Small-Unit Kill Teams

by First Lieutenant Ken Segelhorst

About 80 percent of U.S. soldier deaths in Iraq are caused by improvised explosive devices (IEDs). The U.S. Army has employed various preventive measures to reduce IED damage on the battlefield: military vehicles are equipped with jamming devices that prevent remote IED detonation; engineer patrols clear debris and vegetation from heavily traveled supply routes, which assists convoys in identifying possible roadside bombs; explosive ordnance disposal teams conduct route clearance in heavily armored vehicles specifically designed to counter mines and roadside bombs; additional armor is continuously being added to vehicles; and new mine-resistant, ambush-protected (MRAP) vehicles are being fielded to help defeat newer and deadlier explosive devices.

While these defensive measures provide increased survivability against IEDs, they are reactionary in nature and designed to help avoid and defeat IEDs, rather than destroy or neutralize those who put them to use. Only through a combined effort of passive defensive measures and aggressive dedicated IED interdiction operations can we effectively work to neutralize the threat of IEDs in the contemporary operating environment.

Small-Unit Kill Teams

One method of bringing the fight to the enemy is to employ small-unit kill teams along main supply routes (MSR) and alternate supply routes (ASR) where enemy activity is most prevalent. Small-unit kill teams use stealth, camouflage, and patience to deliver discriminatory and highly accurate fires against enemy targets, specifically IED emplacers. Operating along supply routes in rural Iraq, small-unit kill teams have proven capable of effectively identifying and eliminating enemy targets at distances up to 1,000 meters.

While similar to snipers, small-unit kill teams differentiate from traditional sniper teams on two levels: manpower and firepower. A traditional sniper team operates using a two-man team, consisting of one shooter and one spotter. A kill team generally operates in at least a four-man element: designated marksman, spotter, radio telephone operator (RTO), and machine gunner. The designated marksman is responsible for taking discriminatory and accurate shots on isolated enemy targets. The spotter acts as the kill team's leader and is responsible for identifying targets and directing each member of the team to destroy them. The RTO is responsible for maintaining communications with higher echelons and providing additional security when not directly involved with radio operations. The machine gunner provides the element with additional firepower. His primary task is to provide the team with overwhelming fire superiority in the event of compromise; however, he may also provide additional firepower on the target area, if deemed necessary by the kill team's leader. The additional personnel and firepower aid in increasing the team's security and sustainability beyond that of a traditional sniper team, allowing them to operate independently for extended periods of time without relief.

and IED Interdiction

Small-unit kill team operations are best conducted at the platoon level. The platoon is divided into 1, 2, or 3 four-man kill teams and a mounted element. Multiple teams can either be tasked with the same target area for increased observation and depth, or can each be assigned a different target area along the same route to broaden the platoon's area of operation. The mounted element provides a platform for insertion and extraction, as well as a quick reaction force in the event a team is compromised. The mounted element may also move forward to investigate suspicious activity that does not meet the kill team's rules of engagement (ROE). The platoon leader must position the mounted element close enough to his teams to maintain effective communications and rapid support, concurrently ensuring his vehicle positions do not deter enemy activity on the target area, spoiling potential targets for the kill team.

Planning and Preparations

The planning phase of any operation is critical to mission success. Detailed planning of each phase of the operation is necessary to avoid potential disaster. This cannot be overemphasized for kill team operations due to the small size of operating elements and increased risk of fratricide due to uninformed friendly forces traveling routes the teams observe. For small-unit kill team operations, meticulous planning, coordination, and preparations are required to mitigate risks and facilitate a well-orchestrated and precisely executed operation.

The first step in planning a kill team operation is to determine the target area. The target area must not be selected arbitrarily; intelligence drives maneuver. All available intelligence sources should be pooled to determine the most probable location for upcoming IED activity. By tracking the location of recent IED strikes, patterns of insurgent activity can often be identified. A special computer program was developed for this very purpose; its software can help predict the location and time of upcoming IED strikes several weeks out, making it an invaluable tool when planning IED interdiction operations of any nature.

Upon determining the target area, kill teams must next identify suitable locations from which to observe. Survivability is essential — surveillance sites should provide good cover and excellent concealment. The site should be far enough from the target area to provide the team with standoff, but close enough to effectively engage targets with the team's weapons systems. The site must also provide sufficient egress routes and subsequent positions should the team need to break contact. The most important factor in site selection is the ability to observe the target area. Even the most survivable site is useless, if the team cannot observe and engage the target from within the surveillance site.

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stitute for a thorough reconnaissance performed by the soldiers conducting the operation. While a mounted reconnaissance can often be disguised as an ordinary patrol, it is important to conduct the recon several days prior to the kill team operation to prevent compromising potential surveillance sites. While conducting the reconnaissance, each element focuses on its portion of the operation; however, all personnel should know their counterpart's role. At a minimum, each soldier should know the locations of the surveillance sites, vehicle hide, and the actions taken by each element in the event of enemy contact.

The kill team's primary focus during the reconnaissance is to locate suitable surveillance sites. When testing a site, the team should observe the target area from the same elevation as they will be observing during the actual mission. Even small changes in elevation can make a huge difference in observation and fields of fire when conducting long-range surveillance. For example, a team may be able to observe a target area while standing at their proposed site, but when observing from the prone or dug-in position at the same location, the team's observation may be severely hindered due to terrain or obstacles. Often man-made features, such as abandoned buildings or ruins, provide the most suitable locations; however, teams must be prepared to use or improve on natural positions should the situation dictate. Whether using a man-made or nature-made site, teams must look for evidence of nearby personnel, vehicle, and animal activity that could potentially compromise the team.

In addition to transporting the kill teams to potential surveillance sites, the mounted element must conduct reconnaissance on its area of responsibility of the operation. The mounted element must recon insertion and extraction routes to the detrucking and pickup points selected by the kill teams. The element must identify holding areas near the detrucking point to remain near the teams and provide rapid support should a team be compromised during infiltration to its surveillance site. The mounted element should also locate a vehicle hide that offers good communications between both the proposed surveillance sites and the company command post. From this vehicle hide, the mounted element must have planned routes to the target area, as well as the surveillance sites to quickly respond to any scenario.

Once these key locations are selected, the platoon leadership can coordinate with local friendly forces. In addition to assisting with target-area selection, the battalion S2 can often provide additional intelligence information pertaining to the mission, including updated be-on-the-lookout (BOLO) lists, black lists, and weather and light data. The platoon should also request UAV flights over both the target area and surveillance sites early on the night of insertion. The UAV's thermal imaging can be used to ensure the area is devoid of squatters, herders, and other nomadic personnel that could compromise the team during infiltration.

As kill teams can be easily mistaken for IED triggermen, additional coordination is required to reduce the risk of fratricide. Adjacent units and the battalion battle staff should be briefed on the location and duration of each operation. It is extremely difficult to coordinate with combat logistics patrols (CLPs); however, by placing a friendly observation post icon on the Blue Force Tracker, the platoon leader can mark the locations of his teams for all friendly patrols passing through the target area. Coordination should be made with attack aviation units, not only to prevent potential fratricide, but to provide additional surveillance and firepower capabilities to the teams, if needed. Teams should know the call signs and frequencies of supporting aviation assets; while aviators should be aware of the general location of all platoon elements, and the means of marking friendly positions during day and night.

After the coordination process has been completed, the platoon leaders can complete the plan. While planning for a kill team operation is similar to planning for any other mission, there are some areas that must receive special emphasis. The communica-

tions plan is essential. Communications windows should be established, providing designated times for the kill teams to call situation reports (SITREPs) back to the mounted element. For short duration operations, this method may be conducted hourly, with one kill team reporting at the top of the hour while the other reports at the bottom. For longer operations, times should be extended to approximately every four to six hours, instead of hourly. While teams can switch radios to "standby" between windows to save on battery life, the mounted element must continuously monitor all team nets to ensure any communications made outside commo windows are heard. All communications should initiate from the surveillance sites, which prevents incoming transmissions from compromising the team if indigenous personnel are near the surveillance site.

Kill teams should be equipped with at least two long-range radio systems, a primary and an alternate. While the PRC-119 advanced system improvement program (ASIP) can be used to achieve this requirement; the PRC-117 with its higher power output, wider frequency range, and tactical satellite (TACSAT) capability provides the kill teams with a more powerful and versatile system. The PRC-148 multiband inter/intra team radio (MBITR) provides the kill team with team internal communications over secure nets and can act as the team's contingent communications system. A satellite phone or local cell phone, while unsecure, can act as the emergency system if all others fail. Even though teams are equipped with redundant communications systems, a detailed "no commo plan" should be developed. The plan should describe, in detail, the actions taken by both the kill team and the mounted element if commo windows are missed.

A compromise plan must also be developed; however, it is important to note that a compromise will not always constitute mission abort criteria. There are two types of compromise: hard and soft. A hard compromise immediately places the team in an increased state of danger and threatens mission accomplishment. For example, a herder who stumbles on a surveillance site and immediately begins making calls on his cell phone would constitute a hard compromise. Two young children who see the site while playing games and simply continue to play without much reaction would be a soft compromise. While their spotting of the site increases the risk to the team, there is still a good chance of mission accomplishment. It is the responsibility of the kill team leader to assess the compromise and offer his recommendation to the platoon leader. Depending on the situation, teams may continue mission, relocate to a new position, extract early, or abort the mission immediately.

Along with the no-commo and compromise plans, the escape and evasion (E&E) plan is an important contingency and requires planning. The E&E plan will vary, based on a number of variables. If the team is operating from a defendable position, such as an abandoned building, the plan may be as simple as defending in place until the mounted element or quick-reaction force (QRF) arrives. If the kill team is operating from a less-survivable position, the E&E plan should provide a strategy for repositioning the team from its surveillance site to a known safe and defendable position for emergency extraction. Leaders must ensure the plan remains realistic and simple; if the team needs to execute the E&E plan, conditions are likely to be controlled chaos, at best.

Final preparations are similar to any other mission: precombat checks and inspections should be conducted to ensure all personnel are properly equipped and all weapons and equipment are functioning properly; rehearsals should be conducted to work out any flaws and fine tune the plan; and kill teams should conduct full dress rehearsals to prepare for the weight of their load, which is often quite cumbersome. At a minimum, the kill teams should rehearse dismounting procedures at insertion, dismounted tactical movement for infiltration and exfiltration, react to contact, clearing procedures for the surveillance site, the E&E plan, and friendly linkup procedures for extraction. In addition to its normal rehearsals, the mounted element should also work with the kill teams to rehearse actions at insertion and extraction, linkup procedures, and the mounted element's actions if a kill team is compromised.

Insertion/Infiltration

Typically, kill teams will be inserted into the operational area via foot or ground tactical vehicle — the latter being preferred. Foot insertion provides the team with the best stealth. Kill teams can often slip out of an operating base unseen; whereas, friendly convoys leaving the main gate are often observed by insurgents or enemy sympathizers. While foot insertion provides the team with the best stealth, it is also the most dangerous and physically demanding. If spotted during movement, a four-man kill team poses an inviting target to insurgents. Heavy loads and sweltering heat can quickly sap a team's energy, reducing their effectiveness. Foot insertions should be limited to kill team operations conducted in close proximity to friendly operating or patrol bases.

The preferred means of kill team insertion is by vehicle during hours of limited visibility. Vehicles conducting the insertion can often blend in as an ordinary patrol, deceiving the enemy as to the element's true intent. Inserting teams by vehicle reduces phys-

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ical demands on the team, allowing them to carry more equipment and supplies. Vehicle insertion requires less time to execute, allowing the kill team more time to improve its surveillance site prior to first light.

Deception measures should be employed when conducting vehicle insertion to help mislead the enemy. Deception measures are limited only by one's imagination. One method is to blend in as an ordinary mounted patrol by using similar routes and times as typical patrols in the area. Attention should be given to ensure the insertion appears as similar to a normal patrol as possible. Details, ranging from the number of vehicles to the use of headlights, are all important when using deceptive techniques.

The element may use various means to insert the team. For example, the mounted element may give the impression of mechanical problems by coming to a halt and opening the hood of a vehicle, allowing the team to dismount and slip away into the darkness; if there are abandoned buildings or homes in the area, the platoon may conduct a stay-behind operation; or the platoon performs a standard cordon and search of the dwelling and, upon completion, leaves the kill team in place as the mounted element departs the area. These are very effective methods and can be accomplished on the actual site from which the kill team plans to operate.

When conducting a vehicle insertion, the detrucking point should remain a sufficient distance from the kill team's surveillance site to avoid compromising the site (unless deception measures are used). Well-executed detrucking is key to a successful insertion; the team must dismount quickly and quietly. Upon dismounting, the kill team should quickly rally at a nearby covered and concealed position as identified in the team's reconnaissance. The team leader must rapidly account for his team and equipment. Prior to moving to a preplanned holding area, the mounted element waits for the team to conduct a final radio check.

Upon successful detrucking, the kill team moves into the infiltration phase of the operation. After the mounted element departs, the kill team should remain in a covered and concealed position for a minimum of 15 minutes. During this time, the team should conduct stop, look, listen, and smell (SLLS) to become acclimated to its surroundings and identify possible threats in the vicinity. When deemed safe, the team leader terminates SLLS and the team prepares to move. Prior to initiating movement, the team radios a SITREP to the mounted element. It is vital that the kill team keep the mounted element informed of its location, so in the event of enemy contact, the mounted element can quickly locate the team with minimal radio communications.

During infiltration, kill teams must focus on both stealth and security. While a detailed route is developed during the planning phase, teams must adapt to unforeseen circumstances, such as dogs, herders, and other unexpected personnel. The kill team must stop short of its planned surveillance site in a covered and concealed position. At this point, the team makes preparations to move to and clear its surveillance site, entering the execution phase of the operation.

Execution

To clear the surveillance site, one element must move forward to clear while another provides overwatch. Typically, the desig-

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nated marksman and machine gunner will provide overwatch as the team leader and RTO move forward to clear the site. Once cleared, the designated marksman and machine gunner may be signaled forward and site construction or improvement may begin. Depending on the type of site, this may take several hours. The team must maintain security during site improvement, ensuring the machine gun is constantly manned. The team leader should periodically inspect the position from different angles, ensuring the site blends in with the surrounding environment. All improvements to the surveillance site should be completed no later than 1 hour before morning nautical twilight, allowing the team enough time to make final equipment preparations and settle into its positions prior to first light.

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Once the site, equipment, and personnel are prepared, dedicated surveillance of the target area begins. Each team member should be assigned a sector to scan with the spotter and designated marksman, focusing on the center of the target area. The team leader ensures all sectors overlap and establishes target reference points to assist in passing information between team members. Communications between team members is essential, as target exposure times may be brief and the marksman may have to readjust to engage targets outside of his sector.

During hours of suspected enemy activity, all team members should be alert and performing assigned tasks. When deemed appropriate by the team leader, the element may move into a predetermined rest cycle. A rotation is especially important for the spotter and designated marksman; being in awkward and uncomfortable positions, as well as eye strain from peering through optics, quickly fatigues these personnel. Clearly defined priorities of work must be established for the rest plan; these often include weapons, optics, and radio maintenance, as well as personal hygiene, food, and sleep. To implement a rest plan while maintaining operational efficiency, all team members must be cross trained to perform each other's jobs. This ensures capable personnel are manning the machine gun and designated marksman's weapons at all times.

The mounted element has its own role to play during the execution of kill team operations. Upon inserting kill teams, the mounted element normally moves to a holding area nearby as the team conducts foot infiltration. The mounted element closely monitors the radio and watches for signs that the team may have been compromised, such as gun fire or pyrotechnics. Upon the kill team reaching its surveillance site, the mounted element may relocate to a predetermined hide site further from the objective area. Often, dried wells or old vehicle fighting positions can be located and offer excellent positions for the mounted element.

Once at the vehicle hide, the mounted element must take proper precautions to establish its position. A dismounted reconnaissance and security (R&S) patrol should circle the element upon arrival, looking for signs of recent indigenous activity and ensuring the vehicles are best positioned to avoid detection. If it does not interfere with communications, antennas should be tied down to reduce visibility. While gunners may be able to provide adequate security, dismounted observation posts may be required if the gunners' fields of view are insufficient. Just as in establishing the kill team's surveillance site, the mounted element should limit all movement at first light to avoid detection.

If the area of operation lacks sufficient terrain to conduct vehicle hides, a number of deception measures may be employed, allowing the mounted element to remain near the kill team without compromising the mission. The simplest form of deception is to simply conduct ordinary patrol operations in the area. The mounted element may also establish overt observation posts along other hot spots on the MSR or ASR, deterring enemy activity in the area, or possibly even driving the enemy into the kill team's target area. Just as in the case of insertion, deception measures are limited only by soldiers' imagination and creativity.

No matter whether the mounted element occupies a vehicle hide, or performs complex and elaborate deception measures, its role remains the same: to support the kill team. The mounted element, with its increased communications range, must relay information to and from the kill team, acting as a go between for friendly units. The mounted element must remain poised at all times to move in support of the kill team. This may consist of rushing to the team's pickup site for an emergency extraction, maneuvering to intercept a suspicious vehicle or searching vehicles and personnel engaged by the team.

The kill team must have a clear understanding of the ROE. There is often inadequate time during this type of operation to report the situation and request guidance from a party that lacks visual contact. The team leader on the ground has the best perspective and must be trusted to make the right decision. If suspicious activity does not meet the team's engagement criteria, the team should document the activity in the surveillance log, photograph the vehicle and personnel involved, and report the activity to the mounted element. The platoon leader then determines the mounted element's course of action. If the activity does not merit compromising the element's location, the report may simply be entered into the patrol log or reported to high-

er. If the reported activity requires more serious attention, the mounted element may move to intercept the target or request the establishment of a traffic control point at a specific location to halt and search the target.

When the ROE have been met, targets should be engaged. The designated marksmen should engage first, as one well-placed shot may be enough to eliminate the enemy threat. The marksman should continue to engage targets until all targets are eliminated or instructed to stop by the team leader. To avoid drawing additional attention to the position and collateral damage to passing bystanders, the other team members should hold their fire unless engaged by the enemy or instructed to fire by the team leader. The team leader may order his team to engage if the designated marksman is unable to eliminate his target, there are multiple targets on the objective, the team is receiving fire, or the enemy is preparing to flee the target area.

Immediately upon the kill team engaging targets, the mounted element should initiate movement to support the team. Normally, this consists of moving along the MSR to intercept fleeing targets or searching dead or wounded enemy personnel and vehicles on the objective. The kill team should remain in place and provide overwatch for the mounted element as it conducts its search. The platoon leader should be prepared to establish a perimeter around the site and call for an explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) team to disarm enemy munitions. Upon clearing the site and gathering intelligence, the mounted element returns to a suitable hide position and continues the operation.

Exfiltration/Extraction

Upon completion of the execution phase, the kill team must prepare for its exfiltration and extraction. The team should wait until nightfall before breaking down the site and preparing for movement. The team must sterilize the site, removing all traces of its presence, to prevent the enemy from gathering information on friendly operations. Just as with site construction, the machine gun should be constantly manned during site deconstruction and sterilization. Upon successful sterilization of the site, the kill team is ready to exfiltrate.

The team should never be extracted from its surveillance site except in the case of emergency extraction. Extracting the team from its operation site "burns" the site, compromising the location for future operations. For this reason, the team must exfiltrate to a predetermined pickup site. The pickup site must be defendable, away from natural lines of drift and enemy avenues of approach. At the same time, the terrain must not be so rough as to prevent friendly forces from quickly reaching the site in the event of compromise or enemy contact.

The team's exfiltration can be extremely dangerous; enemy personnel who may have observed the team's operation may be waiting to engage the team as it moves from the site. For this rea-

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son, the team will often bound in pairs, initially, for added security. On reaching a covered and concealed position, the team links up and conducts movement as a single element to the vicinity of the pickup site. Just as the kill team clears its surveillance site, the team must also clear the pickup site. On clearing the pickup site, the team establishes a security perimeter while the RTO notifies the platoon leader the team is in position and ready for extraction.

The mounted element should remain in place until the kill team confirms it is ready for extraction, as linkup between two moving elements should be avoided. The mounted element should confirm its direction of approach with the kill team and its estimated time to destination. The kill team may need to assist the mounted element by verbally directing it to the team's location, and should be prepared to activate the pre-designated signal on visual contact. Common signals often consist of infrared (IR) flashes from night-vision devices, IR strobe lights, or chemlights. On receiving the confirming signal from the mounted element, the kill team may move forward to conduct linkup with the mounted element. The team leader should ensure his personnel and equipment are loaded prior to mounting the platoon leader's vehicle. On receiving confirmation from the kill team leader, the mounted element may begin extracting.

Extraction should be executed much like insertion: the mounted element should avoid simply making a B line for home; extraction routes should vary; and, if possible, the element should not enter the camp though the same gate from which it exited. Deception measures should be employed to hide the platoon's true intent and maintain operational security. Leaders must ensure that soldiers remain focused, as it is easy to become complacent at this stage of the operation.

Debrief/Recovery

The operation is not over when the trucks enter the wire. While many leaders brief recovery as the final phase of an operation in their operations order (OPORD), seldom is it actually conducted. All too often, units return from patrol and are almost immediately released without conducting a proper after-action review (AAR), mission debrief, or recovery plan. This complacency often occurs later in a deployment as soldiers and leaders become overconfident in their abilities. However, this phase of the operation is fundamental to mission success and essential for future operations.

All personnel should be present for the platoon leader's AAR, which should take the form of an initial debrief and focus mostly on the mounted element and its coordination with the kill teams. The platoon leader should review the mission, beginning with the planning process and walking through each step. The platoon should discuss both the positive and negative aspects of the mission, noting what to sustain and what to improve. It is important that all soldiers feel comfortable enough to participate; many times, junior soldiers feel intimidated and their voices go unheard. As with any AAR, the platoon leader should conclude the discussion on a positive note. Once the AAR is complete, vehicle crewmen may begin conducting recovery operations, preparing vehicles and equipment for the next operation.

The kill team and key leaders must then begin the mission debrief. A well-structured debrief is important; it may expose unreported details from the operation. These details, when combined with other information, may shed new light on the enemy situation. The debrief will also highlight shortcomings in premission planning and unit standard operating procedures, which will help reconstruct the mission if casualties were sustained, and provide a historical record of the mission for post hostilities analysis.

The debrief should be attended by all members of the kill team, as well as key members of the mounted element, such as the platoon leader, platoon sergeant, and RTO. Typically, the S2 or company executive officer serves as the debriefer. If no electronic recording devices are available, a soldier should act as a dedicated recorder. The unit commander and other interested units or staff members may also attend the debrief. Only personnel with a valid need-to-know should be allowed to attend as an excess of personnel can often be distracting and place additional pressure on the team conducting the debrief.

The debrief should be conducted in a quiet and secure location and have overhead cover, chairs, tables, and sufficient lighting. Imagery, maps, overlays, and other materials used in the planning process should be posted for the team and debriefer to review. Additional materials, such as the kill team's surveillance log, the mounted element's patrol log, communications logs, and all photos taken by the kill team or mounted element, should be present for debrief as they may help reconstruct the actions that occurred. Water, coffee, and a small snack may also be provided to help keep personnel comfortable. Normally, a side room located at the company or battalion tactical operations center can be dedicated for the purpose of conducting debriefs.

Regardless of rank, the debriefer is in charge at all times and is the only one who can address the team. Any questions the observers or staff have for the team should be submitted prior to the debrief, which keeps the debrief structured and prevents the team from having to answer a barrage of questions from various sources. Various techniques may be used to conduct the debrief; however, the preferred method is to use a predetermined question format in which team members are asked various questions designed to draw out details not previously reported. Another technique is called "map tracking," in which the operation is retraced from insertion, infiltration, actions on the objective, exfiltration, and extraction to draw out additional intelligence. No matter what technique is used, any information collected during the debrief should be thoroughly reviewed and evaluated — this information is invaluable when planning future operations.

Small-unit kill teams can be a very effective method of countering IED threats, especially in rural Iraq. These operations require highly trained and well-equipped personnel to counter the high risk inherent to small units operating in a hostile environment. While not all armor or cavalry units are sufficiently manned or equipped to conduct kill team operations, many lessons can be learned from this type of operation; most notably, the level of thought and planning entailed in executing small-unit operations and need for a thorough AAR and debrief. For those with the capabilities and fortitude required to aggressively execute IED interdiction operations, I hope this article has proven thought provoking and provided some ideas that may help conduct such operations. Happy hunting!

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