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August 30, 2004

QUICK REACTION FORCE READY TO MOVE OUT IN RESPONSE TO INSURGENTS IN BAQUBAH AREA

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FORWARD OPERATING BASE GABE, BAQUBAH, Iraq — “Hopefully nothing goes boom.”

Less than 24 hours after arriving here, 2nd Lt. Eric Nelson found himself uttering those ominous words after finding a suspected improvised explosive device. Nelson commands the 3rd Platoon of Charlie Company, 82nd Engineer Battalion.

That day the platoon comprised the Quick Reaction Force for the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division.

While on a lunch break from patrolling Blue Babe

Highway, the QRF received word that an IED had been spotted alongside Canal Road east of FOB Warhorse. Soldiers barely had time to grab their lunch and go. It was time to put the "quick" in the team's title into action.



SPC SHERREE CASPER

An Iraqi interpreter points out a suspected improvised explosive device alongside a roadside near Baqubah, Iraq, to a Soldier with the Quick Reaction Force from the 3rd Brigade Combat Team of V Corps' 1st Infantry Division.

Within moments, a small convoy of Humvees was racing to the reported location.

"It's hard to catch them," said Sgt. Joshua S. Staderman, a combat engineer tapped as a gunner for the mission.

Staderman was referring to the enemy insurgents who planted the IEDs designed to maim and kill Soldiers and Iraqis. From the beginning of July until mid-August, Staderman experienced five IED explosions, escaping injury each time.

"Being on QRF is like being a firefighter; you're on call," said Nelson. "We are supposed to be the first ones to respond to a scene."

The QRF may encounter anything from IEDs to rocket-propelled grenade attacks to small arms firefights and ambushes.

Sgt. 1st Class Mark Patterson said the mission of the 3rd BCT's QRF is to secure Blue Babe Highway, and the team has been very successful in that task, claiming that there has been a 30 percent decrease in IED incidents along the stretch of roadway in the last three months.

"Normally we find an IED by hitting them," he said. "That's probably the easiest way to find them. It's not the preferred method of finding them."

Patterson said having 'up-armored' Humvees has lessened Soldiers' casualties. Only the week before, the vehicle Patterson was riding in was struck by an IED.

"It was a huge blast," he said. "We got hit, but kept moving."

Except for some pain in his ears, Patterson and his crew were unscathed by the attack. The reinforced Humvee proved its mettle.

“Up-armored vehicles are great. If you don’t have one, you are wrong. If Soldiers don’t have one, the unit is wrong. The Army needs to get more up-armored Humvees.”

He said sometimes while on patrol, the QRF finds itself positioned in a location for an extended period of time.

“You might have someone take a shot at you and you’ll pursue that person for maybe an hour,”

Patterson said. “It’s pretty hard to find them. It’s pretty much like chasing a rabbit most of the time.”

Nelson said his first hours on the job were an eye-opener.

“I know what to look for from now on,” he said.

Of course, he appeared to be among some seasoned QRF veterans.

“We are glorified infantrymen that know how to play with demo(litions),” Staderman said.

After arriving on the scene, the QRF was advised by local Iraqis where the suspected IED was buried.

"If they don't blow up on us, we usually blow them up," said Spc. Justin A. Hayse, a combat engineer.

Staff Sgt. Ivan D. Cruz uncovered red and green wires coming from a small black box buried beneath a small mound of dirt along Canal Road.

"It's time to play in the dirt," Hayse said.

At first the QRF tried to destroy the suspected IED themselves.

"A .50 cal ought to move some stuff," Nelson said.

"Light her up," Staderman said.

When the .50-caliber machine gun failed to get the job done, the QRF requested it be allowed to blow up the suspected IED with C-4 plastic explosive. Instead they were put in a holding pattern until an Explosive Ordnance Disposal team arrived.

In the end, the EOD team found that it has blown up remnants of a former IED that had exploded, but had not been disposed of.

But the QRF Soldiers found it's better to be safe than sorry.

