

Managing Sensitive Site Exploitation — Notes from Operation Iraqi Freedom

By Major Pete Lofy

The hunt for weapons of mass destruction (WMD) and the related documentation was a focal point during Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom. U.S. Central Command designated sites that were associated with WMD or other war atrocities as sensitive sites. During the conduct of Operation Iraqi Freedom, Task Force Iron Horse—built around the 4th Infantry Division, Fort Hood, Texas—was given the task of securing and exploiting many of these sites. This article outlines the management process that was used to identify, target, and exploit those sites; it will not elaborate on techniques used or detail findings.

Weapons for the Dragon Hunt

A sensitive site—as defined by Special Text (ST) 3-90.15, *Tactics, Techniques, and Procedures for Tactical Operations Involving Sensitive Sites*—is “... a geographically limited area with special diplomatic, informational, military, or economic sensitivity to the United States.”¹ For our purposes, sensitive sites were separated into two types: those that potentially contained WMD and those that did not. The focus of the former was to locate stores of nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) weapons or the facilities that produced them. The focus of the latter was to exploit the documentation that supported the former Iraqi regime’s atrocities and/or gave information regarding its structure.

In order to conduct sensitive site exploitation operations, Task Force Iron Horse was augmented by two specialized sensitive site exploitation teams: Mobile Exploitation Team (MET)—Delta (MET-D) focused on non-WMD, while Site Survey Team #4 (SST #4) focused on WMD exploitation. These teams were placed under the operational control of the task force. While the composition of a MET or SST varies among different teams, those teams assigned to Task Force Iron Horse had typical composition and capability. The two teams had some overlap in capabilities and could internally task-organize to accomplish specific missions or prosecute multiple missions simultaneously.

Redefining the Targeting Process

The process by which sensitive sites are identified, targeted, and exploited is analogous to—and can be imbedded in—the process used by an effects coordination cell (ECC) in planning and executing an air tasking order (ATO) cycle. An ECC is generally found at division and higher levels, but its targeting processes can be used at almost any level. The division ECC’s purpose is to—

- Plan, prepare, and execute the synchronization of lethal and nonlethal effects at the decisive point on the battlefield.



Photo courtesy of MET-D

MET-D poses in front of a picture of Saddam Hussein as it prepares for yet another mission in support of Task Force Iron Horse.

- Synchronize and integrate the division's collection and target efforts for shaping operations.
- Integrate information operations (IO), civil affairs (CA), and public affairs themes into the shaping operations.
- Coordinate and synchronize organic echelon-above-division and joint assets.
- Develop and disseminate targeting products.

The ECC is generally built around the unit's fire support element. For those not familiar with the ATO cycle or the targeting process, they are deliberate, coordinated processes by which persons or areas of interest are identified and targeted using information from a number of sources. Once targeted, members of the ECC determine how to attack or render effects on a target. This group then continually provides updated information (or refinement) on the target. After the effects (lethal and/or nonlethal) have been delivered, battle damage assessments feed back into the ECC for refinement of the target and possible reservicing of that target. This is a very rough description of a complex process.

It is easy to dismiss the importance of the chemical officer in this process. The operational danger is that everyone knows a little about WMD. The danger manifests itself when that "little" knowledge is applied. This is not a job for part-timers; it requires a chemical officer to assess and inject WMD smarts into the process. "Enthusiasm does not equal capability" was the constant mantra of this mission. (To read more about the chemical staff officer's part in the targeting process, see "The Chemical Officer's Critical Role in the Targeting Process" in the January 2003 issue of the *Army Chemical Review*.)

For the purposes of security and stability and support operations, Task Force Iron Horse transformed the ECC from a group that primarily targeted high-value assets (HVAs) kinetically (lethal) to a group that used nonkinetic (nonlethal) effects to target HVAs. Examples of nonkinetic effects include psychological operations (PSYOP), CA operations, and IO. As the task force transitioned to stability and support operations, the composition of the ECC changed from artillerymen, aviators, and Air Force representatives to a group dominated by PSYOP, CA, and IO planners. This paradigm shift resulted from the need for the armed U.S. forces to adapt to an ever-changing battlefield in which simultaneous, full-spectrum operations were the norm.

The sensitive site exploitation management process nests itself within the ECC's targeting or ATO cycle. The process begins with identifying the threat—in this case, the sensitive sites. Sites are identified by two primary means. The first is based on the findings of our national-level intelligence assets: the deliberate planning process

SST #4

Primary Mission: Exploit sites that may contain evidence of Iraqi WMD-related materials and/or actual NBC agents.

Team Composition and Functions:

- Site Assessment Team: Five Defense Threat Reduction Agency soldiers providing technical expertise and equipment
- Support Element: Ten soldiers providing logistical support and tactical linkages
- Explosive Ordnance Disposal: Two soldiers securing the team from explosive hazards
- NBC Reconnaissance Section: (Composition varies) providing NBC survey and monitoring

MET-D

Primary Mission: Exploit documentation and other information supporting Iraqi WMD programs and/or supply information regarding the structure, personnel, or atrocities of the former Iraqi regime.

Team Composition and Functions:

- Site Assessment Team: Five Defense Threat Reduction Agency soldiers providing technical expertise and equipment
- Support Element: Ten soldiers providing logistical support and tactical linkages
- Criminal Investigation Element: Two investigators providing crime scene support
- Explosive Ordnance Disposal: Two soldiers securing the team from explosive hazards
- Security Detachment: Five soldiers providing physical security for the exploitation team

identifies preplanned sites. These sites translate easily to specified tasks for the units. The second means involves serendipity: units identifying a site during the conduct of operations. More often than not, these sites are discovered as a result of contact with the local populace (human intelligence [HUMINT]).

In Iraq, farmers, merchants, and local civilian authorities approached soldiers stating that something had been buried in their backyards, fields, or playgrounds. These types of reports were so numerous that it was often difficult to corroborate the information with other sources. Often, these HUMINT reports were not immediately prioritized and matched up with the sites from higher headquarters unless they posed an immediate danger. Nevertheless, these ad hoc sites required the same level of attention and effort as the preplanned sites. Part of the growing pains in identifying these ad hoc sites was the

initially limited skill set for missile identification. Many missiles larger than a soldier's arm were incorrectly identified as Scuds (enemy missile systems) or other surface-to-surface missiles. It took a concerted effort to educate the force and grow beyond the "big missile" identification. A description of how these ad hoc sensitive sites were processed is at the end of this article.

Assigning Priorities

Once all of the possible sensitive sites were identified, the systematic process of site prioritization began. Prioritization was a deliberate, dynamic process based on many factors, which included (but were not limited to) the—

- Priority assigned by higher headquarters.
- Perceived geographical/political significance.
- Amount of combat power required to secure the site.
- Reliability and recency of on-site intelligence.

The priority assigned to these sites could change based on updated information. For example, a clue discovered at site "X" could cause site "Z" to leap to the top of the list.

At the task force (division) level, the most critical factor in determining prioritization was often how much combat power was required to secure the site. Our higher headquarters tasked us to secure the designated sites until they were properly exploited and reported. Only then were we relieved from the task. Those who understand the tactical task of security realize that physically securing a fixed site can require from two soldiers to two battalions of infantry. The amount of combat power and time required to secure a facility gains the commanders' attention quickly.

Next, the planner must balance the priority of the site against the tactical reality of the unit. Often, the task force's prioritization of sites was not in line with those of our higher headquarters. The sites were prioritized by importance while maintaining the scheme of maneuver. For example, if site "Z" was at our limit of advance, it would not be secured initially despite its high priority, whereas lower-priority site "W" was secured simply because it was encountered earlier in our advance.

Injecting Sensitive Site Exploitation

Once initial prioritization of sites was complete, it was time to feed the sensitive site into the targeting cycle. The injection

of the site was the duty of the NBC plans officer on the division plans team. He took the site with the highest priority and placed it in the targeting list. This was done 96 to 120 hours before the site was to be exploited. This list was staffed throughout the division plans team and examined for feasibility. If approved, the target list was passed to the ECC for further refinement and assignment of supporting resources.

At the 72- to 96-hour ECC meeting, resources—such as security personnel, engineers, and the Fox M93A1 Nuclear, Biological, and Chemical Reconnaissance System—were allocated to support the exploitation effort. Members of the ECC analyzed sensitive sites and other missions to ensure that all targets got the required assets during the timeframe of interest. During the 48- to 72-hour meeting, the commanding general reviewed and approved the target list. Approximately 48 hours before the execution of the exploitation, a division fragmentary order (FRAGO) detailing the operation and its support requirements was produced.

The FRAGO was not the first time that the supporting unit was aware of the requirement. The target sheet listing the task and purpose for each 24-hour time period was circulated to the units after approval by the commanding general. This allowed the units some lead time to plan. This target sheet also translated into a troop-to-task list, which the leadership of the division used to manage assets and ensure no unit was overtaxed.

Target Refinement

While the targeting process continued, the NBC staff (assisted by the intelligence section) continued to refine



SST #4 exploits a suspected WMD storage site.

Photo courtesy of SST #4

intelligence on each target. Priority intelligence requirements (PIRs) for the exploitation were also refined. PIRs focused the teams in their exploitation efforts. Some of the secure sites were rather large, and without PIRs the teams would have taken days (if not weeks) to exploit some of the sites.

Before the day of execution, MET-D and SST #4 coordinated with the supporting unit. The supporting unit can be tasked with providing security, engineer assets, and other needs. The mission was completed on the day of execution, and the teams out-briefed the supporting unit, the ECC, and the division chemical section. This form of feedback allowed the division staff to decide if the mission was complete or if the target would have to be revisited.

Release from the task of securing the site required that the teams exploit the site and submit a formal report detailing what, if anything, was found at the site. If the site required a large amount of force to secure, the drain on combat power crippled other operations in the task force area of operation (AO). Therefore, the reports to higher headquarters were normally submitted within 24 hours of mission completion.

Lessons Learned

The process used to exploit ad hoc sites is important to know and pass on. If a unit received a report regarding a possible sensitive site within its AO, it would process the site at its level before engaging the SST. For example, if the unit reported a possible WMD site, it would first exploit the site with organic NBC monitoring and survey teams. If these teams found positive evidence of chemical or biological agents, then the unit dispatched a Fox to the site. If the Fox also found positive evidence of WMD, then the unit would request support from the division Chemical Section and the SST. The SST was tasked by the ECC (using the targeting process) and dispatched only after credible evidence of WMD was found and proper analysis conducted. This use of organic assets was critical to the process of managing the ad hoc sites, ensuring that the crucial asset of the SST was not squandered.

Conclusion

The salient points of sensitive site exploitation management within the realm of the targeting process may be summarized as follows:

- Targets must be prioritized based on predetermined factors, but this prioritization remains flexible to allow for ad hoc site exploitation.

- Targets must be injected into the unit's targeting process early. This allows members of the ECC to allocate resources and gives subordinate units ample time to plan.
- Written orders must be specific about sensitive site exploitation task accomplishment and the unit's requirements for supporting the effort.
- PIRs must be defined for each sensitive site.
- Intelligence preparation of the battlefield must continue on the target as the date of execution nears. Detailed targeting folders must be delivered to the team well in advance of conducting the exploitation.
- Detailed coordination must be complete before executing the exploitation.
- Detailed feedback about the exploitation must be briefed after its completion. This will determine if the target must be reserviced or if the mission is complete.

Managing sensitive site exploitation is a new and complicated process. This process can be simplified, however, when it is nested in the already-existing system of the ATO or targeting process. This established method makes the task more manageable for the staff officer and gives the unit actionable tasks. Correct and efficient management of this process will ensure minimum strain on unit combat power because of sensitive site security missions.

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Endnote

¹ST 3-90.15, December 2002, was an excellent and timely guide for sensitive site exploitation operations. Though it focuses on combat operations, most of the principles can be applied across full-spectrum operations. This was extremely important, as the task force was often involved in combat and stability and support operations in an extended battlespace.