

The men of Delta Battery, 173d Airborne Brigade are in search of the mad mortar man.

Well, that's not exactly true, they know where he is and he certainly knows where they are. It's just that the boys of D-bat are hoping to drop in on this man, drop a 105 mm howitzer round in on him to be exact.

From the nearby town of Al Hawija the mad mortar man lobs both mortar and artillery shells and rockets at Forward Operating Base McHenry, home to 1<sup>st</sup> battalion, 12<sup>th</sup> Infantry. The men of 1-12 are friends of D-bat you see and like any good friend D-bat is a little ticked that someone is trying to kill them.

Without making light of the situation, they did the only thing a bunch of artillerymen could do; they dragged their guns out to the FOB and waited.

And they're still waiting. But they're a patient lot, they'll get the mad mortar man.

It's just a matter of time.

"The initial plan was to be here for a day," said 1<sup>st</sup> Lt. Kyle Barden, Battery Fire Direction Officer. "The base was getting mortared a lot so we wanted to come out here, get an accusation, shoot back and hopefully get the mad mortar man. We realized that wasn't feasible and are going to be here an undetermined amount of time."

From the look of things, according to Barden, the base was being bracketed. The mad mortar man was getting smarter and the smarter he got the closer he was getting.

"He knows what he's doing. He's getting more and more accurate. He had rounds fall short of the FOB and other rounds land far. They (1-12) already had their 120 mortars out here but they brought us out for the extra fire power and the extra reach."

"The 120 mm mortars response time is not as fast as ours," said Battery First Sergeant Frank Marcantonio. "And the mortars can't reach as far as we can. Our counter fire time is just a lot quicker."

FOB McHenry isn't a pleasant place. Dust, as fine a talc, covers the ground a full 5 inches in most places. It gets everywhere and it gets into everything. Upon returning from FOB McHenry you could easily find the dust in odd places a week after the visit.

Where the dust isn't there is only barren rock. The ever-present HESCO barriers line the compound. For those that have never seen a HESCO barrier imagine a brown paper shopping bag with a wire frame built around the outside. Got a clear picture of that? Good, now fill the bag with dirt. Finally imagine that same bag five feet wide, five feet deep and five feet tall. It's a grocery bag for a giant, a giant that dines on dirt. They are everywhere in Iraq near areas used by coalition forces and they ring D-bats compound inside FOB McHenry.

Their compound is affectionately nicknamed "Texas". Inside the command post a large Texas flag hangs, tribute to the Battery Commander Capt. Jackey Howard's, home state.

Outside, adjacent to a large burn pit used to dispose of trash and human waste, the FDO continues explaining the battery's mission. Tanks and Bradley Fighting vehicles clank by on a nearby dirt road kicking up large, choking clouds of the ever-present talc. Barden is covered in the stuff; everyone is covered in the stuff.

"We do two things, we shoot harassment and interdiction fires or we shoot counter fires," Barden explained.

By using sophisticated radar systems the battery is able to determine where artillery or mortar rounds or rockets are being fired from. This system, theoretically, should allow the battery to quickly kill anyone firing at them.

If only it were that easy though.

It's almost sadly comical that because the rockets are jury-rigged and fired from unconventional platforms (a fancy term for a dirt hill). This makes the tracking of their trajectories all the more difficult. Still though he can be tracked and has been tracked, but again nothing is ever that simple.

"He knows that if he hides in the town we won't shoot back," Barden said. "We just have to be on it and we need some luck. Not only do we have to be on it, he has to be slow."

Marcantonio doesn't think luck will have anything to do with it.

"No, not luck," he said. "Our battlefield standard is from the time that guy drops the round in the tube, two minutes later our rounds should land on top of him."

Two minutes isn't a long time. One minute is even less time and Delta Battery is routinely ready to counter fire in a minute.

“Our guys are ready from the time the radar picks it up and the fire direction control officer sends the data to the guns and the guns lay on the target we’re at about one minute to maybe one minute and fifteen seconds. That guy cannot get away, we just have to get cleared to fire,” Marcantonio said.

But remember, while the mad mortar man might be mad, he’s not stupid. When he fires he does it from places American’s aren’t likely to send a barrage of artillery at, a town for instance.

“He doesn’t have to be accurate he just has to be lucky. One rocket lands here and a mortar round lands there. It’s just going to take one to land in the wrong place. It doesn’t matter how accurate he is, eventually he’s going to get us,” Marcantonio said. “It’s a matter of time for him, he’ll get lucky and land a round where it will hurt us but it’s also just a matter of time for us.”

“When have to be cleared in order to shoot,” he said with a grin. “It’s a matter of time but we have to be able to shoot to get him, and we just haven’t been cleared yet. When we are cleared though ...” he finishes indicating with his hands that his guns will finish a job they’re all eager to finish.

It must be frustrating; with rockets and mortars landing almost daily on the FOB and not being able to fire back. But firing back would, almost certainly cause a number of civilian, innocent civilian, casualties. The mortar man is right, firing into a village or town or at civilians isn’t something American’s are going to do.

“He’ll go right up to the edge of the city where he can disappear down a road after he fires,” said Chief of Smoke, Sgt. First Class Jay Camardelle. “It’s a matter of time, he’ll slip up, and he’ll make a mistake and that will be the end. We might not get him but someone will.”