

# Think Like the Enemy



By Captain Alan R. Mackey

**A**lmost everyone in the military has heard the advice to “think like the enemy.” The saying probably originated with one of the most influential military strategists in history, Sun Tsu, who wrote in *The Art of War*, “If you know your enemies and know yourself, you will not be imperiled in a hundred battles; if you do not know your enemies but do know yourself, you will win one and lose one; if you do not know your enemies nor yourself, you will be imperiled in every single battle.”

This is one of the age-old bits of wisdom I kept in the back of my mind, but never thought about too seriously. I first became familiar with the saying during four years as a cadet and then reflected on it more often during my two and one-half years as a lieutenant. It was not until recently, while serving in Iraq, that I gained new respect for its validity. As a combat engineer platoon leader, I adopted the principle of never following a daily pattern. In my platoon, we constantly

change our formation, speed, and order of march. But that was the extent of my efforts to throw the enemy off. My battalion commander liked to say that people learn through one of two ways: through repetition or



Soldiers clear a road in Iraq.



**After 5th Engineer Battalion Soldiers find an IED, Iraqi police question local townspeople.**

because of a significant emotional event. My recent awakening was the result of the latter.

My platoon operated mainly from a camp in eastern Iraq. Our mission for the past month had been to clear an unimproved road in support of Iraqi civilians working on a nationally significant oil pipeline used to transport crude oil from the region bordering Iran to a refinery in Baghdad for processing. The enemy had previously emplaced anti-tank mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs) along this route to disrupt progress in repairing and maintaining the pipeline. Each day, the workers transported construction equipment to the pipeline to make any necessary repairs to damaged sections. Our route clearance allowed the workers to travel safely to their job sites and get their work done.

On the first day we cleared the route, workers built an expedient ramp to help download their construction equipment. That day we cleared the route and the workers were able to complete a full day of work. Later that evening, my platoon sergeant suggested that insurgents might place an IED in that ramp during the night. The suggestion made sense, and during the mission brief the following morning, we decided to clear the ramp before moving to the next section of the route, which was 75 meters away. When the platoon arrived at the ramp, the Husky mine-detection vehicle operator scanned the area and, on his second pass, identified a possible threat. As he backed up, he saw a

wire leading out of the dirt, used the Husky's ferret arm to interrogate the area, and soon pulled up an IED. Once it was safe, we continued our mission for the day.

If we had not cleared the ramp, the Iraqi pipeline workers would have used it again to download their equipment and almost certainly would have triggered the mine, causing damage to equipment and possibly inflicting casualties. My platoon sergeant's use of an idea that has been a constant theory in military history may have saved the lives of others. Because of this, we ask our Soldiers to "think like the enemy" on a daily basis. We no longer say it just because it sounds good; we say it because it works. Leaders from the team level up should seek the advice of their Soldiers and peers. Leaders will be amazed at the ideas presented and the advantages gained if they use the knowledge that is available from their Soldiers. It has been my honor and privilege to lead some of America's finest young men in combat. They will impress you on a daily basis—if you let them.



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