Kazer Bridge Restoration

By Specialist Robert Woodward

During a three-day project, engineers of the 101st Airborne Division spanned the Kazer River, a tributary of the Tigris River, and gave control of the bridges to local officials. The construction effort was part of the stability and support operations the division is conducting in northern Iraq.

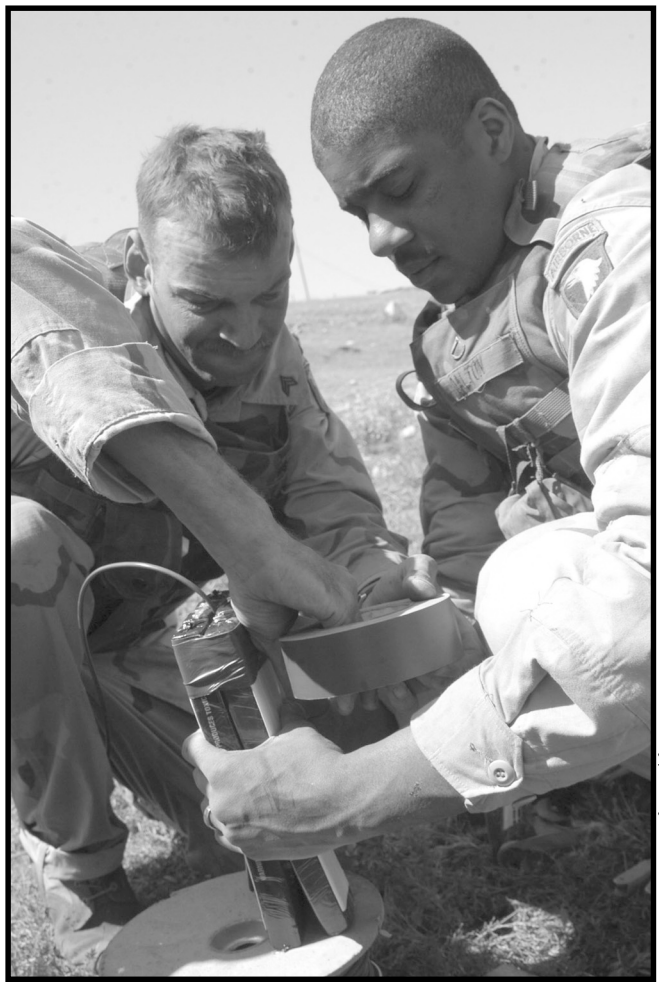
The new bridges eased congestion along Highway 2, a main artery between Mosul and Erbil, the two largest cities in northern Iraq. The four-lane highway crossed the Kazer over two bridges, both of which were partly blown up by Iraqi forces during the war. The southern span was only partially destroyed, while the northern bridge was completely disabled. Iraqi traffic continued to use the bridges, leading to a "rather unsafe" condition.

The first day of work began when the sappers of the 326th Engineer Battalion, Fort Campbell, Kentucky, cleared away the collapsed portion of the northern bridge, which leaned precariously on supporting pylons. Careful placement of C-4 plastic explosives would allow the bridge section to fall to the riverbed without striking the pylons, which could cause the rest of the bridge to tumble down. A 25-foot hydraulic excavator was used to move rubble away from the work area and then to raise the engineers up under the bridge to place the charges. Steel pickets and wooden beams were used to wedge explosives into place, and then fuse line was let out 500 meters to the detonation site.

Soldiers of the 310th Psychological Operations Company roamed the area, using loudspeakers mounted on their high-mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) to instruct gathering villagers in Arabic to move back and take cover. Traffic was blocked from the east and west, and OH-58 Kiowa Warrior helicopters flew over the site, watching for breaches in safety and security.

Crater charges propelled the end of the bridge upward. According to the assistant division engineer, the battalion used more than 1,000 pounds of explosives to knock down the bridge section and didn't do any damage to the nearby villages or harm any people.

The next morning, the 299th Engineer Company of Fort Belvoir, Virginia, prepared to put up a single-lane medium girder bridge made of aluminum and especially designed for quick construction. The unit measured the gap and decided that 16 links of the bridge were needed to span the 34 meters. Soldiers worked in groups, picking up bridge pieces weighing as much as 600 pounds and assembling them. First, the bridging company set up the staging portion of the bridgeworks, which acted as a launching mechanism for the boom of the hydraulic excavator. The boom was extended link by link until it reached the far side. Then the boom was used to support the bridge as it was pushed over the gap by a large truck.



U.S. Army photo by SPC Robert Woodward

Combat engineers of the 326th Engineer Battalion, 101st Airborne Division, prepare a counterforce charge used to blast away a fallen segment of the Kazer Bridge near Mosul, Iraq, 28 April 2003.

Though the bridge was constructed quickly, it's no slapdash structure, but a one-lane bridge that can hold 70 tons. A section from the 74th Engineer Company (Assault Float Bridge), Fort Hood, Texas, arrived and added another lane to the northern bridge using the Army's new dry support bridge. The main advantage in using the dry support bridge is that the launch vehicle does the heavy lifting during construction. Since soldiers did not have to pick up the heavy pieces, it took only eight people to assemble the bridge.

Turning the bridges over to the Iraqi people was one more step toward restoring the economy and security of the region.

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