

Securing Northern Iraq is harder then it looks

Tough decisions, real answers

Story and Photos by

Spc. Brandon Aird, 173d Airborne Brigade Public Affairs

Paratroopers from 1st Battalion, 508th Infantry (Airborne), 173rd Airborne Brigade, haven't had it easy in Iraq. Throughout most of their deployment, the 1-508th Inf. (Abn) has been deployed in forward operating urban patrol bases, far forward from the rest of the 173rd Airborne Brigade. Because 1-508th has been deployed forward and usually live in the most dangerous towns in Northern Iraq, they've sustained the most casualties in the brigade.

During the hot summer months in Al Huwija, 1-508th Inf (Abn) was constantly ambushed during the day. The only thing they had to look forward to at night was a barrage of mortars, courtesy of the "Mad Mortarmen." The Mad Mortarmen is what 1-508th Inf (Abn) named the group of Iraqis who constantly harassed them at night with mortar barrages. Luckily for the 1-508th, the Mad Mortarmen didn't have the best aim.

After moving operations southwest to Daquq and Tuz, to prevent people like the Mad Mortarmen from entering Northern Iraq, 1-508th Inf (Abn) was met with more ambushes and attacks. The unit commander, Lt. Col. Harry Tunnell's convoy was ambushed with rocket-propelled grenades and machinegun fire. Tunnell was shot in the leg and was medevaced out of Iraq.

Shortly after Tunnell's convoy was ambushed, 1st Lt. David Bernstein and Pfc. John Hart, soldiers in Charlie Company, were killed when their convoy also came under attack from rocket-propelled grenades and machinegun fire.

Bernstein and Hart were in the last vehicle in a quick reaction force convoy. They got cut off from the rest of the convoy when guerilla fighters shot a RPG at their vehicle causing the driver, Spc. Joshua Sams, Charlie Company, to lose control of the vehicle and crash into a dirt berm. The vehicle came to a stop on top of Sams' arm. Bernstein, mortally wounded from a gunshot wound to the leg, crawled over to Sams' side under direct fire, and pushed on the gas pedal with his hand, moving the vehicle forward off of Sams' arm. Bernstein collapsed shortly afterward and died. The RPG explosion caused killed Hart who was in the back of the humvee.

A tactical checkpoint, Echo Four, was set up 35 miles south of Tuz by Alpha Company in an effort to prevent such ambushes, and keep the guerilla fighters in Southern Iraq. A platoon of soldiers was manning Echo Four when it came under a massive coordinated attack.

"It was a scene right out of Full Metal Jacket," said 1st Sgt. Michael Stribling, first sergeant of Alpha Company, comparing it to a famous movie based during the Vietnam War. "My guys were down at Echo Four when armor-piercing rocket-propelled grenades, mortars and machinegun fire bombarded the compound. The attackers were firing on my guys from behind a second ridgeline. At night, it looked to my guys that they were being fired upon from the first ridgeline. These Iraqis were pretty smart."

No one was injured in that attack, but it caused a lot of work to be done at Echo Four, which is 45 minutes away from any help. The 1st Platoon built two bunkers inside the compound and 16 heavily sandbagged guard towers along the walls. They even renamed the tactical checkpoint "Helm's Deep"—inspired by the fortress that couldn't be taken by the Armies of Mordor in the fantasy movie "Lord of the Rings."

A platoon of Iraqi Civil Defense Corps (ICDC) has been assigned to Helm's Deep. Alpha Company is training the ICDC soldiers so when the time comes for Alpha Company to leave Iraq the Iraqi soldiers will be physically and mentally prepared to take over Helm's Deep.

The last few weeks at Helm's Deep have been relatively quiet. Iraqis show up with tales of being robbed by the notorious highway bandits, but unfortunately nothing can usually be done.

One night a man walked up to the checkpoint and told Abut Halik, an ICDC soldier, how one of the bandits robbed him of his car at gunpoint.

The driver was asked to give a sick man a ride to a hospital in Kirkuk. He drove through the checkpoint coming from south of Tuz and was searched by two ICDC soldiers. After driving a little bit north, the passenger said, "he needed to relieve himself." The driver pulled over and the "sick man" pulled a pistol on the driver. The

driver had to walk five miles back to the checkpoint, and was mad at the ICDC soldiers for not finding the weapon.

“The guy was mad at me,” said Halik. “Not my fault: he is idiot.”

Many of these minor altercations with the bandits the ICDC soldiers can handle. Alpha Company has switched roles, and is only there to train, observe and protect the ICDC soldiers in event of another large attack.

“We’ve been giving the them classes on field sanitation, muzzle awareness, basic rifle marksmanship, and different patrol procedures,” said Staff Sgt. Antonio C. Medina, a squad leader in 3rd Platoon. “Every night we take them out on patrols. We’ve handed over the actual checkpoint over to the ICDC soldiers, but we still keep one of our guys out there to keep the ICDC soldiers honest.”

The Iraqi soldiers that are living at Helm’s Deep are the same ones Alpha Company helped train a few months earlier.

“The ICDC soldiers have come along way since the first day of training,” Medina said. “Their appearance and discipline has improved enormously. The care of their equipment is still lacking, but their slowly picking it up.”

“The ICDC soldiers are still giving us some heart attacks,” said Pfc. Nicholas Duplesis, a M-249 squad automatic weapon (SAW) gunner in 3rd Platoon. “The ICDC soldiers have had four accidental discharges in the last two weeks while manning checkpoint. Believe it or not, that’s an improvement.”

The ICDC soldiers are improving and have started participating in all of Alpha Company’s missions. With new information, Alpha Company along with the ICDC soldiers raided different homes in the Tuz area Jan. 2 looking for the highway bandits.

Staff Sgt. Randy Morrow’s squad (Alpha Company) along with ICDC soldiers were going through a gate when a suspected bandit closed the gate on Morrow, separating him from his squad.

“After I kicked the gate open, the Iraqi who shut the gate tried to grab my weapon,” said Morrow. “A guy from my squad ‘sucker-punched’ him sending him to the ground, and that’s when I saw a guy come out a side door with a AK-47 ready to fire. My left hand was holding the guy down on the ground so I brought my M-4 up underneath my left arm with my right hand and gave him some of ‘Chicago’s finest.’”

The man Morrow shot and killed was the father of the Iraqi who tried to grab Morrow’s weapon. Through an interpreter at the local police station the son said, “he didn’t know it was Americans. It was really early in the morning and we thought you were thieves. My father was just trying to protect me.”

“What happened was a tragedy,” said Capt. Ned C. Ritzman, commander of Alpha Company. “But even the dead man’s brother, who is a local school teacher, said ‘he was an idiot for coming out of the house with an AK-47.’”

Paratroopers like Morrow in the 173rd Airborne Brigade may sometimes have only a second to decide how to react to a situation. They rely on their training and past experience to come to the right conclusion. In the last 10 months paratroopers in 1-508th Inf (Abn) have had to deal with guerilla fighters placing improvised explosive devices on the road, and being shot at by RPG’s, 105 mm rockets, mortars, and automatic weapons fire.

Morrow saw a man coming out of a side door with an AK-47 aimed at one of his squad members, Ritzman said. Morrow was just protecting his fellow paratrooper. The event was a tragedy, but Morrow did the right thing.