



OWN THE ROAD CONDUCTING CONVOY SECURITY OPERATIONS IN IRAQ

Photo by Master Sergeant Lance Cheung, USAF

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As anyone who has ever deployed knows, there are numerous missions that your unit may be tasked to perform during combat or stability operations. This particularly holds true for the infantry. Iraq has proven no different in this respect than any other conflict. In this theater, some of the most common missions that can occur for infantry units are convoy security missions. Ironically, this can be one of the least understood and trained missions for contemporary units, especially for line platoons in both mechanized and light infantry.

While serving as the headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) commander for a mechanized infantry task force deployed to Iraq, I saw techniques that worked and some that did not during convoy security missions. Soldiers from our task force at one point or another during the yearlong deployment traveled the length of the country. I have gathered some of the lessons learned during these operations (some of them learned the hard way).

There are several different threats that the enemy poses in Iraq. These include small-scale ambushes against patrols, direct and indirect fire against fixed sites, and terrorist-type attacks with either suicide bombers or other asymmetric avenues designed to not only inflict casualties but to draw media attention. Regardless of his methods, one thing to keep in mind about the enemy we face in Iraq is that he is a guerrilla fighter. As such he tends to attack perceived weakness. If Soldiers present a disciplined and

unified front, they are far less likely to be attacked than if they are perceived as lackadaisical or ill-disciplined. Especially in convoy security operations, following certain principles in planning and enforcing discipline will lead to mission success. Given the environment in Iraq, convoys should simply be considered combat patrols with the same pre-combat inspections and rehearsals.

For simplicity, I have organized the lessons learned into three different phases: preparation, execution, and recovery.

PREPARATION:

Order of March. There are several basic principles to determine vehicle order of march. If required, your convoy should be divided into three different sections: a security element, cargo vehicles, and recovery assets. You must have security elements evenly distributed throughout the convoy because on today's asymmetric battlefield a convoy is as likely to be attacked from the flank or the rear as the front. To combat this you must intersperse dedicated security vehicles that carry crew-served weapons (CSWs). When deploying your security elements, it is important to remember that these guntrucks should always work in pairs or sections; this enables one vehicle to cover another and makes them less susceptible to the effect of an improvised explosive device (IED) or rocket-propelled grenade (RPG) attack. Security elements are necessary to prevent civilian vehicles from entering

your convoy. In the event of a halt or an attack, these vehicles stop traffic and seal off the front and rear of the convoy. A large cargo vehicle is a poor choice for this job as it is not very maneuverable. However, if it is necessary to use one because of limited vehicles, use it at the front. A cargo vehicle carrying a CSW in the rear requires the truck commander (TC) to face towards the rear, limiting his ability to control the vehicle (very early in the deployment this contributed to a vehicular accident in my company). The recovery assets should always be towards the rear of the convoy, as it is much simpler to pull these vehicles forward to a disabled vehicle than to turn them around (twice) to retrieve one.

Command and Control. Having divided the convoy into three separate parts — security, cargo vehicles, and recovery assets — the convoy commander must designate responsible leaders for each section. This will enable the commander to maintain a proper span of control. If there are a large number of cargo vehicles, the convoy commander should divide the cargo vehicles into chinks and designate chalk leaders. However, it is usually simpler to have the separate chalk leaders report directly to the convoy commander rather than a designated leader for the chalk leaders. As for placement of the command and control (C2) vehicle, this is up to the convoy commander and largely dictated by METT-TC (mission, enemy, terrain, troops, time, civilians). It is a poor choice for a convoy commander to be the lead vehicle, however, because that TC must be focused forward for navigation and to observe threats, which would not allow the TC to focus on the rest of the convoy.

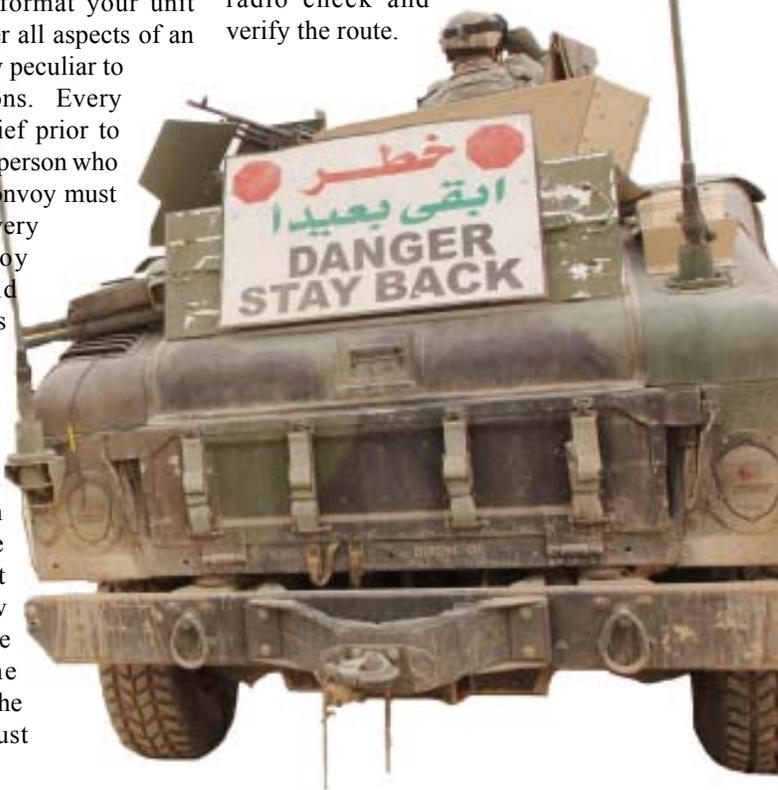
Vehicle Load Plans. These should be standardized across the convoy, as much as is practical, in order to enable Soldiers from any vehicle to very quickly know where something is stored on another vehicle. Also, once it becomes routine, Soldiers on the vehicle can quickly locate critical equipment such as a combat lifesaver (CLS) bag, without wasting time searching for it. At a minimum, each vehicle should carry several different classes of supply: CL I (food and water), CL III (usually in fuel cans), CL V (ensuring there is ammo for each of the weapons on the vehicle), and CL VIII (our

unit took an ammo can and filled it with CLS kit supplies, then painted it white with a red cross). Some other useful CL V items to carry are thermite grenades, smoke, and pyro. On each of our HMMWVs my company also had a tow rope already attached and tied to the front, which could quickly be cut loose if required. However, this method should only be used for quick recovery to a more secure location, towbars being the best method of recovery. In the convoy there should be at least one towbar for each type of vehicle (it is good to keep in mind which towbars will work with each vehicle, e.g. a HMWV towbar will not work on a HEMMT). Also, you must have two of each type of vehicle or an additional recovery vehicle. For example, if you bring only one 5-ton, Murphy's Law guarantees that will be the vehicle that becomes non-mission capable. Lastly, any important items that are required for the mission should be cross-loaded on as many vehicles as possible to allow for flexibility. If you put all of the items on one vehicle, see above reference to Murphy's Law.

Mission Brief. This is simply an operations order (OPORD). Anything less than this will endanger your Soldiers. We developed a template for all convoy commanders in the company to use to ensure all necessary portions were discussed. Whatever format your unit develops, it should cover all aspects of an OPORD as well as a few peculiar to convoy security missions. Every convoy must have a brief prior to leaving the base. Every person who will participate in the convoy must attend the brief. At every brief the convoy commander should discuss the battle drills for react to contact. Even though your Soldiers may have heard these battle drills hundreds of times, it is necessary to repeat them since there is always the possibility of another unit in your convoy or new Soldiers, and everyone must understand the actions he must take. The convoy commander must

also discuss common convoy information, such as route, speed, distance between vehicles, communication plan, designated aid vehicle, recovery vehicle, location of towbars, identify CSW vehicles, order of march, and correct passenger and vehicle count. This last part is critically important, especially if the convoy makes any type of contact with the enemy. In addition to templated areas of heavy enemy activity, the convoy commander should also review recent enemy TTPs and enemy contacts within the last 72 hours. During our deployment, the enemy would adopt certain techniques until they were no longer effective and would then switch to something new. Lastly, the convoy commander must identify all nonmilitary who might be with the convoy such as civilian contractors, other government agencies (OGA) personnel, or VIPs and be cognizant of their location.

Rehearsals. This is a step that is very important for complicated or dangerous routes, and it is the last chance for leaders to emphasize their plan. Rehearsals can be as detailed as the time allows or the mission dictates. Our rehearsals for the road march to Kuwait took two days. For a well-trained unit, full-scale rehearsals for a simple convoy may not be necessary, but at a minimum all vehicles must make a radio check and verify the route.



Inspections. This is an absolutely crucial step for any unit regardless of its level of experience. Without proper inspections Soldiers may be heading out of the forward operating base (FOB) with broken equipment or without the equipment they need to execute the mission. It is the leader's responsibility to ensure the unit is capable of conducting its mission, and a pre-combat inspection (PCI) is the best way. My old brigade command sergeant major had a favorite saying: "Don't expect what you don't inspect." It is absolutely true.

EXECUTION:

Own the Road. While deployed in a combat zone, the convoy commander is responsible for the conduct of his convoy. It is important not to frustrate the civilian population by driving aggressively without cause. This only upsets the delicate balance of maintaining influence over the civilian population and may facilitate the enemy. There is, however, a priority to protect American troops, even at the cost of traffic delays and civilian inconvenience. Guntruck HMMWVs can quickly shut down all traffic on the road if necessary. Even if there is no enemy contact and the convoy stops because a vehicle has broken down, there is still a danger posed by passing traffic. By blocking off the road (or at least your side of it), you reduce these risks greatly. In Iraq, if you stop on a four-lane divided highway (which is the most common road for convoys), traffic will often jump to the other side of the road and effectively create a new lane on the opposite side of the highway. The trucks serve as shields in this formation, providing protection for others nearby. It is essentially the same as when pioneers circled their wagons. We left a passage down the middle of the formation to allow security and command vehicles to move back and forth.

Know the Route. This is another example of what sounds like common sense, but if it is not emphasized Soldiers will sometimes neglect it. There is a significant amount of intelligence built up on each of the major convoy routes in Iraq, and it is more often than not easy to predict where the enemy will strike. Certain stretches of the main supply routes (MSRs) look like moonscapes from all of the IEDs that have exploded on them. With this in mind, it is a good idea for leaders in the convoy to know the likely areas for enemy activity, and to have a plan on how to react if the convoy is attacked in that vicinity. In this case, communication is often the key. Particularly if you are traveling out of your area of operation, it is extremely important to know all frequencies and call signs of the units who are along the route. Some portions of the route are served by aerial relays and a nonsecure net where a convoy can call for assistance. The best method is to contact the unit who owns the territory directly if assistance is required. The SOP in my company was to have the units, call signs, and frequencies along common routes laminated and posted in front of the vehicle commander's seat.

Use Caution and Common Sense. There are a few techniques that Soldiers must use to better protect themselves while providing security for convoys. One way is by staying down in HMWV gun turrets. The bottom line is that on a convoy, the enemy is most likely to strike first. Given this, Soldiers must protect themselves against first contact. The common catch-phrase was

that Soldiers should be in name-tag defilade, meaning only the top part of the torso and head are exposed. Being low in the turret helps Soldiers to avoid some of the blast and shrapnel from an explosion, and presents less of a target to a sniper. Leaders must continually emphasize this. Another technique that all vehicles in a convoy use is dispersion. This is the main defense against a suicide bomber or car bomb. Having proper intervals between vehicles not only ensures that only one vehicle will be impacted by an explosion, but it also presents a much less inviting target, and one that the enemy will be less prone to attack.

After enough time in a combat zone, Soldiers often develop somewhat of a sixth sense. The rule of thumb is that if something looks wrong, it probably *is* wrong. If you know that normally at 2000 hours a certain street is packed with civilians walking up and down, and tonight you only see a few dogs running around, exercise caution. It may end up being nothing, but experience in a combat zone will tend to give you a "little voice" that may end up saving you or some of your men. Don't be afraid to slow down the convoy or take an alternate route if something seems amiss. An excellent example of what can go wrong when you do not notice details was a mine strike in our sector from a transportation unit. The enemy had buried an anti-tank mine in the middle of the freeway under a pile of sand. The first five vehicles drove around the suspicious pile, but the sixth vehicle ran over the top of it.

React to Contact. It is important for everyone you are traveling with to know and understand the battle drills that your unit will conduct upon contact. Every situation is different, but invariably certain principles can be applied that guide quick action. Some of the primary contingencies that a convoy will encounter in Iraq are react to an IED, react to small arms fire/RPG, suicide bombers (on foot or in a vehicle), vehicle breakdown procedures, and casualty evacuation (CASEVAC). Once security is established, CASEVAC and recovery operations are conducted. It is important that Soldiers know and understand the battle drills so everyone can react in the same way if the situation arises. In the event of a convoy with mixed units, it is even more important for the convoy commander to cover and rehearse SOPs and battle drills prior to the convoy mission.

RECOVERY:

Equipment. Following a successful mission, the tendency in undisciplined units is to head to the nearest PX, dining facility, or Internet café. However, a proper recovery of equipment is what will enable a unit to accomplish its mission the next time. Any mechanical malfunctions on a vehicle should be annotated and fixed as soon as possible. Weapons of all types, but especially mounted machine guns, will accumulate a lot of dust and should be cleaned after every mission. Magazine maintenance becomes important too, because after a week or two of patrolling most magazines on M-4s or M-9s will start to foul and cause jams. The only way to prevent this is to take them apart and blow the dust out every week.

After Action Reviews (AARs). The threat in Iraq is a thinking, learning, and adapting enemy. We must therefore constantly learn and adapt as well. The best way to do so is to conduct frequent

and thorough AARs. I understand that most Soldiers picture an AAR as sitting in an air-conditioned trailer listening to the observer/controller explain through PowerPoint slides why everybody got killed again, but it can be something as simple as the squad leader talking to his Soldiers and then backbriefing his lieutenant or platoon sergeant. There are a number of trends that come and go, and convoys that head out briefed up on the latest events are much more prepared than others who remain ignorant. Also, Soldiers discover TTPs that are effective in countering enemy techniques, and without the process of an AAR spreading these TTPs throughout the company and task force could prove difficult.

Rest Plan. Too often in combat it can seem as though there is a nonstop cycle of critical missions. Soldiers must not undertake long convoys with little or no sleep. This can sometimes be as dangerous as driving into an ambush. Even the most motivated, best led, and highly disciplined Soldiers will make mistakes and have trouble completing simple tasks after long hours with no sleep. On a convoy, the danger is elevated since not only the enemy

but vehicle accidents can cause casualties. Leaders need to compare the need for the operation to the risk, and make an informed decision from that assessment. Junior leaders must be involved in this process as well, since they are the ones who know whether the driver came in off from a patrol at 0200, or is fresh and ready for action. On long cross-country convoys, leaders must use the same principles and determine whether it is worthwhile for the convoy to press on to the next FOB or halt at the current one and allow Soldiers to sleep. The key is to avoid unnecessary risk.

CONCLUSION

Traveling along routes that the enemy knows you will take is always hazardous. American Soldiers face that danger every day as they convoy along supply routes in Iraq. Infantrymen assigned to provide security for these convoys have a difficult mission, but one that can be less so given a few precautions and training. Although the circumstances change from convoy to convoy, the basic principles do not. By following these principles, infantrymen can ensure the success of these missions. Some

field manuals that cover convoy security are FM 3-21.91 (*Tactical Employment of Anti-Armor Platoons and Companies*) and FM 3-20.90 (*Tank and Cavalry HHC and HHT*).

Understand that it is a learning enemy we face in Iraq; as he changes techniques so must we. Changing our patterns and methods of operation routinely allows us to maintain the tactical initiative, which contributes directly to achieving our operational objectives. For the basic parts of a convoy security mission, preparation and planning, accountability, battle drills, and recovery, it is not so much the particular system that matters, just the fact that a system exists and is followed by all the Soldiers and leaders.

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