

Task Force Scorpion

By BGen John F. Kelly, USMC

Editor's note: The following is an excerpt from a three-part series of articles written by then-Brigadier General John F. Kelly, 1st Marine Division's Assistant Division Commander, during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2002-2003.

Northern Babil Province Heats Up

Although 1st Marine Division's entire zone was dangerous with criminals and unrepentant Saddam loyalists active throughout, the efforts of the "Blue Diamond" Division's Marines with the local population assisted in all but eliminating violence by midsummer of 2003. There was, however, a far northern slice of our zone where we had not yet spent much effort that grew increasingly active with hit-and-run violence.

During May 2003, as the Army continued its buildup at the end of the conventional stage of the conflict, Forward Logistics Base (FLB) Dogwood was established at a former military base in northern Babil Province astride the Euphrates River 12 miles southwest of Baghdad. This area of Iraq was a fault line between the predominately Shia south and Sunni north. Nearly all roads to Baghdad



from the south passed through this zone. The main supply route, Highway 1 from Kuwait, and alternate supply routes (ASRs), highways 8 from Al Hillah and 9 from the west and Karbala, all converged here. Most notably, however, was ASR Sue,

a narrow two-lane road that meandered through the lowland villages and agricultural fields for 22 miles. ASR Sue was a connector route and an important logistical lifeline for soldiers in Baghdad. It was used by up to 90 convoys a day.

By early June 2003, Blue Diamond-Main, now collocated with I MEF in the ancient ruins complex of Babylon near Al Hillah, received frequent reports of convoy ambushes along ASR Sue, although the number of actual attacks was difficult to determine. There was no system in place to verify reports as they came through any number of command channels.

The reports were seldom timely with often incomplete and inaccurate initial reports. For instance, in the first two weeks of June there were 51 reported attacks along this route although the standard by which an attack was measured ranged from a single driver thinking he had been shot at to the tragic wounding or death of a soldier and vehicles destroyed by combined automatic weapons and rocket propelled grenade (RPG) fire. Thankfully there were few of these. Reports at the time indicated there had been, on average,



A convoy of Medium Tactical Vehicle Replacement 7-ton trucks from Transportation Support Group moves in to 1st FSSG Forward Headquarters in Iraq in 2003. (Photo by MSgt Edward D. Kniery, USMC)

three attacks per day by small arms, two per day involving RPGs.

During this period, another weapon made an occasional appearance—the improvised explosive device (IED)—a weapon that became the weapon of choice for the guerrillas. Regardless of the confusion, the Marines owned the terrain and, in response to the local commander’s immediate concerns, Blue Diamond organized and deployed Task Force (TF) Scorpion.

TF Scorpion’s mission and task organization evolved over time as the tactical situation changed and the enemy reacted to our increasingly successful initiatives. Initially the threat was against defenseless logistics convoys that some described as “manatees.” Convoys coming out of FLB Dogwood or down from Baghdad were not always taking the precautions prudent while operating in such a threat. This made their vehicles easy targets for a host of Iraqi predators. In the beginning the ambush action was no more than one or two assailants standing next to the road in plain sight during the day, emptying an AK-47 magazine at the approaching vehicles, and walking away. Occasionally an RPG might be fired. The convoy’s immediate action was to drive through the “kill zone.” It was difficult to determine if fire was ever returned or if there was any effort on the part of convoy personnel to maneuver against the renegades.

On June 13, TF Scorpion, organized around 4th Light Armored Reconnaissance Battalion (LAR), moved into battlespace carved out of 1st Bn, 4th Marines’ zone and thereafter referred to as “Northern Babil.” It was reinforced with a number of smaller units and capabilities.

The first order of business was the obvious requirement to secure ASR Sue from the paid Iraqi thugs who preyed upon the convoys unmolested. This was accomplished in short order by saturating the immediate vicinity of the roadway with aggressive Marine patrols. Instead of manatees, the terrorists encountered hunters. Every would-be ambusher soon knew the capability of the light armored vehicle (LAV). Like the Cobras, the “light horsemen” of the LAR community were respected and feared; their reputations earned and well-deserved. The second task was to work with senior Army leaders in FLB Dogwood and Baghdad to encourage them to improve awareness and encourage defensive reaction by convoy personnel when departing secure logistics bases.

TF Scorpion’s initial “do something right away” action was to intersperse LAVs in among the convoy’s vehicles in the hopes that ambushers might engage.



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Col John F. Kelly, left, Assistant Division Commander; LtCol Stephen Santa Ana, center, Assistant Operations Officer G3; and Col John A. Toolan, Assistant Chief of Staff G3, 1stMarDiv, pictured at Camp Commando, Kuwait, during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. Kelly, future four-star general and White House Chief of Staff, was promoted to brigadier general in March 2003 during this assignment.



USMC

A convoy of Marine Corps HMMWVs, assigned to Co D, 1st LAR Bn, 1stMarDiv, arrives in Northern Iraq during a sandstorm, March 26, 2003.

The terrorists were ruthless but not particularly suicidal, and this tactic failed to lure many into the kill zone. Another technique in this cat-and-mouse game was to run small “Trojan horse” convoys through the area. The bait vehicles had been hardened with a wall of meals, ready-to-eat boxes filled with sand lining the outer edges of the vehicle beds to give the appearance of a defenseless logistics vehicle. The vehicles were not defenseless, however, because in addition to the driver and assistant driver in the cab (riflemen as well as logistics professionals) there were Marines hidden within the wall of boxes chomping at the bit to return fire and deploy.

Terrorist fighters must have been amazed as convoys of high-mobility multipurpose wheeled vehicles (HMMWVs) or medium tactical vehicle replacements now were just as likely to stop on contact, return fire, and deploy riflemen as they were to rush past to safety. After only a few days



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of operations the enemy adjusted tactics. They were no longer willing to stand next to the road and shoot at American vehicles regardless of how slow they traveled and helpless they appeared. The ambushers adjusted by moving farther and farther back from the road in order to survive, resulting in their fire growing increasingly ineffective. By mid-June, the number of

attacks had fallen off to a fraction of what they had been. By early July there were no direct fire attacks at all.

As effective as the combat tactics were, working the convoy routes in hopes of killing a few not-so-dedicated trigger-pullers was treating the “symptom” and not the “disease” of suspicion and hostility toward the coalition in this contested



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A Marine Corps convoy enters the 2nd Bn, 6th Marines base camp guard post just outside of Muwaffaqiya, Iraq, during Operation Iraqi Freedom, in 2003.

region. There were those outside the MEF who encouraged us to go more kinetic and consider the use of AC-130s, close air support, and artillery against suspected hostile sites. We took a different approach. We needed to do what had worked so well for us throughout the rest of the zone—win the trust of the locals whom we were here to help and who were here to stay.

The TF Scorpion team implemented a parallel program of civil affairs activities in the population centers with explosive ordnance disposal (EOD) serving as a particularly effective tool in helping penetrate the civilian communities, many of which lived in terror of anticoalition forces. The use of U.S. fire support assets had been heavy here as units fought through the area in April on the way to Baghdad. There was a massive amount of unmarked unexploded ordnance (UXO) spread across the fields and villages. A tremendously effective psychological operations and information campaign, developed by the Army soldiers attached to 1st Marine Division from the 432nd Civil Affairs Battalion, first warned local citizens of the dangers of UXO and provided posters and handbills to help identify the objects.

The second aspect of the campaign was to encourage the Iraqi citizens to contact the newly arrived Marines for removal of dangerous materials from their fields, homes, schools and neighborhoods. The EOD Marines began a nonstop campaign that ultimately, over a period of many weeks, resulted in the removal of 250,000 pounds of UXO, but at the cost of several dead and wounded. This common interest also began a process of extending TF Scorpion's influence and trust into the population. The real intelligence sources would be found among the people—a reality, again, we had learned previously. Soon the people were overtly and covertly stepping forward with tips and warnings to the Marines and soldiers with whom they had developed a fragile relationship of trust.

By early July, the enemy once again changed tactics. They gave up on the ineffective and highly dangerous to themselves direct fire ambush, altering their tactics to the almost exclusive use of IEDs. These were most often mortar or artillery shells “daisy chained” together and command detonated. Soon the TF found its stride here as well, and although IED attacks rose to a high average of three a day in the first two weeks of July, they began to fall in number almost immediately to near zero by the end of the month. In dealing with the evolving threat it was clear the LAR-centric task force had the mobile patrols covered but

was in need of “grunts” to do the dirty work off-road and in the towns. The need for infantrymen to hunt down and kill this elusive enemy working in the shadows along the roadsides at night or cordon target sites for search or ambush was obvious; however, just as obvious was the need to get “boots on the ground” in amongst the citizenry of the Northern Babil and in those places where we were warned by friends, and threatened by our few enemies, not to tread. We went there first.

In late June two rifle companies—Company I, 3/7, traveling up from Karbala, and Co E, 2/5, As Samawah—were attached. In the first case the company commander selected a position adjacent to Al Mahmudiyah and directly astride a

very active IED “mixing bowl.” The company had not even unrolled their sleeping mats when they were out prowling the night on initial patrols. In exactly the same way, the second company selected a similarly dangerous position near the city of Al Yusufiyah, one that would give it access to both the population and active IED zones. Many of these tough young men were in ambush sites the first night seeking early contact and were not disappointed.

The impact of the infantry's arrival, along with the combined efforts of the task force of nearly 1,000 personnel from three services, clearly presented the enemy with more dilemmas than he could handle. The anticoalition forces were forced to alter their tactics a third time.



Col John A. Toolan, second from left, CO, RCT-1, 1stMarDiv, talks to two Iraqi employees at a train station located on the outskirts of the city of Fallujah, Al Anbar Province, Iraq, during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

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USMC

LAR Marines guard the entrance to the Tikrit Palace compound in Iraq during Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003.

We now saw the introduction of sporadic mortar attacks from hastily laid ground or vehicle borne tubes. These attacks were obviously conducted by men who were not only unskilled with the weapons but also very interested in not directly confronting the infantry who were everywhere and nowhere at the same time. Great tactical headwork by junior leaders was quick to figure the enemy's procedures, predict his routines, and set ambushes and sniper teams in those places that presented a mortar threat—and they ceased.

We once again resisted the suggestion to reply to these attacks with heavy firepower, a response that we felt would likely wound or kill innocent Iraqis. Even if innocents were not hit—and more importantly from a hearts and minds perspective—we felt it would severely erode our message that innocent Iraqi lives were as precious to us as were our own. We calculated that the use of bombs and artillery against a fleeing enemy long gone before the first ordnance struck made no tactical sense, was in fact counterproductive, and would send the message that we held the lives of Iraqis in low regard. Some argued it would show Iraqis who was boss, or show them our resolve and power. We elected

to rely on a high degree of field craft and the tactical expertise and confidence of our company grade infantry leaders.

The final stage of operations for TF Scorpion, before their relief by elements of the 82nd Airborne Division, was a spoiling attack against a large number of unrepentant former regime supporters just prior to their own offensive. Our counteractions were made possible by the wealth of actionable intelligence the small units were gleaned from the many sheikhs, clerics, police, and private citizens throughout the zone but particularly in Babil.

Long before being alerted by Commander, Joint Task Force 7 in Baghdad of the pending offensive, the G-2 (intelligence) sections at MEF and Blue Diamond, in collaboration, detected an unmistakable increase in indications and warnings focused on a four-day period corresponding to the July 14 anniversary of the founding of the Ba'ath Party in Iraq. The intelligence unquestionably pointed toward an aggressive campaign of IED and other terrorist type attacks. Our response was a simultaneous counteroffensive against a number of these suspected individuals designed and executed to disrupt the expected attack. Building up

a large number of detailed target folders we held off striking suspected individuals until July 12 in order to maximize the disruption of this plan and minimize the period of time they had available to recover.

So successful was this initiative that the division continued this tactic in an effort to round up senior regime officials, fedayeen, and terrorists until we departed the zone. By continuing the attack and taking the fight to the enemy, we greatly reduced hostile influence against us in Northern Babil. Each raid led to the next and were most often conducted by the infantry companies or attached force reconnaissance assets from the Reserves. These raids, or “cordons and knocks” as we first termed them, were typically executed at night and were backed by invaluable Cobra and Huey support from the 3rd Marine Aircraft Wing. These actions were highly successful in capturing large arms and ordnance caches, IED production facilities and their technicians, Ba'ath Party stalwarts responsible for hiring local trigger-pullers, and even occasional cells working against our soldiers to the north in Baghdad. 🇺🇸