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MISSION PUTS ENGINEERS OF V CORPS' 1ST ARMORED DIVISION INTO 'GROUND-POUNDER' ROLE

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WITH TASK FORCE 1-37, Iraq –For two successive nights last week, Soldiers of B Company, 16th Engineer Battalion traversed the streets of Karbala in support of Operation Iron Saber.

The company is part of the 1st Brigade Combat Team of V Corps' Task Force 1st Armored Division.

The first night of operations found the combat engineers setting roadblocks and conducting dismounted security in support of tank, infantry, and air assaults on known militia strong points in that city. The roadblocks were intended to encircle and trap escaping enemy forces, said team leader 1st Lt. David Drake.

"We're the ground-pounders out here, making sure (the Soldiers manning the roadblock) have good security on the ground. We've done a lot of this stuff," he said.

The evening was filled with uncertainty as the sounds of explosions echoed down the streets and red tracer fire streamed overhead.

Soldiers assigned to secure the area acted with deliberate speed, deftly stringing concertina wire across the broad boulevards.

The teams found cover in the underbrush, in dry irrigation ditches and under covered alleyways, denying the enemy pathways of escape around cordon.

Pvt. James Watkins is an M249 Squad Automatic Weapon gunner for the company's 1st Platoon. He said the engineers are skilled in many areas.

"Whatever they (the other Soldiers) need help with, we can do it," he said.



SPC ANDREW MEISSNER

Illuminated by the red glow of Karbala's street lamps, Pfc. Alec Fowler, an M113 Armored Personnel Carrier driver from V Corps' B Company, 16th Engineer Battalion, 1st Armored Division, strings concertina wire across a road while platoon mechanic Pfc. William Lockey and Squad Automatic Weapon gunner Pvt. James Watkins provide security.

Although there was no contact with the enemy during their operations, the engineers knew their contribution was necessary to the whole effort.

"I was hoping we'd be able to see more ... but we did our part," Watkins said.

After only a few hours of sleep, the engineers were out again the following night. This time the mission was a search for weapons at an abandoned amusement park.

Dismounted infantrymen initially combed the area, encountering some resistance, which they quickly dispatched.

After the infantry secured the park, it was the engineers' turn to fan out.

"You have to do most of your soldiering first, and be a mechanic second," said 1st Platoon mechanic Pfc. William Lockey. "Actually, it's been quite challenging. Most mechanics don't do the things I do."

The engineers did not need ground-penetrating radar to find the weapons and ammunition caches that evening. The hidden contents of the park were slowly being discovered by visual searches.

Many of the small structures in the park contained deadly weapons of war: mortars, rocket-propelled grenade launchers, heavy caliber ammunition and improvised explosive devices -- many ready to be put to use.

The sappers collected the ordnance and destroyed them. In a thunderous explosion, the weapons disintegrated so completely that none of the items were left for salvage.

Pfc. Alec Fowler, a M113 armored personnel carrier driver, said missions like this validate the task force's move to Karbala to provide a safe and secure community for the city's residents.

"They sent us here because they feel that there is more that (coalition forces) need to do. I have no problems staying here until it's done."

