# Command and Control of Construction Assets in Iraq

*By Lieutenant Colonel Jeffrey R. Eckstein*

At a time when construction capability within the Engineer Regiment is limited and in high demand, commanders must use their construction assets wisely. This article presents some thoughts on different ways to approach future task organizations.

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, construction assets—consisting of combat heavy battalions and group headquarters—are equally distributed to the divisions and to the corps. Each division has its organic battalions, an attached group with a combat heavy battalion, and a wheeled battalion. At corps level, there are two group headquarters, a combat heavy battalion, a wheeled battalion, a combat support company, and two combat support equipment companies. This allocation results in the inefficient use of forces to accomplish engineer work.

During my experience in corps-level combat heavy units, we worked adjacent to other combat heavy battalion areas, but it was usually at a distance from our base. The converse was also true. Divisional units executed missions adjacent to another base, traveling some distance to the mission site. This created a burden on the unit conducting these remote missions, as well as a command and control problem with coordinating movements, security, and logistics support.

A possible solution for this problem is to allocate construction capability across the theater based on assessed work requirements, to include civil-military projects. A group headquarters could be designated to facilitate

command and control of multiple engineer battalions over a dispersed area. This construction capability would be subordinate to the theater engineer brigade, not the divisions. The boundaries for the group headquarters would not necessarily match the existing divisional and brigade boundaries. A group provides area support to the units within its boundaries, some of which are the division headquarters. This allows the construction capability in the corps to focus on corps priorities and distributing construction capability throughout the corps area of operations.

The corps-level units could execute the large concrete work, road and airfield repairs, and projects that would improve the local Iraqi communities. If a project exceeded a division's capability, it could request corps assistance. The engineer brigade, as directed by the corps, could assign the mission to the group responsible for that area. With the shortage of combat heavy battalions in the force, combat engineer battalions cannot be allowed to ignore simple engineering tasks, such as filling Hesco® bastions, constructing berms, digging trenches, and constructing simple wood buildings and tent pads. Any type of engineer unit with the proper equipment can execute these missions.

An alternative to retaining the construction assets at corps level is to allocate the units to the divisions based on estimated work in their area of operations. Corps-level missions could then be assigned to the divisions to execute at a higher priority than their own construction missions. This would provide the divisions optimal engineer effort for their integration at the lowest level. It also would allow the corps the flexibility to assign high-priority missions to the unit that owns the battlespace. The risk with this task organization is that the divisions might redirect engineer units to execute nonengineer missions.

Divisions have their organic engineer battalions. Additionally, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, most divisions have a corps wheeled engineer battalion. This gives the division three to four engineer battalions. If properly equipped with power tools and generators, these engineers can provide a majority of the division's construction needs within a base camp or forward operating base. Large projects on a base are typically executed through local contracts or through the US Army Corps of Engineers® area offices. Combat engineers are fully capable of constructing simple wood-framed buildings and tent pads, constructing berms, and filling Hesco bastions. Wheeled engineer battalions have the capability to do those tasks, as well as haul and spread gravel.

An engineer group headquarters can command and control from five to seven task-organized subordinate units. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, most groups control no more than four subordinate units. The two groups subordinate to the theater engineer brigade collectively control three battalions and two separate companies. Additionally, engineer battalions command and control five to seven subordinate companies or detachments. During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the two divisions each have two colonel-level engineer headquarters. This lends itself to stovepiping of engineer effort: One headquarters deals with certain missions, while the other headquarters deals with other missions. One engineer headquarters could synchronize work between all engineer assets within the division and ensure that maximum effort is applied to the division and corps priorities.

Within the Regiment, there is a tendency to think of ourselves as sappers and the other guys. We must realize that there is *one* engineer. Sometimes the focus is on sapper missions, and sometimes it is on construction missions. There are numerous examples from Iraq of the great work engineers are doing outside of their traditional missions while assigned to a specific type of unit. Being flexible enough to execute the mission of another branch is not the road to relevancy. That is the road to manpower reductions in order to buy manning for the other branches. We must always look to execute engineer missions. That is where we add value to the Army. To stay relevant, we must stay focused on *all* engineer missions.

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