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Lessons From Iraq

An Infantry Platoon Leader's Thoughts on OIF Operations

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Listed below are a number of observations based upon my 15 months service as an airborne infantry platoon leader in and around Samarra, Iraq. I have tried to organize my thoughts into specific areas which include small kill team (SKT) operations, mounted and dismounted patrolling, raids,

interaction with local nationals, sensitive site exploitation (SSE) and miscellaneous topics. My observations are based on common sense ... I think. During an assignment everyone forms his own opinions and develops his own techniques for doing things; these are the practices that have worked for my platoon and our particular way of conducting combat operations. Take what works for you and your area of operations (AO), or expand on my concepts to help prepare your platoon for deployment. Unfortunately, my company had a very bad relief in place and received almost no information or lessons learned from the previous unit. We spent the last year learning by trial and error what easily could have

been passed on from our predecessors. This is my attempt to rectify those deficiencies and minimize the amount of practical knowledge lost between units.

SKT Operations

SKTs operations target ambushes, saboteurs, and those who attempt to emplace mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs). These insurgents are essentially the bottom rung on the ladder of importance of enemy personnel. Despite the low-level targets, these operations can still have a great effect on a company's AO. Neutralizing these individuals may not stop IEDs completely, but it reduces enemy manpower, increases the cost to the insurgents, makes it harder to recruit replacements, and creates lulls in activity, which lessens the danger to Coalition forces (CF). To stop IEDs completely, you must target the builders and financiers.



Destroying these personnel will have a more substantial effect on IED activity.

The enemy may use the same sites and techniques over and over again. This seems idiotic and would appear to make it easy to catch them, but it's not. A unit's sector can be extremely large, and it may be impossible to cover the entire region all the time. You have to do some time analysis to see when the best times are to target specific sites and find a pattern in the enemy's activities, then target those specific times with your SKTs. The enemy still might not oblige you, but you never know. The other problem is getting your SKTs into sector without being detected. The enemy knows when we are in sector and when we leave. Their ubiquitous eyes and ears are very good at observing our movements, so you have to be creative in how you infiltrate teams. The biggest limiters to creativity are the adherence to long-used SOPs and the reluctance to accept risk. Don't be lazy, try different approaches. For example, make your SKTs walk a few kilometers to their objectives rather than always being inserted by vehicle; they are less likely to be seen and compromised.

SKTs are a fairly new type of operation for line platoons to conduct. In the past, this was an operation that would be conducted by battalion scout elements. When I arrived in country, I received M14s and a .50 cal Barrett for my platoon. Any SKT operation that you conduct must have at least one "long gun."

To be successful at SKT operations you must possess the right equipment. Good optics and good spotting scopes are a must. Do not waste time and money on cheap spotting scopes. My battalion bought lots of cheap spotting scopes, of which four came to my platoon. We took them on operations at first, but realized they were much less effective than our Vipers and regular binoculars. Now they just sit on a shelf gathering dust. I would trade the four for one good scope. If money is an issue, then get one really good optic that actually brings something to the fight. Two really great spotting scopes in the company would be more worthwhile and could be signed out by the platoon prior to their missions. It may be tough to win the quality vs. price fight; I know we sent up a request for specific, quality scopes and someone else made the decision to go cheap. Unfortunately, often the guys who decide what to buy and what you do and don't

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need are far from the fight and may not understand your requirements. The need for good glass is not limited to daytime operations; along with day optics you must have the appropriate night optics for both the .50 caliber and smaller caliber rifles.

Sniper blinds or screens for windows are also required equipment for SKTs. When occupying an abandoned building, the Soldiers should hang blinds to break up their shapes and cover any movement inside. Obviously, do not hang the blinds in the window itself. Hang them a few feet back from the opening so that they blend into the shadow of the room. From the outside nothing will seem out of place, as long as no one walks up and looks in the window. Should this happen, just detain the person until the SKT operation is complete. Sniper blinds or screens are really easy to make; use the tan mosquito screen that is common or some other light netting that can be seen through. Have two types available. We have a screen that is painted mostly black for hides that have complete roofs and are dark on the inside. We also have mostly tan screens for those abandoned houses that are missing a roof. You can still hide in these rooms; you just need to ensure your screen matches the back wall. If you are in a mud brick house in the desert, the tan alone works great and is hard to detect unless you are close.

A unit looking to conduct SKT operations must also be able to hide in the open. To do so, you need a desert ghillie suit or ghillie blanket. In Iraq during the summer months, it is too hot for a team to wear a ghillie unless it is for VERY limited target hours. Using SKTs away from structures during the winter months will help to prevent overuse of a hide site, which leads to them being booby trapped or a complex attack on the position to capture the personnel. To maximize the number of times

that a hide can be used, ensure that you discretely mark the site or otherwise keep track of when and under what conditions you used it. The standard composition for an SKT will vary depending on the hide, with more men needed for a structure having multiple rooms, or for using a house that is occupied. This allows for men to pull security on the local nationals and others to conduct the SKT. Using occupied homes decreases the likelihood of booby traps and gives unlimited locations for SKTs.

Mounted Patrolling

As light infantrymen we initially did little mounted patrolling. In the train up prior to deployment, we knew we would have some trucks, but the extent to which we would have to use them was definitely unknown. Conducting combat operations in up-armored HMMWVs (UAHs) required skills that my paratroopers did not have, but as is the way of the paratrooper we adapted quickly and became very proficient. The first of those skills that we needed to learn was proficiency with heavy weapons, especially the M2 .50 caliber machine gun. Only a handful of my men who had been in antitank platoons had ever used them. It is the main weapon we use when conducting mounted operations. We learned as we went and spent a lot of time and ammunition on the forward operating base (FOB) range. We also incorporated the MK-19 into our operations. Most of my sector is flat, open desert, and this weapon is great for reaching out and touching the enemy when they shoot at you from 800-plus meters. Soldiers need to become proficient with these vital crew-served weapons under as many conditions of employment as possible prior to their first combat mission; they should not be getting their first exposure to equipment during combat operations. You need to train on this equipment at home station. If you are light infantry, beg, borrow, steal — get it done. If you can get four turtle shells for the company to pass around and train on, then great — that's the first step.

Again, using UAHs was an entirely new experience for my platoon and company. A great lesson learned was how to task organize my platoon for the different operations that we conducted. What I learned was when conducting patrols with full trucks, it is better to have one squad man all the trucks and one squad to ride in



TSGT Molly Dzitko, USAF

Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment discuss a mission in Iraq, February 26, 2007.

the back seats for dismounting. With this organization, you have a pure squad for dismounted operations. It makes accountability and command and control much easier than if you continue to have each squad manning their own trucks. In that situation, you have pieces of each squad dismounting and when shooting starts, maneuvering and accountability become more difficult and less effective. There is no substitute for an infantry squad; eight men dismounted and maneuvering as an organized unit cannot be equaled by twice their number of non-organic Soldiers who have not trained together attempting to do the same task.

Be prepared for as many contingencies as possible when conducting mounted patrols. Carry everything you might need in the vehicles as part of your vehicle SOP. One contingency that

may occur often is the need to conduct a hasty raid. For starters, you have to get in, so you need shotguns. Have at least one on each patrol (I have one in each team). In addition, sometimes you run into steel doors, and a picket pounder is more useful to batter it in (though we usually shotgun those, too). Flash-bangs and grenades — have these available and use them when the situation merits. Also understand that raiding tools perform differently in different environments. Outside Samarra, a shotgun is usually all that is needed because the houses are not usually walled and the doors are mostly wooden. Another tool we always have with us on patrol are door charges. You never know what you will be getting into, so an explosive breach is a great way to disrupt anyone on the other side of the door. We use a mixture of flex linear and water impulse charges, mostly the latter. We also experimented with rifle grenade entry munitions (RGEM), which seemed like a great tool and great concept. We used them on the range, and they were impressive. It is an explosive charge that is shot at the door with an M4, like an old-school rifle grenade except designed for breaching doors. With these munitions the breach team does not need to approach the door to breach; they are quick and easy and will set off any booby traps before you move up to the building. After we used them on the range, we took them on a mission. The first shot was a dud; it just hit the door, broke in half and fell to the ground. We quickly gave them up and returned to the old reliable water impulse. If they could make the RGEM reliable enough to work every time, that would be our primary explosive entry tool. We have also used explosive breaches on the compound gate with a larger charge.

Always have all your night-fighting equipment with you (i.e. thermals, night vision devices and Tac light). The situation is always changing; you might go out on a short patrol early in the morning and get diverted to something that lasts all night — be prepared for it. If your unit has the equipment, put at least one thermal in each truck. At night, my gunners wear NVGs and have the thermals on and scan regularly.

Have a company vehicle SOP for equipment carried. Vehicles go down at the most inconvenient time, and you often have to borrow from other platoons to accomplish the mission. The other platoons should have the same equipment in the same configuration. One critical piece of equipment is binoculars. Every vehicle needs to have a good set of binoculars. In my AO, the trend for IEDs went back and forth between surface and subsurface laid. For the ones on the surface, the enemy will use trash, bushes, and even sandbags to hide them. After a while you learn what to look for, especially in your company AO, and you will see what is different. The binoculars will give you standoff for suspicious objects and allow you to assess whether it is an IED or not.

Fire blankets need to be on all vehicles in a standard location. IEDs often are artillery rounds with some kind of accelerant attached

(meaning cans of homemade napalm or gas). They do this to try and burn the vehicle. The IED will probably not destroy the vehicle, but if the accelerant gets on the tires, it will burn the truck to the ground. The blankets will let you extinguish burning personnel and help you get them out of the truck.

Learn to use the Blue Force Tracker. It is a critical system that makes life so much easier. It allows you to track other elements and see what kind of air assets are in the AO. If nothing else, it lets you get to where you need to go with relative ease. Learn it. Ensure that no mounted patrol goes out without one.

Be very careful when driving on dirt roads. Don't do it if you don't have to. Dirt roads facilitate large catastrophic IEDs and allow the enemy to dig them in right under the vehicle. To help mitigate risks, do an assessment of the dirt road you want to use. Do local nationals use that road frequently or do they avoid it? Is it a road that only military traffic uses? If so do not use it; it will probably be mined. Can I get there a different way? Do I set a pattern when I use it? Ways to avoid getting hit are to vary your routes, dismount and go in across country, by air assault, through boat operations, etc ... We also have mine rollers that attach to the front of our vehicles. They will work fine in cases where the IED is pressure wired and not offset from the mine. We have had one detonation on a mine roller from pressure wire; it did its job and stopped anyone in the vehicle from getting hurt; the mine roller survived also, but do not rely on them to mitigate all the risk of driving on dirt roads. We have also encountered deep buried IEDs on dirt roads that are command wired. The enemy uses these IEDs to keep us out of areas only accessible by a few dirt roads. These staged IEDs allow local traffic to use the roads all the time without incident and allow us to enter an area without incident.

Word spreads once we are in the AO, and the trigger man moves to the command wire to engage us on our way out. We have had one IED of this nature detonate on a patrol and another patrol saw the command wire for a second device. These IEDs were placed on strategic choke points for the AO — roads they knew we had to drive on to access the enemy of the region. If you must use a dirt road, do not use the same road twice; try and keep them guessing. Also,

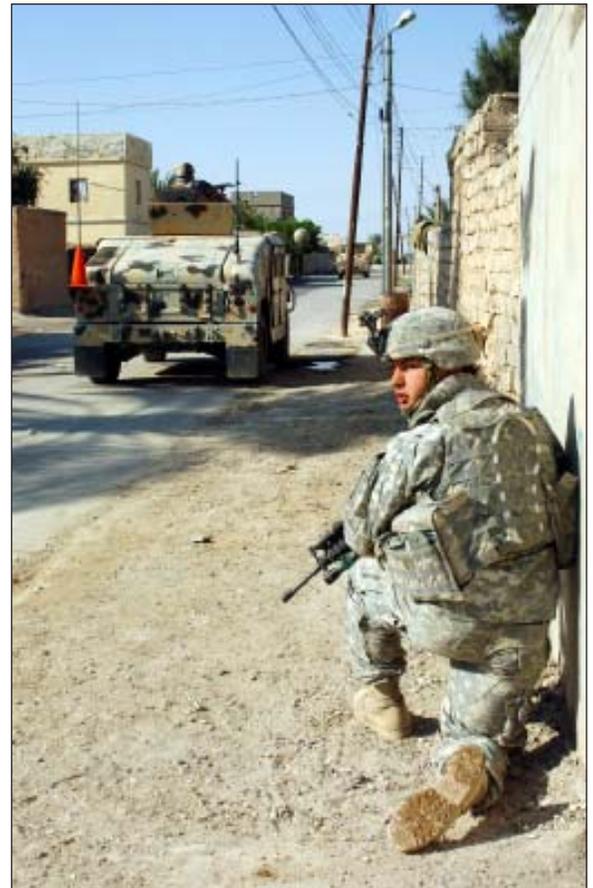
assess the enemy activity in that part of your sector. Are there lots of reports of anti-Iraqi forces (AIF) from that region? Are there lots of IEDs on the main supply route (MSR) adjacent to that location? Are there frequent of small arms fire attacks on combat logistic patrols and Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) from that area? If so, then common sense tells us that the area is an AIF safe haven, and that the roads into it are more likely to be mined. These mines serve as both early warning to allow AIF to hide or escape, to deny us terrain, and to inflict casualties. Remember, the enemy is smart and adaptive; they have been doing this for five years and the dumb ones die quickly. The bottom line with dirt roads is be smart and vary how you operate; ask yourself "is the result worth the risk?"

When a vehicle does get disabled by an IED or mine, slow down and look for secondary devices before you move up to aid. Don't rush up to them; approach with caution and make sure there are no more IEDs.

Have an SOP for who will respond to the disabled vehicle; only send a few Soldiers to render assistance until you can clear for secondaries. I know the first instinct is to get to vehicle and assist, but you might get more troops killed by rushing. Think of it as walking into a mine field; you don't just run across the field to get to the casualty, you clear to them so no one else blows up. Slow it down and do it right.

Don't be afraid to dismount. Many units don't want to get out of their vehicles and are afraid to do so. Luckily, my paratroopers prefer to be out of their vehicles. Vehicles limit you to roads, and roads are where IEDs are. They are also large and noisy, allowing the enemy to keep track of you easily. Moving dismounted in the dark helps us get where we have to go, and without being detected.

When driving on an MSR, control the civilian traffic. In my battalion's sector, all civilian vehicle traffic will pull to the side of the road and stop when they see us coming in the opposite lane. It took a lot of "training" of the local populace, but I believe



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A Soldier with the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment provides security for Iraqi Army soldiers during a mission in Ad Dawr, Iraq, March 30, 2007.

it makes the difference. Vehicles in front of our patrol traveling the same direction as us that try to stop are waved on with flags or we tell them to move on with the PA system. There are certain rules that we live by that are absolute in my platoon and company. The first is never pass by a stopped car on the shoulder of your lane and keep as much distance as you can from local vehicles. Again wave them on with flags or use your PA system. Make it clear, in no uncertain terms, that they will move that car immediately. If it is broken down, they will push it off the road 15 meters or more. We do this in case it is a vehicle-borne IED; one of our platoon leaders was killed passing a bongo truck that pulled to the side of the road to let the patrol pass and detonated on the lead vehicle. The second reason is that they could be trying to stop us in an IED kill zone to the rear of the car or trying to get us to cross the median where there could be mines or additional IEDs. Always see the possible threat and attempt to safeguard against it.

Make sure all extra ammo supplies for the

crew-served weapon are NOT inside the crew compartment. Keep them in the trunk, behind the blast doors, or make bustle racks on the sides of the turret. I like them on the turret; that way the ammo is at hand for the gunner, and in the event of an IED attack, the rounds will most likely be blown away from the vehicle, causing less of a hazard for everyone.

Because of the possibility of IEDs my platoon also revised the combat load we were carrying in the trucks. Then we rolled to a large vehicle engagement where we shot most of that combat load relatively quickly and changed it back. The combat loads we carry now seem to be a good compromise. What these events really taught me was to have battle drills ready for reloading ammo for crew-served weapons and to have that ammo in a uniform location so any Soldier reaching through the blast doors knows where to reach. Also, establish a minimum combat load and have a separate 100 rounds for test fire ammo. When your test fire ammo gets within 50 rounds of the combat ammo, put in an ammo request for another 100 rounds; that way you ensure your combat ammo is always available and has not been depleted by test firing.

Remember Soldiers and leaders can be lazy; put systems in place so you do not get caught in sector with less than your combat load. My system is that once a week, on our dispatch day, the ammo in a truck is counted and updated on a tracking board and dated. This count will include the test fire ammo and facilitate the platoon sergeant in giving a weekly consumption report to the XO and requesting more ammo when needed.

Ammo updates are done once a week on my platoon's maintenance day. That day (operations allowing) all my trucks will get TI-ed by the mechanics and re-dispatched. The squad and team leaders will then ensure that the vehicle SOP for equipment is straight and that the ammo tracker is updated. Vehicle maintenance is absolutely critical for maintaining a high operations tempo. Our battalion mandates that all vehicles will be re-dispatched every seven days. This ensures that the battalion mechanics see every vehicle once a week and can stay

on top of the preventive maintenance.

This system seems to work well; my trucks are rarely down for maintenance problems, and if they are it is for no more than half a day. I can not stress enough the importance of a good maintenance program for your platoon. I do not know anything about fixing vehicles, but my platoon has the best maintenance record in the battalion. On my maintenance day when all my trucks are in the motor pool, I am in the motor pool. I have a very good relationship with our chief. If a lieutenant is in the motor pool involved in his platoon's maintenance, the chief may be more inclined to take care of you and your Soldiers. Sometimes a private will get the runaround from a mechanic about a problem with a vehicle. If you are in the motor pool, he can come to you and you can ask the chief. My chief, when I ask, will take me to the truck himself, check it out and talk to the mechanic working on it. You will then get a good answer on the problem that the private might not have received and have a good idea how long it will take to fix. Take ownership of your vehicles and pride in their repair; the mechanics will appreciate it and take care of you when you do have a problem.

Along with vehicle maintenance you must do the same with your weapons. I guarantee that most units do not regularly update 2404s on all their equipment in country, even though there is no more important place to be tracking your maintenance. Once a month, all weapons and electronic equipment in my platoon receive preventive maintenance checks and services, by the book, and results are logged in our platoon 2404 book. We maintain three platoon books: one is the vehicle log, tracking the 5988Es on all vehicles (updated weekly on dispatch day). The second is the platoon 2404 book which has all organic equipment tracked by system, and the third is a 2404 book tracking all the TPE (theater-provided equipment) that we received in theater.

Raids

Often in sector, we will receive a time sensitive target (TST) or a report of enemy activity and you have to go with what you have and prosecute the target. Everyone, including me, needs to be able to enter and clear a room. You also need to have the flexibility to confront multiple buildings and complex objectives with a small force. Be fast and be aggressive; that will usually cow most enemy and prevent them from offering much resistance. If you go in without confidence and fail to dominate the situation, then people might get hurt. Even if you only have limited manpower with you, the amount of fire power available to you far out matches the enemy. Use your gun trucks as your support-by-fire (SBF) element, if you have multiple buildings to clear; after the first is secure take the time to adjust your trucks to have that fire superiority ready if you make contact. Slow it down half a step and never move without having your SBF to cover the movement.

To be able to execute the missions we do, every weapon needs a Tac light and a PAC-4 or PEQ-2. We conduct raids on a



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Soldiers from the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment enter a house to search for weapon caches near Samarra, Iraq, March 4, 2007.

daily basis, both day and night. Tac lights are needed even during the day; an Iraqi home or barn is not usually well lit, all rooms do not have windows and the adjustment between light and dark is aided by the Tac light. For night you need both; you must be ready to go white light inside the house and NVGs outside. Your men must be able to clear large complex objectives with a small force, and at night that involves going in and out of many buildings. The ability to transition back and forth is something that must be trained and supervised by team and squad leaders. Some troopers don't like NVGs very much, so they will not put them back on after the first house unless trained and forced to do so.

One technique that we use for a hasty raid is to stop short of the objective, quickly dismount the assault force behind the lead vehicle, and then approach the house. The lead vehicle rams the gate and continues to push toward the house. The remaining three vehicles move into cordon and ensure no evaders get out the back side. The assault force then moves past the truck and enters and clears the house. This technique works well, is quick, and maximizes fire power immediately available if contact is made.

The other technique we use, which is our preferred method in a more urban environment, is to dismount the assault a few blocks away and conduct a covert breach on the gate (with ladder and bolt cutters as stated earlier) then move the UAHs into cordon.

A tendency you may see as the deployment goes along is that platoon objectives get larger. Make sure that the objectives you raid are not too big for your platoon to effectively clear. Quite often you will be forced to clear objectives that are very large, and most of the time there is no resistance and it will not be a problem. But eventually there will be a fight and you may be too spread out on the objective to effectively defeat the threat. Do not allow yourself to get caught with your pants down. Ensure that no squad ever moves to clear the next building without having moved your SBF forward for support. Never move without overwatch; you must ensure that the appropriate fire power is available for all movements. Slow down, have the combat patience to allow the guns to readjust. It may slow down the movement through the objective, but it will be more secure and more effective if and when you do make contact.

Intelligence/Local Interaction

Whenever you talk to a local national get his full name. There will always be at least three — his name, his father's name and his grandfather's name. It seems tedious, but it is very useful. Through names we know who are brothers, cousins, uncles, etc. Their naming system helps to make connections between people. On top of names, you must understand the importance of tribe and sub-tribe. Everyone here is a member of a tribe,

which is a large unit. What is important to know is his sub-tribe, the clan or group of families within the tribe. With this information and a person's full name you can track most people down (or at least his house).

In addition to a person's name ask for his nickname. Most insurgents go by their nicknames and will refer to each other by that name. The nickname will usually be "Albu ____", meaning father of ____, and that will be how they are known. Making sure you get all the necessary details when cataloging information about a person can help identify AIF. You must be meticulous. Record names of all brothers and sons. That information will help you identify "Albu" whoever. Being successful in a counterinsurgency is in the details; I cannot stress enough the importance of gathering as much information as possible about an individual. Months later you might get information confirming that individual as AIF, and if you took the time to properly catalog that person you should have everything you need to now target him.

You must also understand the importance of sheiks and sub-sheiks. These men know the activities of everyone in their tribe or sub-tribe. If they say they do not, they are lying. They maintain a ledger that lists the names of all males in the sub-tribe with homes and occupations. Ask them to show you the "books;" it will tell you the extent of the sub-tribe and personnel that the sheik is responsible for. It will also undoubtedly have names of AIF that you are looking for. The tribe and sub-tribe system has existed for hundreds of years. They are well established and are very organized. Do not make the mistake of assuming these men are stupid or insignificant because of their appearance. They are the key to successful interaction with the local populace. If you can get these men to support you, either openly or in secret, it would be critical for your unit's success. Remember, they know everything that goes on in their town or AO. They can tell you exactly who is involved in the insurgency and where to find them. The trick is getting them to tell you.

One way to win them to our side is to put power back in their hands. We need to throw out linear thought and what the Army solution would be, and create something that works. Life in this part of the world is not about right and wrong or good and evil; it is about power and influence. The concept



TSGT Molly Dzitko, USAF

A lieutenant with the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 82nd Airborne Division questions a man during a mission in Iraq, February 26, 2007.



SFC Robert C. Brogan

A Soldier with the 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment sorts through documents found in a home during a raid June 11, 2007.

of hearts and minds is an example of an American solution and what we assume would win these people over. We clearly did not do our homework beforehand. You cannot force your beliefs or thought process upon another people and expect them to thank you for it. The same goes for democracy. For this system of government to work, the people need to be ready for it and demand it from internal sources. You cannot force it on them and expect it to succeed. This region of the world has been ruled by fear and intimidation throughout written history. They will not instantly forget what they know and accept another system, especially if it is not demanded from within. The typical Iraqi does not care about the overarching politics involved; what he does care about is having food to feed his family, electricity for his water pump to irrigate his fields, and to live in relative safety. As far as I can tell from the people in my AO, that is the bottom line. He does not care what system of government he has, be it with a king, a dictator or a prime minister, as long as it is a stable system that allows him to live his life as he did before.

The quickest way to stability appears to be through support of the tribal system, which is still in existence and working, only with less influence. Al Qaeda and other insurgent groups have eroded the sheiks' traditional power base by competing for the loyalty of many of Iraq's young males. We can use this reduction in power and influence to help gain their support. By placing the power back in the hands of the sheiks, we can enlist their help in countering al Qaeda. These men are territorial by nature; once we restore some of their power base, they will begin to see al Qaeda as competitors and attempt to counter their influence over the males of the tribe. To do so we must place the ability to grant local works projects and raise local militias or town police in their hands. With these powers would obviously come corruption and abuse of the system, and a certain amount of this must be tolerated as a cost of doing business in the Middle East. But with the correct Coalition force relationship and oversight by intelligent and clever company commanders, these men could begin to become a competing factor for al Qaeda.

Conducting meet and greets with local nationals, those with other than sheiks will almost always result in them telling you that their neighborhood is "a safe neighborhood and nothing bad happens here," but you must learn to work around this and use

simple questions to gain information. Only two or three times in 15 months has someone actually given me real info about the enemy. Use simple and harmless questions like asking who neighbors are? Then check that info when you go see the neighbors. Collect as much info as possible; it helps give you leverage and catch them when they are lying.

One way we used simple information to get great results was with a cache we found in an unused orchard. We stumbled onto the largest cache ever found in our division's history by accident. But we used simple reasoning to lead us to another of equal size. When we found the first one, we grabbed the local sub-sheik and showed him what was within his area of influence, then used him to tell us who owned every piece of land from the river to a major road in the region. It turned out that the land the cache was on and numerous other tracts of land were owned by a father and series of brothers. We used this information to search other orchards owned by the brothers and found a second large cache. Seems simple, but most people would not have asked who owned all the adjacent land and put the family connections together. This allowed us to refine our searches to specific fields and orchards.

Sensitive Site Exploitation (SSE)

SSE is an absolutely critical task on any mission. After the objective is secure and security is established, your focus must be on SSE. This is a task you should push down to your squad leaders, but you must ensure that all leaders fully understand what is expected of them. When we arrived in country I directed this phase personally, but as I tackled larger objectives with multiple buildings I was forced to relinquish this task to my squad leaders. It was the right decision; it freed me up to focus on tactical questioning of local nationals. It took a few missions for them all to get on the same sheet of music for what I required every time we go into any house. I demand a lot from my squad leaders in this department; I have a basic SSE standards SOP for my leaders. It is a one pager that they can laminate and reference when conducting SSE. You should push this responsibility down to your squad leaders early; they will get good at it and do it automatically. Frankly the post operation products we provide now are better than when I did it all myself. My platoon SOP states that squads conduct SSE on all buildings they clear. This ensures that a building on the objective is not missed because it was assumed that some other squad was searching it.

Each building will have one slide in the final assessment. The slide will include the building number/objective name, the floor plan with labels and pictures taken. If the objective is a compound, there will be a compound sketch, with building numbers and vehicle locations marked. Seems tedious, but it is very effective and necessary to ensure the enemy stays in prison. These slides are created by my squad leaders. When we return from a mission, they immediately transfer their SSE to a slide for each building or compound they cleared. After a while it becomes second nature, and the products get better and better. It is better to be more detailed than less and answer all of S2's questions before they ask.

Even if the objective is a dry hole and nothing is found, follow the same procedures and create the same products. I guarantee that you will go back to that objective within six months looking for someone else or the same guy again. With these products you now have pictures of the houses and floor plans for all the buildings. If

not your unit, then the unit you hand off the AO to will find the information invaluable. Create the record to give the next guy a great picture of what is on the ground.

Intelligence

Battalion-level intelligence and above has been generally less than useful. They have a very limited knowledge of my company AO and do not seem to understand it. All useful intelligence in the sector comes from the platoon leaders' and commander's interaction with the locals. Later in the deployment the tactical human

intelligence (HUMINT) team started to prove useful. They dedicated two guys to each company AO and began going on all missions with us. When they got boots on the ground with the boys and started collecting with the PL, they became a real asset. We need to place more emphasis on creating and running an intelligence cell at the company level. Use some of the smart guys in HQ platoon and have them focus on putting the pieces together. What would be great is if you can get an S2 Soldier or two from battalion to be the center of that cell, and they could liaise and exchange information with the other companies and battalion. Then they can focus on the targeting analysis for IEDs and tracking personnel, etc. Otherwise, battalion could be too busy looking at everything and miss the details of your sector.

One intelligence driven tool that could really make a difference in this war is the Handheld Interagency Identity Detection Equipment (HIIDE)/Biometric Automated Toolset (BAT) system. With this system, even units with weak counterinsurgency programs can make a significant contribution. This system, is essentially a cataloging system at the national level. It takes a photo, gets the fingerprints and retinal scans of the local national, then enters the information into an Iraq-wide database. What is important is that it matches a retinal scan and fingerprint to a picture, and these cannot be faked. We know that most al Qaeda members and other AIF have fake ID cards and change them on a regular basis. We can combat that with this system; the moment they are entered in



SPC Jason Edwards

The weapons pictured were found by 2nd Battalion, 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment Soldiers in a small village near Samarra, Iraq.

as one name, they are stuck with it. The next time we meet that person the name will not match the picture, fingerprint, and retinal. That is enough for me to know the guy is using a fake ID and that I should bring him in to find out why. This will apply to all levels of enemy leadership. How many times a day do you think senior AIF leadership pass through a CF checkpoint? With this system, after they are cataloged the first time, changing their identity again would be a significant risk if they encounter CF. If nothing else it will lock them into using the one fake identity instead of 20.

In addition, having a database with fingerprints connected to pictures and names could help identify unknown prints from captured weapons and IEDs. It would also increase the significance of forensics. Quite often we capture IEDs and weapons, but the enemy evades capture. If we then lifted the prints from those objects and added them to the database as an unknown insurgent, eventually we will run into that person. Most of the guys we fight live in the towns we patrol and are the guys we interact with on a daily basis. With fingerprint evidence to make the connections between the man and the weapons, they would stop smiling at me very quickly as I came to take them away.

I do not know how well I have explained my view on the importance of this system. But I am sure that even if everyone in Iraq does not use it, and only a brigade combat team or even just a battalion uses it, it will contribute to the success of that unit. Most of the contributions the system will make will be to the fight inside a battalion-size

area. So if one unit is using it, they will be better off. If everyone is using it, not only will local insurgents be tracked at the battalion level but possibly senior AIF leadership and their movements around the country.

Caches

When looking for caches you have to be observant. They will be marked in every conceivable way. Remember that a cache must be accessible to the enemy. There is usually a path leading straight to it or there is a

distinct marker that stands out. Once you find a cache or two, you will know the signs. Things we have often run into are green plastic water bottles lying near the cache, sandbags, shirts or rags in a tree over the cache, even had a shovel sitting right on top of one (we just picked up the shovel and dug it up). Another was a small fresh patch of grass growing in old growth. There are all sorts of things; just be observant and look for the things that stand out or do not belong. Remember, they have to find it, too. We also know they are lazy; in houses always move the large appliances and cabinets, we have found hidden compartments under the refrigerator and hollows in the wall behind pictures and mirrors.

Miscellaneous

We have several Raven unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) in our company, and I try to use them all the time. It does not take the best picture, but it does have thermal and gives you a good idea of the activity in your area. It is also very useful when planning raids/cordon and searches, etc. We have tried to photograph all the communities in our sector in great detail. When you plan an operation, it will be using Google or Falcon View imagery, which may be outdated and rarely looks like you imagined it. When you get an objective, you can look into your Raven photos of the area and find your objective. This will give you a great idea of what the objective really looks like, to include locations of doors, windows, sheds even what cars to expect on the objective, etc. Catalog everything early so that it is on record and ready for use. You do not want

to do an over flight within a few days of the raid, or you will tip off the enemy and they will relocate. They know what UAVs are and that when they are overhead a raid is coming. So they leave. It is a useful asset that is at company level; the only problem is that you need 48 hours to get approval for a flight to de-conflict air space. Just remember it is there and plan ahead to use it.

Shoot as often as you can. You will not have the opportunity or ammo to shoot this often at home station. Every week my squad leaders take their Soldiers to the FOB range to conduct reflexive fire, long range marksmanship, and reconfirm zero (once a month). In addition to squad training every two weeks, we take the entire platoon to a range on an Iraqi Army FOB and fire all our heavy weapons. We conduct shooting drills stationary, moving and moving in sections. This develops individual marksmanship for gunners, team leader's control of their vehicle's weapon and designating of targets, and squad leaders' ability to control both his vehicles. Designate targets to each and control their rates of fire. It is great training, and I try to do it as often as possible, especially since it is all based on skills needed every day on patrol.

I have several different headsets I use for my radio when operating dismounted. If I am conducting an air assault, I always use a Peltor; this headset allows me to hear all the traffic on the net despite the noise of the aircraft. It is also compatible with the headsets in the aircraft, allowing you plug in directly and talk to the pilots and crew. You will also know if there is a landing zone problem and have to land elsewhere, prior to getting on the ground.

I also require all my leaders to use a headset with their Icoms when operating dismounted. This is basic noise and light discipline; enforce it — don't be that unit that you can hear around the block because of the ridiculously loud Icom chatter. Why give the enemy any indication of your presence, especially one that you can control.

When conducting air assaults or other dismounted operations, think about casualty evacuation (CASEVAC). Plan for it, have helicopter landing zones (HLZs) identified along your route in case you take a casualty. I dropped this ball on one air assault; we took

contact at my last building on the objective and had two casualties — one litter and one ambulatory. After the fight, we had to move the casualties 400 meters to an established landing zone. This doesn't seem far, but when you are loaded down with 60 pounds of combat gear, two wounded 190-pound men, their gear and people are trying to kill you, it gets a little difficult. That was the closest LZ I knew birds could land at, and battalion already had the grid. If I had done a better recon with the objective imagery for CASEVAC LZs, then I would not have had to move so far. There was a suitable LZ within 200 meters. It is simple Ranger School stuff that I learned as a private. The moment you forget something or cut corners, it will come back to haunt you. So make an overlay of possible HLZs, number them and have the grids prepared. Make sure battalion or your company CP has the overlay (whichever you will be talking to from the ground), that way you can save time and effort during a hectic situation and just tell them to send the CASEVAC bird to "HLZ X-ray", and they can get the grid from the overlay you gave them. It's basic stuff; just remember to do it.

M203 smoke is great for signaling and aiding in the direction of aircraft. Sometimes it can be hard to talk aircraft in on a target area; remember everything looks completely different from the sky. A couple of M203 smoke rounds to mark the target can clear things up very quickly.

Some units will have SOPs for how you configure your equipment on the IBA; this reminds me of the old days with the LCE. There are more important things than everyone having the same setup of their gear, like how they fight. The only thing that might matter is the location of the medical pouch, otherwise it should be what is comfortable and effective for that Soldier. Many of my guys use rack systems instead of attaching directly to the armor. With all the combat gear we wear, it is very difficult to move around in the turret; being able to take the rack off allows for much greater maneuverability. It also makes it much easier to pass boxes of ammo up during a fight and to switch gunners if he is injured. It is not easy to lay in the prone in a grove for 18 hours with all this gear on, especially in the heat. Being able to remove most of the weight of the gear but still maintain the protection should keep most leadership happy and makes it a more doable task for the troopers.

Always look for and use good ideas from other units. Whenever you are attached to another company, find out what their SOPs are and see what they do differently. I guarantee there is something they do that is smarter or more efficient than your way. Have an open mind and be willing to change if they have a better system; integrate what works for your unit and AO and leave what does not.



A1C Stephanie Longoria, USAF

The author (at far right) questions an Iraqi man with the help of an interpreter during a mission in Samarra, Iraq, September 28, 2007.

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