

Employing the Route Clearance Package in Afghanistan

By Major Gerald S. Law

Numerous articles have been written describing route clearance package (RCP) formations, equipment, and targeting; however, minimal references exist for employing the RCP. Therefore, this article presents lessons learned in Afghanistan for RCP employment. The intent is to change the way we think about tasking, managing, and employing the RCP. The article will not describe RCP tactics, techniques, and procedures used in Afghanistan.

What Is the Problem?

In May 2009, the 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team (IBCT), 4th Infantry Division, deployed to the Nangarhar, Nuristan, Kunar, and Laghman (N2KL) provinces of Afghanistan to support Operation Enduring Freedom. N2KL, located in eastern Afghanistan, covers more than 25,000 square kilometers but contains only a small number of vehicle-accessible routes. Therefore, the Anti-Afghanistan Forces (AAF), which include all elements

fighting U.S. and coalition forces in Afghanistan, easily predicted where U.S. and coalition forces traveled and frequently inflicted casualties using improvised explosive devices (IED) and complex attacks.

To combat this threat, Combined Joint Task Force (CJTF)-82 allocated three RCPs to support the brigade. One RCP consisted of infantry and engineer Soldiers from the brigade's organic special troops battalion and one of its infantry battalions. The other two RCPs arrived from the engineer brigade supporting CJTF-82 in-theater; however, these two RCPs were task-organized as general support to the IBCT.

Who Controls the RCPs?

Who controls the RCPs, decides their missions, and approves the routes they clear? These questions raised concerns among staff members and commanders from CJTF-82, the IBCT, and the engineer



Photo by First Lieutenant Alex B. Armstrong

A Buffalo interrogates a suspected IED site along a key route in Afghanistan.



An RCP conducts operations in difficult terrain in Afghanistan.

brigade. Doctrine was referenced, slides were briefed, and arguments heard; in the end, it came down to common sense. The brigade combat team (BCT) controls the RCPs, decides their missions, and approves or disapproves the routes they clear. The BCT maintains responsibility for mission accomplishment, owns the assets, resources additional enablers, and synchronizes those assets and enablers in support of the brigade, battalion, or company.

For example, a battalion task force within the BCT is tasked to conduct a key leader engagement to assess the security situation within a village. The battalion develops a plan and tasks a company to accomplish that mission. Additionally, the battalion requests resources to facilitate mission accomplishment. The route to the village is expected to harbor IEDs, so the battalion ensures freedom of maneuver by requesting an RCP from the brigade. Furthermore, the battalion requests additional assets such as rotary-wing aircraft and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets to support the company and the RCP. The mission has a high probability of success, because the battalion task force, which is familiar with the area, decides it would be best to attack the device for this mission. The battalion provides a maneuver company to conduct the mission, requests the RCP to maintain freedom of maneuver, and allocates rotary-wing and ISR assets to support the company and the RCP.

Defeat the Network or the Device?

In the counter-IED fight, the BCT must decide to defeat either the network or the device. The primary and most desirable method for defeating the IED is to defeat the network. This involves data gathering and analysis, intelligence development, and action. Simply, the BCT plans and executes missions to remove an IED cell by eliminating its leadership, personnel, and resources. Additionally, this article argues that it's the BCT which mainly conducts the "decide, detect, deliver, and assess" process—not the RCP's parent unit.

Furthermore, if the BCT's command group or staff believes that the IED network still exists along a route and that mission requirements dictate movement or maneuver along that route, then the BCT resources and synchronizes the RCP to defeat the device. True, RCPs gather data and develop intelligence from acquired IEDs and IED parts found, which enable the BCT to defeat the network; however, the RCP's primary purpose at this point is to defeat the device.

What Routes to Clear?

RCPs clear routes in direct support of a BCT maneuver element conducting a mission. RCPs conducting missions that are not in support of a BCT

maneuver element are not defeating the device, but simply putting RCP assets at risk. This argument is based on three assumptions:

- AAF IEDs can damage or destroy RCP assets.
- AAF have more IED-making material and resources than U.S. and coalition forces have RCP assets within a BCT's area of operations.
- AAF can predict the routes U.S. and coalition forces use within a BCT's area of operations, thus giving the AAF the initiative.

Once an RCP clears a route, the AAF simply return and reseed it with new IEDs. Even if an IED is found, the RCP used its resources to clear AAF resources, which puts the RCP at risk and results in a net gain of zero. Therefore, RCPs must support a BCT maneuver element tasked to conduct a mission. Only then are they defeating the device. Examples of BCT maneuver missions RCPs may support include—

- Conduct a key leader engagement or border flag meeting.
- Deliver humanitarian assistance.
- Kill or capture a high-value target.
- Escort a combat logistics patrol.
- Conduct area or route reconnaissance.

Furthermore, an RCP defeats a device if it provides freedom of maneuver (freedom of movement) to the BCT element even if the RCP loses a vehicle in the process. For example, an RCP may lose a vehicle, but if the BCT maneuver element maintains freedom of movement along the route and succeeds in conducting the border flag meeting or delivering humanitarian assistance to a village, then the mission has been accomplished. However, an RCP that encounters an IED and loses a vehicle without providing freedom of movement to an element has allowed the AAF to defeat the RCP.

Remember that RCPs must support a maneuver element tasked to conduct a mission. The RCPs should not be sent out on “clear-a-route-we-haven’t-cleared-lately” types of missions. The AAF want U.S. and coalition commanders to commit RCP assets to clear routes not immediately vital to mission accomplishment.

Lessons Learned

- RCPs should support battalion missions. (Supported battalions work to have additional assets for operations.)
- RCPs are not stand-alone elements but support provincial reconstruction teams, agricultural development teams, companies, or platoons conducting missions in support of brigade, battalion, or company operations.
- The job of the RCPs is to clear routes that have, or are suspected of having, IEDs on them. It is not their job to clear routes that don't have IEDs.

- RCPs are put at risk when units send them to clear routes with no additional support. When units send RCPs to clear routes not required by a maneuver element, the RCPs are exposed to risk uselessly.
- RCP missions should be briefed 96 hours out to the brigade commander every day for approval. All operations from 24 to 96 hours out should be synchronized every day in the brigade operations synchronization meeting. This ensures that the BCT is supporting the RCP with maneuver elements, ISR, and rotary-wing aircraft.
- RCP missions that are not approved usually consist of—
 - Missions that require RCPs to travel on their own.
 - Missions to clear routes not in support of a BCT maneuver element requirement.
 - Missions nominated by brigade staffs to clear routes not in support of a BCT maneuver element.

Conclusion

RCPs are a critical asset to every BCT in Afghanistan. However, these assets are limited and must be tasked, managed, and employed properly. RCPs must support a BCT maneuver element conducting a mission. BCTs can either defeat the network or defeat the device in the counter-IED fight.

RCPs only defeat the device for the BCT maneuver element they are directly supporting. RCPs are not stand-alone units but support a battalion or company tasked to conduct a mission. If RCPs are not directly supporting a BCT maneuver element, then no device is defeated even if the RCP finds an IED and eliminates it. The brigade committed its RCP assets to eliminate an AAF resource, thus having a net zero gain. No mission was accomplished, the RCP was put at risk, and the AAF simply reseeded the route. RCPs should only support a maneuver element conducting a mission requiring freedom of movement or maneuver. 

Major Law is the brigade engineer for 4th Infantry Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Division, Fort Carson, Colorado. Past assignments include detachment commander and battalion operations officer, 3d Battalion, 361st Engineer Regiment, 5th Armored Brigade (Training Support Brigade), Fort Carson; assistant brigade engineer, company commander, 44th Engineer Battalion, 2d Infantry Division, Republic of Korea; platoon leader, 618th Light Equipment Engineer Company, 82d Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, North Carolina; and platoon leader and assistant brigade engineer, 307th Engineer Battalion, 82d Airborne Division, Fort Bragg. He holds an associate's degree in welding engineering from Ricks College, Rexburg, Idaho; a bachelor's in industrial engineering from Utah State University, Logan, Utah; a master's in geology and geophysics from the University of Missouri–Rolla (now Missouri University of Science and Technology), Rolla, Missouri; and a master's in military arts and sciences from the United States Army Command and General Staff College, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas.