combatants. There is no denying that civilians died during the insurgent’s coordinated attack on the Marines on 19 Nov 05; however there is no evidence that Marines intentionally set out to target, engage, and kill non-combatants.

...the four military age males in the WHITE CAR got out, failed to comply with orders and instructions from Marines and proceeded to run away...

Anti-CF [Coalition Forces] were indistinguishable from non-combatants...

The amount of force was proportional...appropriate in nature, scope and duration...

...hostile action set conditions that made it difficult for CF to PID/discriminate while executing offensive room clearing techniques.

[Read the [Watt report at the link.](#)]

Watts' findings were that SSgt Wuterich and his Marines did it right in accordance with their training and the military necessity of the tactical situation. You, General Hagee, had everything necessary to debunk Tim McGirk's story.

In fact, Col Watt recommended a public response to *Time* magazine.

...the Marine reaction to the ambush/coordinated attack was LAW published doctrine and TTP; Non-Combatants were killed while Marines cleared houses that they had been fired on from....

You could have called a news conference on Monday, March 20<sup>th</sup>, much as you did on June 7, 2006, where you expressed that you were "gravely concerned about the serious allegations concerning actions of some Marines at Haditha".

You could have started the briefing with how important Haditha, its dam and electric power complex (the second largest hydropower installation in the country), is strategically to not only the Coalition Forces but also the new Iraqi government. After all, the Corps of Engineers in 2004 spent \$12 million on restoration that brought it to full capacity for the first time in its history. The dam provides power to thousands of Iraqi citizens, one of the basic government services that support and enhances a citizen's confidence in their government.

This strategic asset was in a territory controlled by the insurgency. Haditha's mayor and son were assassinated in 2003. In 2004, the enemy had seized complete control of the city by rounding up all the local police and publicly executed them in the soccer stadium. The insurgents would also collect the salaries of the remaining legitimate government officials from that day onward to help fund their operations until the Marines retook the city.

You could have said that the entire Haditha area had been declared a TAZ (Temporary Autonomous Zone) until the Marines deployed to the area in March 2005. A TAZ is a lawless zone that is a major source of funding, manpower and supply for the enemy; in other words, there is absolutely no Iraqi government control. In addition, you could have cited a *Guardian* article ("[Under US noses, brutal insurgents rule Sunni citadel](#)", August 22, 2005), that describes the day-to-day Al-Qaeda control with these opening lines:

The executions are carried out at dawn on Haqlania Bridge, the entrance to Haditha. A small crowd usually turns up to watch even though the killings are filmed and made available on DVD in the market the same afternoon. One of last week's victims was a young man in a black tracksuit. Like the others he was left on his belly by the blue iron railings at the bridge's southern end. His severed head rested on his back, facing Baghdad. Children cheered when they heard that the next day's spectacle would be a double bill: two decapitations.

Next, you could have spoken of 3/25's (3<sup>rd</sup> Battalion, 25<sup>th</sup> Marines) deployment to the Haditha area. They were the battalion that fought in the Haditha area the seven months before 3/1 replaced them. During that deployment, 3/25 lost 48 Marines and Sailors killed and took additional 150 wounded. These causalities speak to the fact that Haditha was a city where the rules of law did not exist and only the Laws of Armed Conflict applied.

You could have also cited an article about 3/25 that appeared in the *Seattle Times* ("[New Offensive Launched Against Iraqi Insurgents](#)", May 26, 2005) that describe the fighting in Haditha. It is interesting that one of the fights this article describes is very similar to SSgt Wuterich's ambush:

One Marine was killed and another injured in the firefight, the military said. Six insurgents were reported killed, with four wounded and four detained. Among the insurgents killed was an imam, Ismaeel Abbulah Shesh, who fired on the Marine patrol, the military said.

Cpl. Jeff Hunter, 26, said he and another Marine stormed one house. "It was pretty intense," Hunter said. "It's quite an experience when you see your friend walk through a door and see a muzzle two inches from his chest."

The insurgents apparently commandeered the houses, causing civilians to be trapped.

Hunter said he threw a grenade inside a house and then another Marine threw a second grenade after forces heard a noise in a back room. That room contained about four women and six children; one woman was fatally wounded, the Marines said.

"She just got caught in the cross-fire."

You could have spoken about [the battle 3/25 fought](#) in May 2005 where the enemy destroyed the Haditha hospital, the largest in the area:

On Saturday, three U.S. Marines and a sailor were killed in fighting with insurgents in western Iraq, some of whom fought from inside a hospital, the military said. The battle, in which an unspecified number of insurgents were killed, began in Haditha, 140 miles northwest of Baghdad, when U.S. forces responding to small arms fire near the Haditha Dam and saw Iraqi civilians running from Haditha Hospital, the military said. The soldiers were then attacked by a suicide car bomb that destroyed a nearby building and set fire to the hospital. Insurgents inside the hospital set off a roadside bomb and fired small arms and rocket-propelled grenades at the U.S. forces. After the fight, Marines searched the hospital and found fortified firing positions with sandbagged windows.

You could have then stated that the enemy in Haditha routinely violates the Law of Warfare, specifically, Article 51, that basically states civilians will not be used as human shields.

You could have also cited [the enemy ambush](#) in August 2005. This ambush killed six of 3/25's Marine snipers and is an example that proves the enemy was still a viable force within Haditha when 3/1 took over in September 2005.

In September and through October 2005, starting with Operation River Gate, 3/1 would seize the city of Haditha from the insurgents without firing a shot. In addition to the approximately 160 suspected insurgents detained, 119 IEDs and mines disarmed, and 14 weapons caches uncovered, 3/1 also seized

an operational car bomb factory containing six vehicles in the conversion process of becoming human-carnage makers.

With all that background in mind, you could have then moved on to the Tim McGirk article, stating that it was one-sided because it was written from the point of view of Iraqi citizen's witnessing a Marine combat assault. These are the same citizens that have been under the insurgents intimidating rule of fear for years.

You could have informed your audience that the issue could be the difference between military reporting and Iraqi hearsay reported by McGirk. The Rule of Law on [hearsay](#) is that "assertions made by human beings are often unreliable, such statements are often insincere, subject to flaws in memory and perception, or infected with errors in narration at the time they are given" and are therefore normally excluded as evidence.

From here you could have moved into making a case for your Marine combat squad leader. I know you could have done that because even old, broken down, retired Marines can make that case (see - [The Case for a Squad Leader: SSgt Wuterich in Haditha](#)).

Instead of taking any of these actions, you puffed out your chest, checked your gig line and started briefing Congress on how any Marine violating the Corps high standards would be "held accountable". At the same time you were talking to congressmen, you tasked Headquarters Marine Corps lawyers to not only get improperly involved but also bring the legal proceeding to a quick conclusion and enabled the rush to judgment against the Haditha Marines.

Instead of relying on the combat commanders, you allowed yourself and your superiors to ignore the chain of command for the sake of political expediency. Rather than asking the combat chain of command for the facts, you allowed and supported the relief of the Marine in-country combat commanders. This relief was conducted on April 7, 2006, more than two months before the completion of the Bargewell investigation. This action demonstrated an inconceivable mistrust in your combat leaders that goes against Marine Corps war fighting doctrine.

I feel, because of your involvement, you prematurely deployed NCIS (Naval Criminal Investigation Service) to Iraq when they arrived in Haditha, March 13, 2006, only two days after Lt General Chiarelli, Commander MNF-I (Multi-National Force-Iraq) referred the investigation to his Marine Commander, Major General Zilmer, MNF-West.

In addition, you said nothing of high Marine standards when thousands of pages of investigations were leaked to the press by congressional sources. Those pages were in the possession of the military before they ever got into the hands of congressional staffers.

Instead of standing up to your superiors, Defense Secretary Rumsfeld and General Pace, you were cowed by them. You allowed them, like yourself, to manage what is clearly a combat commander's responsibility. This mismanagement, because it came from the comfortable offices of the Pentagon, turned in to a public relations debacle for the Marine Corps. As testimony to this mess, the Marine Corps is suing CBS for evidence the military lawyer could not produce. The logic and wisdom of preserving the Marine Corps standards with this legal maneuver completely escapes me.

What you did not realize is that bad decisions and bad leadership do not stand up under scrutiny. Treating Haditha as a legal instead of an information issue allowed the rights of the accused to publicly bring the truth to your misperceptions. The accused Marines have paid a monstrous cost for that truth and your actions. I also feel the real case for unlawful influence is not with Col Ewers, as the military judge correctly found in LtCol Chessani's case, but with you and the Headquarters Marine Corps lawyers. Your actions in this matter should be investigated.

Your mismanagement of the Haditha incident makes your speech on Marine Virtues not only hypocritical but also brings into question your courage and honor. Remember your definition of honor is "the moral courage to do the right thing in the face of danger or pressure from other Marines". At this point, the right thing for you to do is pick up the phone and urge the current Commandant to call end-ex to the Haditha public affairs fiasco before further damage is done to the image of "Marine Virtue". Tell the present Commandant it is time to drop the appeal against Lt Col Chessani's dismissal of charges and withdraw the lawsuit against CBS to acquire the outtakes of the SSgt Wuterich *60 Minutes* interview. Remind the present Commandant that courage and "*all things worth while began their lives by some one man, or woman, daring to do what others feared to attempt.*"

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**Bob Weimann**  
**Defend Our Marines**  
**11 October 2008**

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*Gig line:* The alignment of the uniform's shirt, belt buckle and fly

*End-ex:* Military term for end of exercise

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**Bob Weimann** is former Commanding Officer, Kilo Co., 3/1 and a senior contributing editor to *Defend Our Marines*.



**Bob Weimann, LtCol USMC Ret**

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Read more on the Haditha case by Bob Weimann:

[The Case for a Squad Leader: SSgt Wuterich in Haditha](#) July 25, 2008.

[Huzzah! Huzzah! HUZZAHHH!](#), June 6, 2008.

[Open Letter to the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps concerning the 3/1 Haditha Marines](#), February 8, 2008.

Explore Haditha documents:

[Haditha evidence room](#)

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Contact us at [WarChronicle@verizon.net](mailto:WarChronicle@verizon.net)