



# 18th Engineer Brigade Maneuver Support Conference: Engineers Share Route Clearance Lessons Learned

By Captain Sonie L. Munson

**S**oldiers from across United States Army, Europe (USAREUR), and individuals from the Engineer Regiment came together for a maneuver support conference sponsored by the 18th Engineer Brigade at Heidelberg, Germany, in March. During the three-day conference, units throughout USAREUR shared lessons learned about route clearance operations during their recent deployments to Iraq and Afghanistan. The brigade commander, who began the conference with hopes that the information shared would go back to the units, said that knowledge is only useful when it is put to use.

Representatives from the 4th, 9th, and 54th Engineer Battalions spoke about the lessons they learned during recent deployments and held two panel discussions in which members of the Engineer Regiment asked questions to help them understand route clearance and how to operate at the battalion, company, and platoon levels.

The operations officer for the 9th Engineer Battalion, whose unit operated in five provinces south of Baghdad, Iraq, emphasized the importance of the top five lessons learned.

**Centralized route clearance.** This was essential to success because it allowed the battalion to plan all route clearance operations within the five provinces, letting the unit prioritize routes based on the threat in the area. The unit cleared an average of 4,000 kilometers a month, but when the threat from improvised explosive devices (IEDs) increased, the number of kilometers cleared doubled to ensure that the roads were safe for the local populace.

**Effects-based operations.** The 9th Engineer Battalion planned operations with certain outcomes in mind and achieved them in ways that weren't always obvious. For example, one desired outcome was to discover and eliminate IEDs. U.S. forces subjected IED sites to crime scene investigation, and sometimes that resulted in finding an

IED emplacement or network. This practice convinced the Iraqi Army and Iraqi Police to establish their own crime scene investigation labs.

**Robust engineer equipment fleet.** This allowed U.S. engineers to complete any engineering mission assigned, whether route clearance or general engineering. A large fleet rendered the unit less vulnerable to shortages or delays in orders for low-density items or those that weren't in the military ordering system.

**Training as multifunctional engineers.** Training in military occupational specialties other than their own resulted in better-trained Soldiers and helped break up the monotony of long duty hours. The change of pace gave general engineering Soldiers time away from construction sites and helped keep Soldiers alert during their route clearance missions.

**Crew rest management.** Many Soldiers needed to perform maintenance during rest periods and needed more time to wind down before they were able to fall asleep. This resulted in overall lack of sleep and mission ineffectiveness. To counter this problem, leaders ensured that Soldiers were getting enough sleep by checking rooms during lights-out, thus managing crew rest periods.

Route clearance is one of the Engineer Regiment's most important missions in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. By keeping open lines of communication and sharing lessons learned, USAREUR leaders hope to improve engineer performance and save Soldiers' lives. 

*Captain Munson was the public affairs officer for the 18th Engineer Brigade when this article was written. She took command of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 15th Engineer Battalion, Schweinfurt, Germany, in July.*