Task Force Able Supporting Operation Iraqi Freedom

By Colonel Christopher J. Toomey

Deploying in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom in April 2003, the Fort Lewis-based 555th Engineer Group (the Triple Nickel) conducted extensive operations with the 4th Infantry Division's Task Force Ironhorse and ably demonstrated the versatility, flexibility, and agility of modern combat and general engineering forces as it conducted full-spectrum engineer combat operations (to include fighting as infantry). As the sole brigade-level engineer headquarters with the Force XXI-structured 4th Infantry Division, the 555th conducted echelon-above-brigade operations across the entire division area of responsibility (AOR) and was often called on to conduct security and infantry operations. This article briefly summarizes the task force's operations and presents some observations.

A Versatile Engineer Force

As a multicomponent, multifunctional unit, the 555th (known as Task Force Able) benefited from a unique variety of skills and experience. Of the six battalions eventually assigned to the group, three were active, two were Army National Guard (Mississippi and West Virginia), and one was US Army Reserve (Figure 1). Similarly, the separate companies also came from all components. This was a key developmental experience for all leaders and soldiers who had to understand and appreciate the strengths of each component. It was also a great success, because all units in Task Force Able contributed equally to the efforts and sacrificed in the accomplishment of the mission. The achievements of the task force demonstrate that Active Component (AC)/Reserve Component (RC) integration works and is a viable reality for today's force.

In a recent letter to the editor of *Stars and Stripes*, a non-commissioned officer (NCO) from the 223d Engineer Battalion, Mississippi Army National Guard (part of Task Force Able), described his impressions of this multicomponent force:

"I don't know where the writer got the idea that reservists and guardsmen are whining about doing their jobs. I was with the 14th Engineer Battalion out of Fort Lewis. Those guys would work 24 hours if you let them, and our guys are right there with them to the end. We're all soldiers out here. There are no guardsmen and reservists. We are an 'Army of One.'"

Task Force Able was multifunctional and included combat engineers, construction engineers, and bridge builders. This assortment of units gave the task force the ability to perform just about every engineer mission imaginable, while working over the entire division AOR—in excess of 35,000 square miles—and with every brigade combat team (Figure 2, page 14). This large and diverse AOR posed some significant challenges that included long distances, inadequate infrastructure, and a determined enemy.

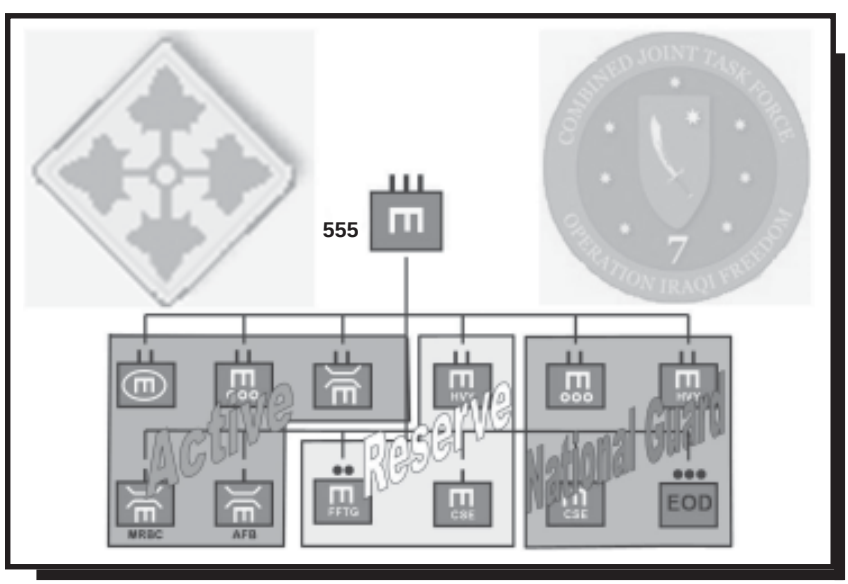

Figure 1. Task Force Able Organization

Lines of Operation

Within this AOR, Task Force Able operated along several main lines of operation that were based around the most common mission sets:

- Constructing power projection platforms and forward operating bases (FOBs).
- Reinforcing force protection.
- Providing assured mobility through route improvement, bridging, river patrols, and route clearance.
- Securing and destroying unexploded ordnance (UXO) and captured enemy ammunition (CEA).
- Facilitating civil infrastructure by helping Iraqis rebuild Iraq.

Figure 2. Area of Responsibility for the 4th Infantry Division

These lines of operation, described in general terms below, were not discrete and often overlapped. Throughout the deployment, the task force provided direct and general support to the division-committed brigade combat teams and often fought as infantry—conducting raids and ambushes and performing security operations.

Forward Operating Bases

The 555th contributed to building more than 50 FOBs for division troops. These were essential to provide relatively secure life-support areas from which units could project operations. In a harsh environment, with temperatures in excess of 140°F in the summer, these areas were important for maintaining the health and safety of the force. The FOBs varied in size from company outposts to battalion-sized bases. Each FOB included living areas, power, water, and accommodation for sewage (ranging from burnout to chemical latrines). Surface area improvement was essential. In Iraq, the ground is very unstable; the soil turns to choking dust in the summer and liquefied mud in the winter. Gravel was the primary material used for soil stabilization, and Task Force Able spread tons of gravel over thousands of square meters to provide a stable surface.

Proper force protection was a key piece of FOB development. The task force constructed bunkers and fighting positions and emplaced numerous berms and wires to secure perimeters. The task force and resident units worked diligently to harden a variety of sites on each FOB—from fighting positions and access gates to living quarters and morale, welfare, and recreation tents. The sandbag earned renewed respect, and the units of Task Force Able used literally thousands of HESCO Bastion Concertainers®.

Force Protection

Aside from FOBs, Task Force Able's efforts extended to protecting all manner of US, coalition, and procoalition Iraqi installations. The task force constructed multiple well-developed traffic control points along major routes and emplaced protective measures for Iraqi civil infrastructure, police stations, and civil defense installations to guard against attack—particularly against the increasing threat of vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (IEDs). Figure 3 shows some of the force protection measures employed.

Mobility Operations

A major mission for engineers—across history—is giving freedom of movement to the force by providing assured mobility. Task Force Able improved and rebuilt thousands of kilometers of road and trails. Most of the roads in Iraq are not designed to withstand sustained military traffic and required a continual program of route upgrade.

Bridging and River Patrols. Task Force Able also put in and maintained some significant bridging. The task force emplaced several military bridges over the Tigris River to provide mobility for military (both the 101st Airborne Division [Air Assault] near Mosul in the north and the 4th Infantry Division) and civilian traffic. With most significant bridges over the Tigris River destroyed during the early part of the war, it was essential to establish crossing sites. These included the longest Mabey & Johnson float bridge ever erected. Named for two soldiers from the 14th Engineer Battalion who were

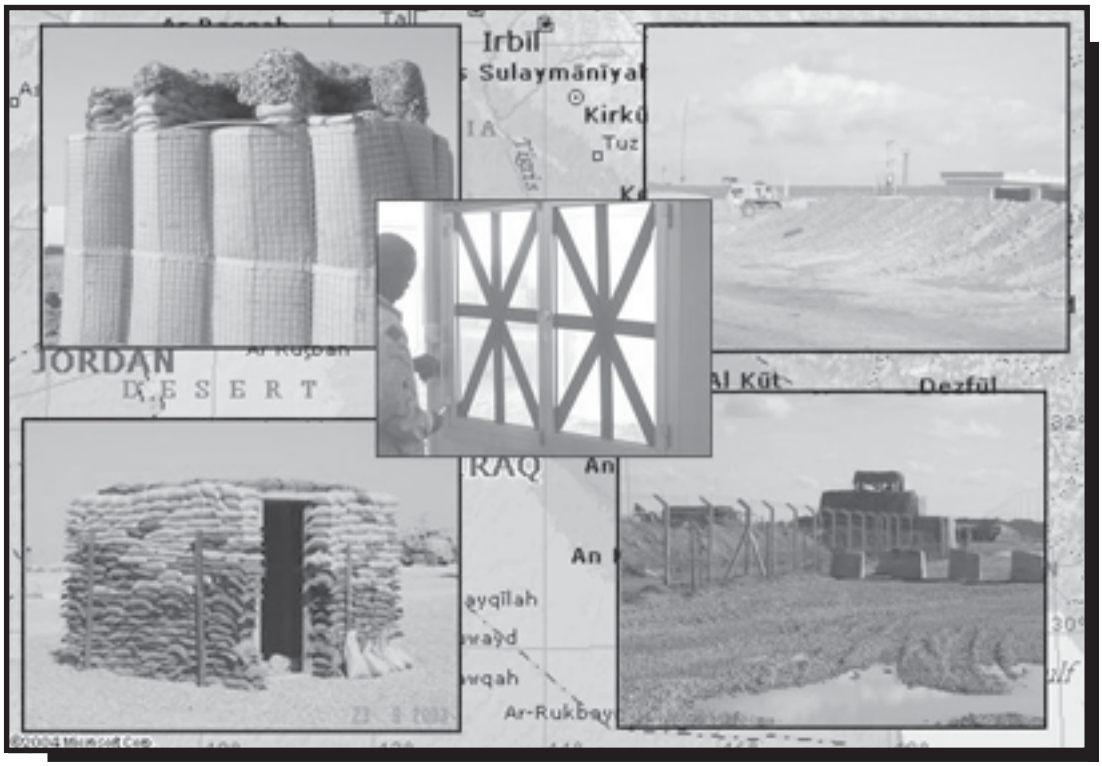

Figure 3. Force Protection Measures Used by Task Force Able

lost in the conflict, the Haight-Jordan Bridge was more than 320 meters long.

Tied to bridging was ensuring mobility along the waterways, principally the Tigris River that effectively bisected the division AOR. In a great show of flexibility, Task Force Able assumed water patrol missions using bridge erection boats as riverine patrol craft. The efforts of the task force ensured that coalition forces controlled the river and effectively denied it to the enemy.

Route Clearance. Another major combat operation for Task Force Able was route clearance. In a noncontiguous and dispersed battlefield, security and clearance of routes connecting nodes of combat power is critical. The enemy quickly seized on coalition routes—extended, exposed, and difficult to secure—as vulnerable points to launch ambushes and attacks. The preferred attack was to mine the road or use an IED to attack convoys. Starting out as simple and relatively unsophisticated explosives, the IEDs matured into deadly devices. Often, the enemy followed up IED attacks with small arms fire or rocket-propelled grenades. The attacks were fast, and the enemy seldom stayed around to be counterattacked by US forces.

To thwart these attacks, Task Force Able launched a concerted campaign of route clearance and presence to inhibit, find, and destroy IEDs and mines and those emplacing them. The task force assumed this mission with the intent to thwart the enemy's ability to emplace IEDs or mines, while capturing or killing those who did. The operation, known as Trailblazer, lasted several months and resulted in the clearing of more than 23,000 kilometers of road and the destruction of large quantities of IEDs. Of particular help to the Trailblazer mission was the use of a new generation of mine clearing and detection devices and vehicles currently being fielded. The Buffalo—a wheeled vehicle with a camera-equipped, mine-excavating arm to allow standoff—was particularly useful. Figure 4, page 16, shows the Buffalo and the Meerkat mine detection systems.

UXO and Captured Enemy Ammunition

Iraq is littered with both UXO and cached ammunition—referred to as CEA. Within the 4th Infantry Division area, Task Force Able was charged with securing and destroying large caches of CEA. Some of it was located in fixed sites, but much of it had to be located and destroyed in place. The more of this unsecured ammunition that was destroyed, the less that would be available for the enemy to use against the coalition (notably as the basis for IEDs and explosives). In all, the task force destroyed several hundred tons of CEA and cleared thousands of square miles of terrain. Additionally, it managed several large fixed sites and turned these over to US Army Corps of Engineers contractor teams for long-term destruction.

Civil Infrastructure

Task Force Able brought a wealth of talent to the civil infrastructure effort, a major step in creating a secure and stable Iraq. The task force worked across the division to orchestrate the building and repair of a myriad of water treatment facilities, power plants, civilian bridges, and schools. Working closely with local Iraqis, the task force helped facilitate the creation of local governments in some areas. The bulk of the Iraqi people

Figure 4. Buffalo (left) and Meerkat (right) Mine Detection Systems

with whom the units worked were appreciative, and the soldiers saw very positive behavior in response to their efforts.

An important facet of the Task Force Able civil infrastructure repair was the level of involvement from local Iraqis. The task force sought to instill self-sufficiency by letting Iraqi engineers and local firms take the lead whenever possible. In dealing with a people who were subjected to an oppressive regime for more than 20 years, the task force wanted to emphasize the Iraqis' right and responsibility to take care of their own country. The unit did this by allowing the Iraqis to take control of their own destiny in terms of prioritizing what needed to be done and then by instilling a culture of stewardship in order to care for and maintain what they had.

Observations

Throughout their mission in Iraq, the leaders of Task Force Able worked to identify lessons learned based on their experiences. In no way all inclusive, they represent some take-aways that can be used for preparing soldiers and units for future operations.

Every Soldier Is a Rifleman. The Army Chief of Staff is right on target that every soldier must be a rifleman first. All soldiers are expected and need to have traditional combat skills. They must be experts with weapons. They must know first aid. They must know how to communicate with organic communications systems. The unpredictability of operations dictates that there are no rear troops in Iraq. This has some readiness implications. Every unit needs to bear down and take a hard look at how and what is being trained. Task Force Able leaders would willingly sacrifice technical engineering expertise for fighting skill. Balance is key, of course, but leaders—particularly RC leaders who have scarce training time—must make some hard decisions on what they train and how they train.

Predeployment training is not normally enough. First, common task training, often given short shrift at the end of a fiscal year, is critical. Second, training must be realistic. Leaders cannot wish themselves into a benign environment. Make training hard and challenging. Third, the Army must institutionally look at the concept of tiered readiness for equipping and preparing our soldiers. All units are likely to engage the enemy, and all have sufficient contact time. Thus, there is a valid argument that all soldiers need a basic level of common combat equipment, independent of their assigned unit.

Every Vehicle Is a Fighting Platform. Whether they ride in a Bradley fighting vehicle, a dump truck, or a bucket loader, soldiers need to do the best they can to prepare their vehicles for combat and develop the tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP) to make their vehicles effective. The Army is rushing ahead with Kevlar® blankets, force protection kits, and up-armored, high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs), but units—particularly those operating in thin-skinned vehicles—need to take measures to protect themselves. Such protective measures as sandbags on the floor and prefabricated armor are critical and protect soldiers during engagements.

Every Convoy Is a Combat Operation. Nothing is routine on the noncontiguous battlefields on which our forces operate, and every leader and soldier must treat each convoy and movement as a combat patrol and expect contact with the enemy. All the traditional precombat checks and inspections must be reinforced and become second nature. These include briefings and rehearsals that stress contact with the enemy, evacuation plans for wounded soldiers and damaged vehicles, and the use of indirect fire. Aggressive, offensively minded soldiers are less vulnerable to an enemy that looks for a soft target.

Discipline Is Essential. All units must be disciplined to do what is expected and to fully inculcate the priorities of work: security, maintenance, hygiene, food, and rest. These priorities require constant reinforcement at the lowest level, but disciplined units will absorb them and become more combat effective each day. Senior leadership must ensure that basic standards of discipline are instilled throughout the unit—particularly within the junior leaders who are responsible for enforcing the discipline daily.

Efficient Internal Lines of Communication Are Critical. Units must be able to rapidly transmit information both horizontally and vertically. Dissemination is critical to get the word out on changing enemy TTP and to ensure full situational awareness. This ability to communicate bleeds into two other observations:

- *Exploit Actionable Intelligence.* Intelligence comes from many sources, and units must aggressively move it up and down the chain. Intelligence cannot wait at one level, since much of it—normally human intelligence (HUMINT)—is exceedingly temporal. Every soldier is a HUMINT collector—locals frequently freely provide information to soldiers of all ranks and positions. The information that soldiers gain in their interactions with locals must be quickly reported and disseminated through the appropriate chains.
- *Rapidly Disseminate Lessons Learned/TTP.* As the enemy changes, lessons learned/TTP must be rapidly shared. Units must become practiced in pushing and pulling this form of information. They must do this while continuing their missions and in contact. In-theater training becomes extremely important to ensure the sharing of this new information.

AC/RC Integration Is a Reality. As stated earlier, AC/RC integration works. Our Army is strengthened by our RC units, which have incredible strength. However, all leaders need to be sensitive to the differences in the AC and the RC. Differences such as personnel manning and how family readiness groups are organized must be taken into account. Despite these differences, active AC/RC integration (at least for the engineers) is a success. The daily operations of Task Force Able attested to this observation, as AC and RC units worked side by side with uniformly outstanding results.

Junior Leaders Must Be Empowered. The nature of battle in Iraq is a series of small-unit fights and actions over wide distances. Though 21st century communications can give senior leaders situational awareness, we still need to rely on the local decisions of the junior officers and NCOs on the spot. Senior leaders have a responsibility to resource and provide intent and then give the leaders on the ground the flexibility to work within that intent. This is sometimes hard in training and at combat training centers, but it is essential for success on the battlefield.

Civil-Military Operations Must Be Trained. Civil-military operations are often treated as residual tasks, but within the context of a greater conflict, they need to be on every leader's training card. The "three-block war" includes phases from peacekeeping to combat—sometimes occurring simultaneously only blocks away—and it exists in the current environment.[1] Soldiers need to understand the difference and the subtleties of each. They have to have internal governors and training to recognize the differences and to act accordingly. All soldiers are civil affairs soldiers.

Conclusion

During Operation Iraqi Freedom, the diverse mixture of combat and construction engineers (active duty, National Guard, and Reserve) comprising Task Force Able provided the 4th Infantry Division with versatile and effective echelon-above-brigade engineer support. Along multiple lines of operation, the task force demonstrated the potential capabilities and contributions of a combat engineer group operating as an echelon-above-brigade force. Now back at their home stations, the units of the task force will use their experiences in Iraq as a foundation for demanding, realistic training in preparation for future combat operations.

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Endnote

[1]Charles C. Krulak, *The Strategic Corporal: Leadership in the Three Block War*, Center for Army Lessons Learned, Fort Leavenworth, Kansas, 1999.