

Photo courtesy U.S. Air Force



## GATOR:

# EOD COUNTER-IED TRAINING

By Senior Master Sergeant Mike Hague

The 1/101 Brigade Combat Team (BCT) Operations Center receives an urgent call from a mounted combat patrol, Rough Rider element, in the city of Kirkuk, Iraq, requesting immediate explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team response. The Operations Center relays to the EOD team that during the course of a coalition presence patrol in downtown Kirkuk, a convoy of five up-armored HMMWVs was struck by an improvised explosive device (IED); the lead vehicle took the force of the blast, resulting in minor injuries to the occupants and minimal vehicle damage. The Operations Center immediately dispatches its on-call quick-reaction force to escort the EOD team to the incident scene. Once at the scene, the on-site convoy commander provides the EOD team chief with a detailed description of the events that led to the attack and a sketch of the scene. The EOD team chief ensures that 360-degree site security is in place and that all coalition and local national personnel in the area are safely evacuated. The EOD team uses robotic equipment to quickly do a remote survey of the vehicle damage, explosion site, and surrounding area. They find an animal carcass with electrical wires coming out of it, obviously emplaced by insurgents as a

secondary IED meant to kill or injure the first-responders. Using a robot, the EOD team destroys the secondary IED by placing an explosive charge on the carcass. The site is cleared and the EOD team is escorted back to the forward operating base (FOB)—another mission success.



Photo courtesy U.S. Air Force

EOD robots have proved to be invaluable on the battlefield.

This realistic scenario is just one of many that Air Force EOD teams encounter during a Global Antiterrorism and Operational Readiness (GATOR) Course. The two-week course, held at the Ordnance Munitions and Electronic Maintenance School, Redstone Arsenal, Alabama, is required predeployment training for EOD forces. The course provides training on IED threats and unique EOD procedures and equipment encountered in Iraq and Afghanistan.

GATOR is owned and operated by the United States Army, which established the course in 2003 to enhance the training its EOD forces received before deploying for Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom. The Army conducts more than 30 GATOR classes per year, training well over 500 EOD technicians from all Services, as well as EOD teams from other countries. The permanent GATOR staff consists of four Active Army EOD instructors and a team of contract support personnel who build IED training aids and maintain specialized robotics and equipment. Each Service provides additional subject matter experts to assist the GATOR staff while their Service teams attend the course.

GATOR's joint Service training venue allows Air Force EOD teams to train as they will fight on the joint Service battlefield. Week one consists of classroom training on current enemy tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP); IED trends; advanced IED electronics; electronic countermeasures; Iraq/Afghanistan ordnance identification; crime scene investigation/forensic analysis; and robotic equipment operations. During week two, students respond to more than 30 practical scenarios based on current EOD incidents and evolving insurgent TTP.

The GATOR course is just a part of the required training EOD forces must have before heading to the Iraq and Afghanistan areas of operations. They must also complete Air Force predeployment training at home station and a 15-day basic Combat Skills Training Course at one of the Army's stateside power projection platforms. This is all in addition to their normal schedule at home station. EOD forces spend more than 30 percent of their time in training—to maintain their minimum career field qualifications, to hone their wartime skills, and to stay proficient on specialized EOD tools and TTP.

It's a lot of training, but the execution of EOD operations on the Iraqi and Afghani battlefields requires unwavering skill



Photo courtesy U.S. Air Force

**A team member watches in the mirror of the new EOD Cougar Armored Response Vehicle as another EOD journeyman prepares explosive charges.**

to ensure the safety and survival of coalition forces and local nationals. The GATOR Course provides exceptional hands-on classroom training and challenging practical scenarios built from actual EOD operations occurring in-theater within the past few months.



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