



Task Force Trailblazer: Providing Assured Mobility

By Major Paul D. Harron

Task Force Trailblazer¹ is an adaptation of a long-standing engineer mission—providing assured mobility. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the primary obstacle to assured mobility for US and coalition forces is the improvised explosive device (IED). IEDs are improvised mines, and Trailblazer performs nonstandard minefield clearance.

The Task Force Trailblazer mission was originally conducted by the 14th Engineer Battalion (Corps)(Wheeled), a multicomponent battalion with three Active Army companies and one Army National Guard company. The battalion passed on its tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) during a relief in place with the 141st Engineer Battalion (Corps)(Wheeled), North Dakota Army National Guard, in April 2004. In Iraq, the 141st is attached to the 264th Engineer Group, Wisconsin National Guard, which directly supports the 1st Infantry Division.

Mission

Trailblazer involves clearance and sanitation of main and alternate supply routes to provide assured mobility for 1st Infantry Division elements.

Clearance, which is observing and removing possible IEDs and unexploded ordnance (UXO), is performed on both sides of the road and the median, if applicable. When specialized equipment is used, it covers 4 meters of the roadway. A foot patrol covers as much as 300 meters of the roadway.

Sanitation involves identifying and eliminating potential IED emplacement sites and hide sites used by anti-Iraqi forces. There are two types of sanitation: hasty and deliberate. *Hasty sanitation* is the removal of debris and trash within 5 meters of the roadway to reduce the ability to disguise an IED. *Deliberate sanitation* is a more extensive effort that focuses on the area within 300 meters of the roadway. Conducting this

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Charlie Company, 141st Engineer Battalion, conducts a patrol near Baqubah, Iraq.

type of sanitation denies the enemy the ability to conduct attacks from well-disguised positions. Deliberate sanitation in this type of environment requires a combined arms effort; it is necessary to have maneuver support to provide security as sanitation operations are conducted. The enemy, just like in a traditional battlefield, looks for favorable terrain. In this environment, that means terrain that allows him a tactical advantage for the emplacement of IEDs and the ability to hide and detonate them or provide an ambush overwatch.

Intelligence Support

Upon arrival in theater, the 141st prepared to receive its equipment, while an advance party traveled to Forward Observation Base Speicher to begin the relief in place. The battalion's S2 and S3 traveled north to coordinate this process and familiarize themselves with the terrain. During this initial visit, the unit realized the critical nature of intelligence in the assured mobility fight—so critical that the S2 remained in Iraq to continue to learn mission, enemy, terrain, troops, time available, and civilian consideration (METT-TC) for Trailblazer.

As in any operation, intelligence plays an important role in determining the task organization. It became evident that enemy actions and terrain would drive the battalion's efforts to reduce and eliminate IEDs within its area of operations. Using METT-TC analysis, named areas of interest (NAIs) were established that allowed Trailblazer patrols to focus their efforts. The contemporary operating environment (COE) teaches that the

enemy is always learning and changing. This requires constant reevaluation and adjustment of TTP in order to remain effective in the counter-IED fight and keep our soldiers safe.

Anti-Iraqi forces initially surface-emplaced IEDs, which were easy to identify visually. These IEDs were also command-detonated with a visible wire leading to the anti-Iraqi force member with the detonator. As Operation Iraqi Freedom continued, IEDs became more sophisticated. Anti-Iraqi forces started burying IEDs and remotely detonating them. Now the 141st looks for an antenna sticking out of the ground, rather than a round with wires running from it, which makes the task more difficult. As this TTP developed, an Interim Vehicle-Mounted Mine Detection (IVMMD) System was included in the Trailblazer patrol set. The IVMMD System allowed soldiers a greater level of force protection and the ability to detect mines by more than visual observation. As the enemy changes,



A soldier places charges on UXO found on a Trailblazer patrol.

so does the mission, so the ability to be flexible is critical to success.

The battalion's initial equipment set used high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) and 5-ton dump trucks, which were effective for identifying IEDs. Additionally, M1114 up-armor HMMWVs and add-on armor kits for HMMWVs improved safety while conducting route clearance operations.

Combined Arms Effort

Task Force Trailblazer truly needs to be a combined arms effort. Due to the constant presence required on the roadways to be effective, it is critical to have good relationships with the task forces that own the terrain, as well as with air assets, if they are available.

One of the most important lessons the 141st learned from the 14th was the importance of face-to-face coordination with the landowning task forces. While conducting Trailblazer, there were many occasions when it was necessary to call a task force to assist a Trailblazer patrol with quick-reaction forces (QRFs). Coordination ahead of time was essential.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) teams, who dispose of the IEDs, were located with the task forces. The task force QRF is responsible for escorting the EOD teams to the site. To reduce the possibility

of fratricide, the task force must know that Trailblazer is in its battlespace.

Another consideration in the combined arms fight is the need for mechanized and armored support for our patrols. By integrating these assets into patrols, it is possible to take a more active stance when engaged by the enemy. There were also several occasions when Trailblazer relied on air QRFs to support operations when Trailblazer elements were attacked.

Conclusion

As we enter the next phases of Operation Iraqi Freedom, there will be several changes in Task Force Trailblazer operations. The most notable is that the task force is beginning to train Iraqi security forces to conduct route clearance operations. Initially, it includes joint patrols to ensure their capability and safety. As Iraqi forces become more confident, it is likely that the Trailblazer mission will expand to include patrols by Iraqi forces on their own. There are many hurdles on the way to making this transition, but the goal is a free Iraq, capable of maintaining democracy. To achieve this goal, the Iraqi people must take ownership and pride in their own country.



Major Harron is the intelligence officer for the 141st Engineer Battalion, deployed to Iraq in February 2004. His past assignments include battalion S2, air defense artillery platoon leader, executive officer, communications officer, and S4. He holds a bachelor's in criminal justice studies from the University of North Dakota.



A soldier from Bravo Company, 141st Engineer Battalion, carefully handles a remote detonator from an IED.

Endnote

¹Task Force Trailblazer is the brainchild of Colonel Christopher J. Toomey of the 555th Engineer Group—now the 555th Maneuver Enhancement Brigade (Provisional), 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized). During Operation Iraqi Freedom, Colonel Toomey identified the need for assured mobility due to intelligence and enemy tactics that were being used, primarily the IED.

This article is dedicated to four engineer soldiers who lost their lives while conducting the Task Force Trailblazer mission. They are Specialist Phil Brown, Specialist James Holmes, Staff Sergeant Lance Koenig, and Specialist Cody Wentz