



Making Molehills Out of Mountains

Engineers Have a Blast Blocking Smugglers' Path

By Specialist Patrick Rodriguez

At Camp Monteith, Kosovo, the day ended not with a bang or whimper but with a tremendous thud that echoed through the valley. That morning, Task Force 9th Engineer Battalion had departed from the camp to blow up a suspected smuggling route crossing into the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia from Kosovo. The day began 16 hours before the last explosion, with the high-mobility, multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) crisscrossing up and into the mountains. The route soon became more of a footpath than a vehicle trail. Still, there was evidence that the trail had been used: scarred trees, discarded water bottles, and tire tracks.

First, the task force had to pick a site, which would depend on existing obstacles and terrain in the area. It would be best to link this access to a very steep slope on either side of the road. The site the task force chose was a trail in the German sector of Multinational Brigade (East) with steep slopes on both sides near the top of a densely wooded slope. There was some economic smuggling along the administrative boundary line that separates Kosovo from other provinces in the Federal Republic of Yugoslavia—tax avoidance stuff—but here, the problem was support to armed elements. The task force wanted to stop the smuggling of weapons and the support of ethnic armed groups on either side of the border.

The plan was to set off two explosions—the first from shaped charges and the second from cratering charges. Shaped charges, made of composition B explosives, will go through reinforced concrete and cut through steel. Inside the charge is a cone, and when it detonates, it detonates from the top and consumes itself. By the time it comes out the bottom, it's just a ball of plasma. It pushes everything out of the way. Shaped charges are set a couple of feet off the ground for optimum penetration. These charges would create six boreholes, which would be used for the larger, more robust cratering charges (made of composition H6).

But before destroying the smuggling route, the task force had a few tasks to complete that consumed most of the day:

- Phase 1 consisted of clearing the brush. The team hacked unmercifully for hours at the trees and bushes on both sides of the trail to provide a view of the explosions from both the shaped and cratering charges.
- Phases 2 and 3 consisted of preparing the explosives and setting them off.

The task force ensured that the U.S. and German soldiers who had been providing security for the platoon had evacuated the area after the shaped charges were placed the required distance above the sloped trail. From several hundred feet away, in the protective cocoon of an armored HMMWV, the demolition team set off the first explosion. It ripped through the valley and was felt more than half a mile away.

Moments later, the task force returned to the site of the explosion. The ground was covered with green leaves from the trees overhead, and the site smelled like fresh-cut grass. Five of the six charges had cleared holes straight into the

ground. One of the charges hit a large rock on the way down and stopped a few feet short of the desired depth. After examining all six boreholes, the task force

dug the holes so they were wide and deep enough for the cratering charges. Then, the cratering charges were put in place and detonated. The explosion rocked the mountainside and flung the trail skyward, including trees, gravel, dirt, and large rocks. Debris rained down on the HMMWV with loud bangs. This time, when the team returned to the site, it smelled like tilled earth.

The “tank ditch” was such a success that the Task Force 9th Engineer Battalion worried that if smugglers came at night, they would be injured if they fell into the ditch. So the final touches to the 18-wheeler-size gouge across the trail were strands of concertina wire that led off the trail and down the steep slopes on both sides of the barrier.

Specialist Rodriguez is a journalist/ photojournalist with the 302d Mobile Public Affairs Detachment, Camp Monteith, Kosovo.



Soldiers duel-prime a 40-pound cratering charge with the use of composition B explosives.



A soldier primes a 40-pound shaped charge with a blasting cap crimped to detonating cord.