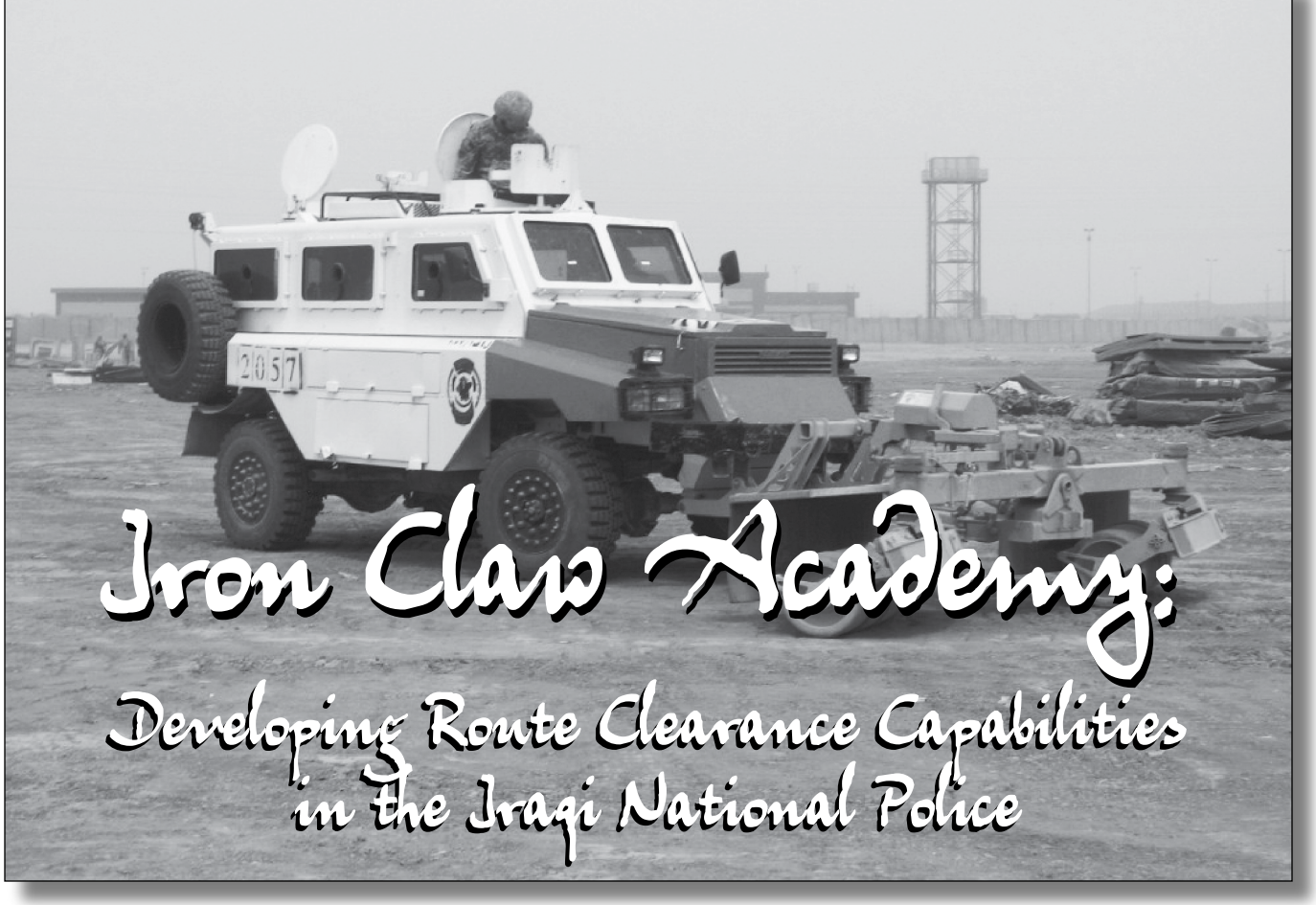

Iron Claw Academy:

Developing Route Clearance Capabilities in the Iraqi National Police

By Captain Scott F. Swilley

Five years into Operation Iraqi Freedom, improvised explosive devices (IEDs) continue to pose a significant threat to coalition forces, Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), and the Iraqi population. The United States Army has invested a great deal of money in fielding vehicles with significantly improved survivability, and this equipment has unquestionably saved countless lives in Iraq. Nevertheless, most coalition forces adjust their patrol schedules and routes to avoid likely IED engagement areas. This is not true for the route clearance teams (RCTs) that patrol the streets of Iraq every day. These teams, affectionately known as "Iron Claw," continually patrol the neighborhoods and streets to find IEDs and keep the routes safe for travel.

While route clearance has traditionally been a primary mission for coalition forces, the development of an Iraqi route clearance capability will help the transition to tactical overwatch. Across Iraq, senior coalition force leaders are aggressively moving toward putting the ISF in the lead and developing additional ISF capabilities. An independent ISF route clearance capability would reduce Iraqi reliance on coalition forces and enable coalition force brigade combat teams (BCTs) to expand their route clearance efforts as unit boundaries shift over time or to mass coalition force route clearance teams in remaining security problem areas.

Recently, Soldiers attached to the 4th Infantry Division (Mechanized) took an important first step in building a future ISF route clearance capability. Through partnership, training, and certification, they dedicated their time and energy to creating an Iraqi RCT within an Iraqi National Police (NP) brigade. The brigade is a uniquely equipped unit that is responsible for securing a main arterial route in Baghdad.

Establishing a Partnership, Sharing a Vision

Developing a close partnership with the NP brigade was an essential step in developing the Iraqi Iron Claw team. Close coordination with the brigade's transition team opened the door for this relationship. The NP brigade commander was extremely receptive to the concept of developing the route clearance capability within his unit and training with U.S. Army engineers. The NP transition team served as an effective agent, negotiating numerous manning, equipping, training objective, and certification standards agreements with the NP brigade commander. Beginning in May 2008, Phoenix Iron Claw, the U.S. route clearance team, developed grassroots partnerships and began conducting combined patrols with the NP brigade. The NP brigade integrated armored security vehicles into Phoenix Iron Claw patrols and embedded ISF leadership in Phoenix Iron Claw command and control vehicles with a coalition force patrol leader and interpreter.

RCT Training

By June 2008, encouraged by the grassroots partnership efforts and the success of combined patrols, the NP brigade commander agreed to establish a dedicated

RCT called *Shurta*. Subsequently, the U.S. Soldiers began earnest preparations of the Phoenix ISF Iron Claw Academy. Modeled after the Task Force Iron Claw Academy used to certify coalition force RCTs upon arrival in the Iraqi theater of operations, the Phoenix ISF Iron Claw Academy trained and certified the NP brigade's RCT through a 10-day program of instruction that included individual, crew, leader, and collective training. The course outline consisted of three compounding phases: route clearance equipment training, tactics instruction, and practical exercises, plus a certification lane.

The U.S. Soldiers prepared training support materials in English and Arabic and vetted the translated training materials through several U.S. and Iraqi agencies for content, accuracy, and cultural sensitivities. The NP brigade delivered ISF vehicles a week in advance of the course start date in order to mount a mine roller and blower to the vehicles for additional counter-IED capabilities. The U.S. Soldiers certified trainers and rehearsed the use of translators for presentation of training materials.

Equipment Training

When the NP brigade route clearance platoon arrived for the first day of training, there were many familiar faces in the group from the combined patrolling and IED awareness training conducted in the preceding months. Upon arrival, the trainees moved to the local training area for three days of training on the following equipment:

- Buffalo
- Husky with ferret arm
- REVA (Reliable, Effective, Versatile, and Affordable), a South African wheeled armored vehicle

Equipment training mirrored U.S. Army standards for new equipment training, progressing from familiarization to preventive maintenance and finally to driver training. The driver's course included a ground-guiding lane, a closed half-mile course, and a serpentine course that allowed the drivers to better judge mine roller clearance and turn radius, critical skills while negotiating security checkpoints.

Tactics Instruction

As with the majority of training, the company noncommissioned officers (NCOs) took the lead and presented tactics instruction, through interpreters, to the students. To set conditions for effective practical exercises, the tactics instruction focused on the following:

- Mission preparation for a route clearance patrol
- IED indicators
- Battle drills
- Vehicle recovery
- Patrol formations

The classroom instruction also served two ulterior objectives: it provided a reprieve from 110-degree temperatures and highlighted the expertise and leadership role of United States Army NCOs. The opportunity to demonstrate the potential of the U.S. Army's NCO Corps encouraged the Iraqi RCT officers to empower their subordinates and foster initiative within the ranks. Several of the tactics classes focused on troop-leading procedures and the importance of participation by all members of the team during patrol preparation.

A Husky operator from the 1st National Police Brigade interrogates an inert IED with the ferret arm during the certification lane.

"Iron Claw teams continually patrol the neighborhoods and streets [of Iraq] to find IEDs and keep the routes safe for travel."

RCT patrol leaders reviewed material with U.S. instructors before presenting a block of instruction, so they entered the classroom with a solid understanding of tactics and a willingness to consider alternative patrolling techniques. The U.S. instructors encouraged the NP leaders to apply all available resources, most notably a mastery of the terrain and insight into enemy behaviors, to critical steps such as reconnaissance and surveillance.

Practical Exercises

The Iraqi RCT members exited the classroom eager for the opportunity to display their newfound IED defeat training. Throughout the training, they displayed marked improvement and their leaders willingly accepted advice. The practical exercises included an IED indicators lane, self-recovery of RCT vehicles, movement formations, and actions on IED battle drills.

An explosive ordnance disposal company and a weapons intelligence team supported the U.S. instructors and enhanced training during practical exercises by producing realistic training aids. Students negotiated the IED indicators lane one vehicle at a time, focusing on identifying as many indicators as possible. During the practical exercises, the Iraqi RCT leaders took over patrol preparation. The practical exercises included emphasis on deliberate rehearsals, to include the following:

- Rock drills on sand tables
- Walk-through rehearsals
- Radio rehearsals
- Mounted rehearsals
- Recovery operations exercises to reinforce the importance of precombat checks

Certification

The certification lane was the capstone event for the Phoenix ISF Iron Claw Academy. The Iraqi RCT leaders were assigned a typical main supply route clearance mission. U.S. instructors provided mock intelligence assessments with leading questions to provoke the tactical problem-solving techniques discussed during tactics instruction. The U.S. instructors evaluated the RCT patrol leader and his unit on the following:

- Patrol preparation
- Use of visual aids
- Patrol briefs
- Rehearsals
- Conduct of the route clearance patrol
- Actions on contact
- Recovery
- Post-combat operations

The Iraqi RCT conducted two iterations of the certification lane. The first scenario focused on actions taken when an IED is found, while the second scenario involved a complex attack. Both iterations revealed areas that needed improvement, but overall the team met the standard for progression to combined route clearance operations.

Keys to Success

With the first cycle of Iron Claw training completed successfully, U.S. leaders identified several keys to success as takeaways to support future training and operations. Developing partnerships and obtaining Iraqi buy-in to form a dedicated RCT opens the door. Training Iraqi forces to perform the route clearance mission does not require the creation of a new training methodology; using the standard eight-step training model and the existing Phoenix Iron Claw Academy program of instruction worked well. Emphasizing patrol preparation is just as important as resourcing the RCT with special counter-IED equipment. Finally, a deliberate sustainment training plan, maintenance plan, and continued combined patrolling will enhance performance as the ISF moves forward. Transition requires willingness, patience, and training for both coalition forces and the ISF. As a result of this training, in a few short weeks Iraqi citizens will see their own security forces clearing important roads and recognize the willingness, patience, skill, and dedication of ISF and coalition forces in partnership together.

Captain Swilley has commanded Echo Company, 4th Battalion, 64th Armor Regiment, for two years as part of 4th Brigade, 3d Infantry Division. His past assignments include project manager, Division Engineers, 3d Infantry Division; operations and training (S-3) officer, 2d Battalion, 10th Infantry Regiment; training developer, United States Army Engineer School; and platoon leader, assistant S-3, and company executive officer, 16th Engineer Battalion. He holds a bachelor's from Louisiana State University and masters' in civil engineering and engineering management from the University of Missouri-Rolla (now Missouri University of Science and Technology), and is licensed as a professional engineer in Missouri.