

Operation Ivy Cyclone

The Rock helps hunt down elusive enemy

Story and photos

By Sgt. 1st Class Todd Oliver

173d Brigade Public Affairs

Paratroopers want to fight back.

Water wants to flow downhill, the sun wants to rise in the morning, death wants to take us all eventually, and paratroopers—when a fight comes to them--want to fight back.

Perhaps the only thing better than fighting back—in the mind of a paratrooper--is to fight first.

Soldiers of 2nd Battalion, 503d Infantry (Airborne)-- better known as “The Rock”—haven’t had it easy in Iraq. But then, no one, or no unit at least, has had it easy. The Rock’s problem is that its enemy is silent until it strikes, and unpredictable. Maybe most frustrating of all, is that the Rock’s enemy is unseen, invisible until it strikes.

The enemy in Kirkuk strikes from the roadside. It strikes from piles of garbage, it strikes from discarded soda cans. Once, it even struck from the body of a dead dog. It strikes without warning, and it strikes without mercy.

An estimated 60 percent of the Rock’s more than 40 wounded in action are a result of this enemy—the Improvised Explosive Device.

Usually placed along a well-traveled road and detonated by remote control, IEDs can have a devastating effect against even the most vigilant of convoys. Constructed from abandoned mortar rounds or artillery shells, IEDs rip through the strongest of materials, shredding vehicle and body alike. Even the mention of having driven past a suspected IED can give one cause to stop and think.

And when the dust has settled after an IED strikes, there’s no one to take the blame. Those who detonate the devices fade away in the confusion and horror they’ve created.

But The Rock isn’t crippled, far from it. They’re a battalion of paratroopers and if the fight won’t come to them, well then, they’ll just have to take the fight to the enemy.

In the early hours of a cold, yet sunny, Monday morning the Rock did just that. They fought first. The Rock, along with a few cannon’s courtesy of 173d Airborne Brigade’s Delta Battery, 314th Field Artillery, and two A-10 aircraft from the U.S. Air Force, set out with a vengeance against those that would harm them. Operation Ivy Cyclone, a 4th Infantry Division- wide attack, was in full effect for The Rock.

“It was a three-pronged approach,” said 2-503 Inf Abn commander, Lt. Col. Dominic Caraccilo, a day after the attacks. “The first thing we wanted to do was to deter enemy and anti-coalition forces from using the open areas surrounding Kirkuk and the airbase. Second, we wanted to show our capabilities, shooting from inside the sectors where we think the enemy is operating. Using mortars and artillery right there in the area the enemy is operating from, hitting their sanctuaries. Finally, we wanted to seize the IED makers and their supporters.

“We knew that there was a lot of activity in the southwestern parts of the city of Kirkuk,” said Caraccilo. “We knew that activity was in the form of emplaced 107mm rockets aimed at targets which included our Soldier’s safe houses and the airbase itself.

“We were fairly successful,” he continued. “We captured one guy who had 12 different remote controls (taken from toy remote control cars)—that was important. They take them [the remote control portion] out of the car and use it to detonate the IED.”

Caraccilo and his men think there might be one key former regime loyalist in the city who puts the whole thing together. They think this man or, more likely a small group of men, pay someone to provide them with the remote control devices, they pay another person to supply the ammunition, and still others to place the actual IED.

Operation Ivy Cyclone netted 13 suspects for The Rock. While some of them are certain to be found innocent and will subsequently be released, some of them are most definitely ‘persons of interest.’

“The guy with the 12 remotes was a fairly significant catch. We actually caught 13 guys and four of

whom are known Fedayeen members. The jury is still out on the rest. They're being interrogated and we'll figure that out, but I think this is going to have a significant effect on things."

In addition to the raids, the Rock also did something that might seem kind of odd. They cleared the streets.

It maybe hard to describe to anyone from a westernized country the amount of just plain filth that lines the streets in some neighborhoods of Kirkuk. The city has only recently had its fleet of garbage trucks replaced, but many neighborhoods still dump their trash in the streets to burn at night. It's these piles of trash that are an attractive hiding place for those intent on placing IEDS.

"We actually cleared roads where there had been a significant amount of IEDs found," Caraccilo said. "We just brought bulldozers out and pushed the trash out of the way. While this doesn't prevent them from hiding IEDs, it deters them as it makes it harder. We're now going to start burning the excess vegetation in the medians of the street—which is another hiding spot for IEDs. We're going to make this problem die on the vine by killing the guys who provide the money and supplies and by making it difficult to emplace the IEDs."

Back in Kirkuk, artillery, mortars and A-10 aircraft pound targets on the outskirts of the city, laying waste to the buildings the attackers were believed to have used. Explosion after explosion from the artillery rocks the still morning air and the distinctive sound of the A-10s chain-gun punctuates each aircraft's approach.

It's an awesome sight and sound. The area they are hitting so relentlessly, three small hilltops and a small building, are empty. Empty or not though, the message is clear, you can be hit anywhere, anytime.

As the pounding continued, the men of The Rock fan out inside the city, raiding the houses where the people responsible for the attacks were believed to have lived. It as a huge, coordinated effort, meant to send a clear message to those that meant them harm.

"We're looking for anything suspicious," said Sgt. 1st Class Sean Dohr, Battle Company, 2-503d, as he and the members of his platoon finished searching yet another house. "WE're looking for anything that could be used to make IEDs. Wires, explosives, remote control devices, even photos of individuals. Anything that will give us more information about who these guys are, their names, patterns, anything."

Dohr and his platoon methodically go from house to house. They don't raid every house, just houses they have intelligence on. Houses that are believed to be hiding anyone or anything suspect.

"These people work in small cells," he said. "They are usually trained by individuals who live outside the city of Kirkuk. They [the trainers] come here and train people on putting these things together. That's who we're looking for, the guy who's been trained to do it and is now being paid to do it."

It's here at Dohr's level that the success is most plainly apparent. It's also here that success will most likely be felt—eight Soldiers in his company alone have been injured by IEDs.

"This has been a great success," he said. "We have pictures of these guys now, we didn't have those before. This kind of information is priceless. We now have a face to match the people we are looking for and we can give these photos to other units, to guys manning traffic control points."

Dohr's company commander, Capt. Bill Bundy, echoes those thoughts.

"Today's mission was basically a cordon and search," said Bundy. "We've experienced a lot of IEDs and rocket attacks in these areas, so we've gone through looking for any kind of material that could be associated with those things."

IEDs, their construction, use and financing are a complicated affair. The matter is further confused by the fact that each step of the process is handled in separate areas by different people.

"You have a guy who makes the *initiators* and another guy who assembles those to the explosive devices and then they hire a third guy to emplaces the bomb and then another guy throws the switch. We hope that some of the guys we got today know who the others are."

Sadly, the culprits aren't quick to give each other up to the Americans.

Success or no, Bundy and his men actually live inside the area they're searching. Besides trying to ensure that no soldier or resident of the neighborhood is hurt in an IED attack—and IEDs do main and kill innocent civilians almost daily—they have the added burden of trying to be good neighbors, even as they are rifling through someone's bedroom dresser.

The days of kicking in doors, or more dramatically blowing into a million small pieces with plastic explosives, are all but gone now in Kirkuk. That tactic is reserved for only the direst of cases. Rock Soldiers

routinely knock first now and speak briefly to the homeowners before they began to search.

“It doesn’t matter if we go to the wrong house,” Bundy said. “It doesn’t matter, as long as you don’t break down the door to the house. Most of the homes we go up to, we knock first. Generally, if we do go to the wrong house, and that does happen, the people inside understand. The Saddam regime was so tyrannical that people are used to getting smacked down and bouncing back from it. So they are pretty understanding of it, they know we’re looking for bad people.”

The simple fact of the matter is that no matter how much the mainstream media cannot see it—things are better in many parts of Iraq, or at least in Kirkuk. A simple leisurely stroll through a market place turns up a wide assortment of goods either forbidden under Saddam’s rule or unobtainable because of sanctions. Prices too are showing signs of normality and while the *dinar* has surely been beaten back and forth over the past years it is becoming stable and the jobs in the city pay living wages. One cannot stand on a rooftop and not count dozens and dozens of satellite dishes. While satellite dishes by no means describe (or prescribe) normality and stability they are a sign that things are changing for the better. Even owning a dish a year ago was a sure-fire trip to prison.

“Every time we change our profile it has an effect on the IED attackers. A few months ago we changed our profile by not driving during the hours they were hitting us and it had a huge impact,” Bundy continued. “Now we’re going to change that profile again by changing the geography of the city, cleaning up the trash, clearing up the roads, burning the vegetation in the medians and then hitting hard at where we think their sanctuaries are. The jury is out, I don’t know if it will have an effect, but you’ve got to think that if you are going after them hard like this, you’re going to make an impact.”

Cut parts:

. Get rid of the guy who’s doing it but also get rid of his geographic capability.