



Hunter-Killer Teams

by Major Mark J. Aitken

The deployment of reconnaissance squadrons and employment of organic cavalry troops to combat operations throughout Iraq in support of the infantry brigade combat team illustrate the importance of synchronization between reconnaissance and killer forces. This synchronization of forces is not a new or novel concept, but actually a tried and true, and extremely successful, tactic, technique, and procedure (TTP) used by armored and cavalry forces for many years. The “hunter-killer” team concept was tested and perfected during countless rotations in the deserts of Fort Irwin, California, and then successfully employed in the Fulda Gap of Germany, liberation of Kuwait, and most recently during Operation Iraqi Freedom.

The officers and troopers of the 1st Squadron, 89th Cavalry (Recon), 2d Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, adopted this technique as they patrolled and secured the Multi-National Corps-Iraq’s main supply route (MSR), Route Tampa, southwest of Baghdad. This route was used daily by military and contractor convoys, as well as a high volume of civilian traffic. The squadron was responsible for securing a large portion of MSR Tampa, which included three tier 1 im-

proved explosive device (IED) sites and two tier 2 sites. A tier 1 IED site is identified by a significant number of IED events in a 1-kilometer radius over a 30-day period, and a tier 2 site is a lesser number of IED events using the same criteria.

Reducing IED emplacement was our first priority, which included directing all lethal targeting efforts against the insurgent cell, including financiers, bomb makers, and transport personnel. Our second priority was to conduct direct action operations against actual IED emplacers. These tactics, while separate and distinct, ultimately combined to reduce violence throughout south Baghdad. As scouts, we tend to ignore the things we cannot immediately see or impact, and revert to our default mode of taking the fight to the enemy we can see, like insurgents emplacing IEDs. Therefore, as the war entered its 4th year, we had to develop new innovative techniques and recycle old TTP to capture or kill insurgents in our areas of operation.

We initially conducted a thorough mission analysis, which focused on enemy activity and highlighted prime IED emplacement times and preferred locations. Additionally, our S2 conducted a com-

prehensive terrain analysis, focusing primarily on the terrain, supporting tier 1 and 2 sites, as well as the line of sight (LOS) that enabled the insurgent “trigger man” to target coalition convoys while maintaining the freedom of movement to escape immediately after the attack. Our initial course of action was to establish a combination of mounted and dismounted observation posts (OP) to confirm or deny enemy activity in an effort to disrupt their operations. While initially successful, these “old school” techniques quickly proved ineffective as insurgents quickly adapted their operations to avoid frequently used OP positions. We attempted several other techniques, including counter-mobility obstacles, unmanned aerial vehicle coverage, ground sensors, and countless other techniques, each with some limited success. We finally decided to use a combination of mounted and dismounted OP locations, coupled with dismounted ambush and hide positions — the light cavalry version of the hunter-killer team.

The squadron commander assigned the task of capturing or killing IED emplacers in the vicinity of the “mixing bowl” to C Troop (Crazyhorse). The operation

developed by the C Troop commander required the employment of three platoons, each with a separate and distinct task purpose: the first scout platoon (main effort), the “killer” element, was to establish three dismounted subsurface hide/ambush positions on the most likely insurgent avenue of approach; the second scout platoon (supporting the first platoon), the “hunter” element, was to establish a combination of mounted and dismounted OPs overwatching the target area of interest (TAI); and the third scout platoon (supporting the second platoon) was to conduct routine mounted patrols in the vicinity of the operation, while reinforcing both the main and supporting effort platoons as its secondary task, as shown in Figure 1.

Selecting dismounted ambush positions is critical to the success of the operation, thus it is imperative to integrate the squadron/battalion S2 into the planning process and provide timely accurate enemy and environmental information, which should include, at a minimum, the following information:

- Insurgent pattern analysis.
- “Rat lines,” or trails, that feed the IED site.
- Line of sight products (OP to TAI, ambush position to engagement area).
- Light and weather data.
- Photos of known insurgents.

Once the ambush positions were selected and plotted, the platoon leader conducted a detailed reconnaissance of the tentative positions, using caution to avoid alerting the local populace or insurgency to possible future operations. The platoon leader’s primary goal was to finalize the exact location, determine resource requirements, and develop an accurate time estimate for the dismounts to covertly prepare and occupy OP positions.

The success of the operation hinged on the successful covert insertion of the ambush positions, which C Troop was extremely successful at accomplishing! This task can be accomplished several ways, but C Troop infiltrated their OPs when MSR Tampa was shut

down to traffic as a result of a possible IED. This enabled C Troop to seal off the route to mounted traffic and enabled the dismounted elements to move into position and establish their ambush positions. Simultaneously, the mounted OP platoon established their positions overwatching the TAI. Once all positions were established, the route was reopened and traffic moved freely.

Once established, the length and duration of the operation was determined by the ability of the ambush positions to remain covert and undetected, a function based on the stamina of the dismounted elements. Accordingly, only the most disciplined and technically proficient troopers were selected to man the ambush positions because it requires self-discipline, commitment, and training to remain undetected for extended periods of time. The key to the operation was clearly patience. As in any defensive position, the team leader completed a sector sketch, established communications, and developed courses of action for all contingencies, all of which were well thought out and rehearsed prior to occupation. The ambush team leader maintained constant communication with the mounted OP el-

ement, who kept them informed of movement in their vicinity.

During C Troop’s operation, the mounted OP platoon observed both vehicular and foot traffic in the vicinity of the ambush positions for nearly 36 hours. Prior to first light on the second day, the OP element observed two unidentified individuals moving north in the vicinity of ambush position two. The two suspected insurgents were attempting to move covertly by using the terrain for cover and concealment. The OP element tracked their movement for several minutes, while simultaneously alerting the ambush element of possible activity in their area.

The decision to execute a lethal ambush, or to apprehend the suspected insurgents, was made by the overwatch element, as they had the best vantage point from which to positively identify weapons. The insurgents continued their covert movement north, approaching to within 10 meters of the ambush position. It was precisely at this moment that the team leader executed a perfectly timed assault and apprehended the suspects. Once the suspected insurgents were secured and searched, it was determined that they were moving weapons to establish a user-level cache

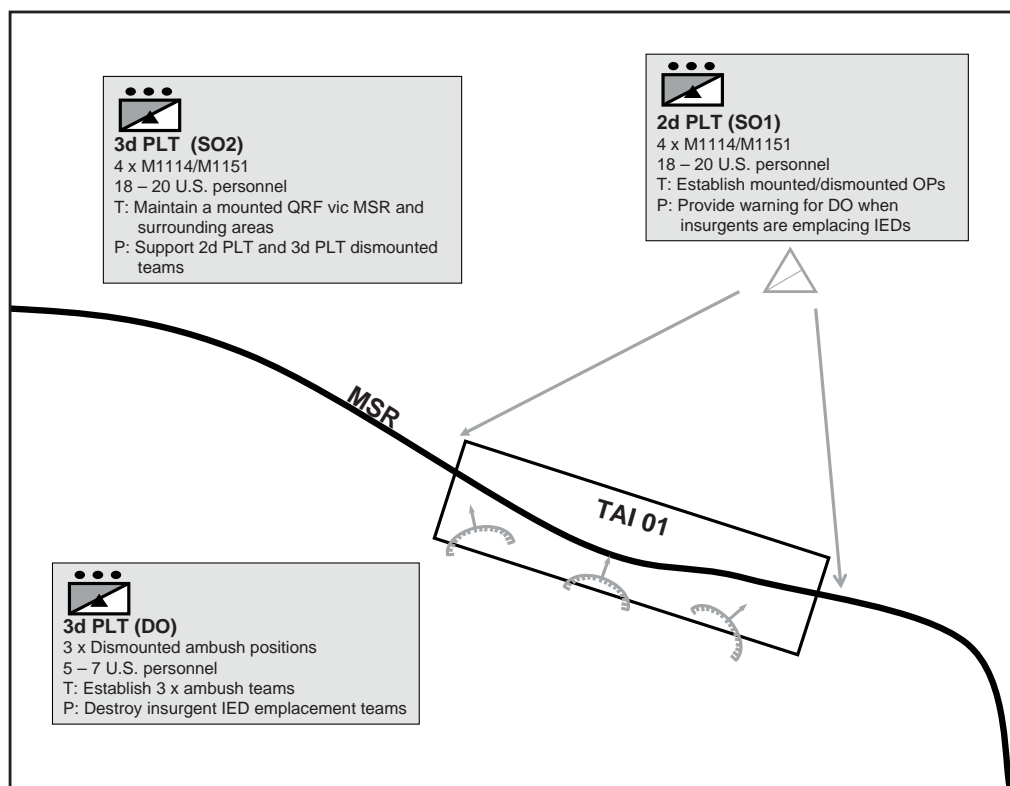


Figure 1



“...the first scout platoon (main effort), the “killer” element, was to establish three dismounted sub-surface hide/ambush positions on the most likely insurgent avenue of approach; the second scout platoon (supporting the first platoon), the “hunter” element, was to establish a combination of mounted and dismounted OPs overwatching the target area of interest (TAI); and the third scout platoon (supporting the second platoon) was to conduct routine mounted patrols in the vicinity of the operation, while reinforcing both the main and supporting effort platoons as its secondary task...”

north of MSR Tampa. The insurgents were captured with several AK-47 assault rifles, PKM machine guns, and rocket propelled grenade (RPG) launchers with warheads.

During the execution of the ambush, the quick reaction force (QRF) platoon moved in to support and reinforce the

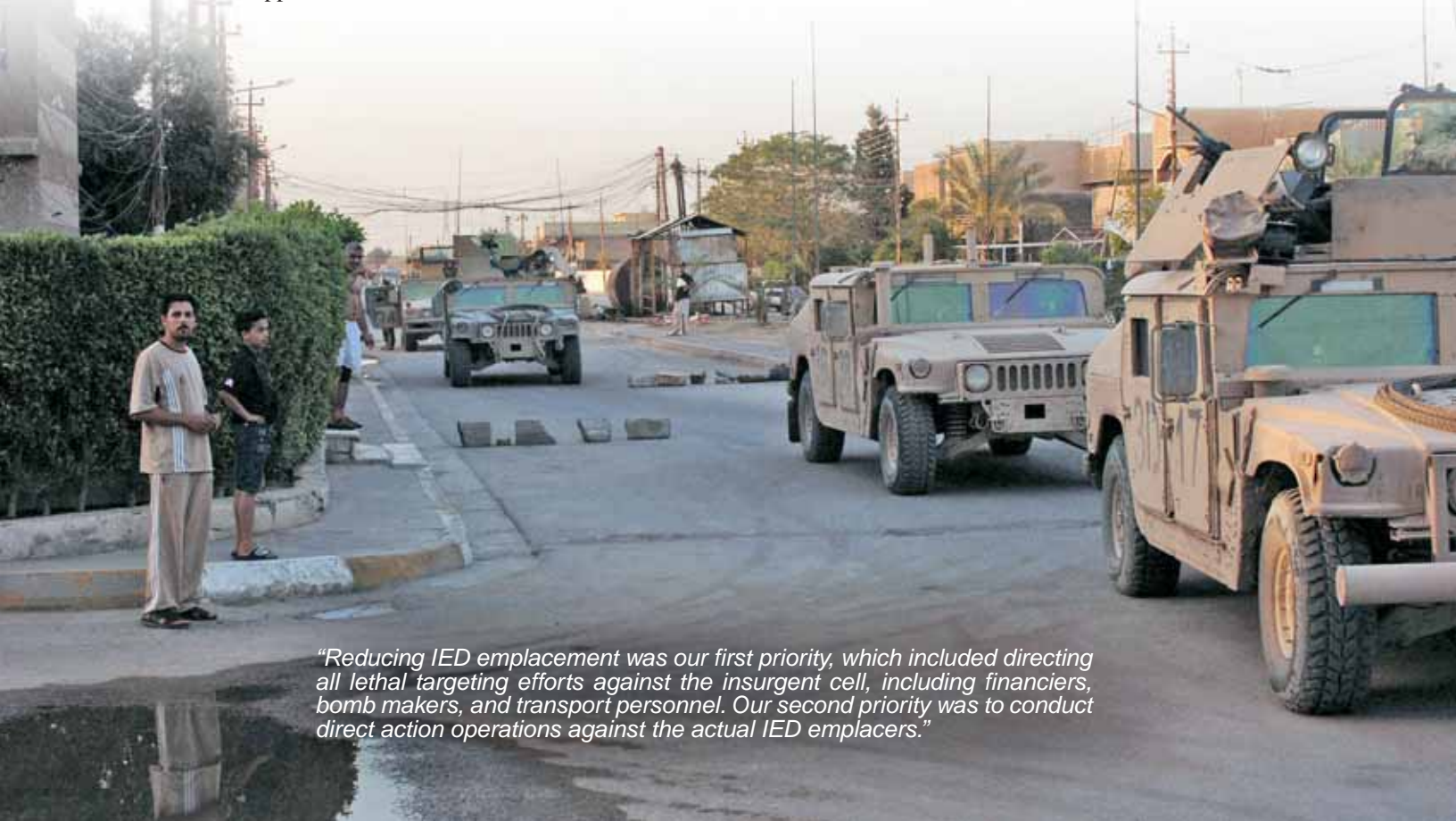
ambush positions, and assisted in evacuating and moving the detainees to the squadron’s detainee holding area. The troop commander then had to make a decision whether to continue the operation or withdraw his forces. The troop commander made the decision to withdraw the remaining ambush position, but directed the mounted OP element to remain

in place and report on activities within the TAI for the remainder of the operation. No further activity was reported or observed for the next 24 hours.

This operation, as well as many others in our area of operation, illustrates that cavalry TTP can be used effectively in a counterinsurgency environment. Integrating and synchronizing mounted and dismounted elements provides outstanding results, which we applied throughout our areas of operation.



Major Mark Aitken is currently serving as squadron executive officer, 1st Squadron, 89th (1-89) Cavalry Regiment, 2d Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, Iraq. He received a B.S. from Saint Mary’s University and an M.A. from Louisiana State University. His military education includes Armor Officer Basic Course, Armor Officer Advanced Course, Field Artillery Advanced Course, Air Ground Operations School, Airborne School, and Air Command and Staff College. He has served in various command and staff positions, to include S3, 1-89 Cavalry Regiment, 2d Brigade Combat Team, 10th Mountain Division, Fort Drum, NY; XO, 3d Squadron, 17th Cavalry Regiment, 10th Mountain Division, Fort Drum; armor/mechanized observer controller, Joint Readiness Training Center, Fort Polk, LA; commander, D Company, 2d Battalion, 72d Armor, Camp Casey, Korea; and commander, E Troop, 2d Squadron, 2d Cavalry Regiment, Fort Polk.



“Reducing IED emplacement was our first priority, which included directing all lethal targeting efforts against the insurgent cell, including financiers, bomb makers, and transport personnel. Our second priority was to conduct direct action operations against the actual IED emplacers.”