Intelligence Support to Sustainment Operations: Lessons Learned from the Iraq Drawdown

The 1st Theater Sustainment Command relied on daily intelligence sharing across the joint operating area to conduct safe and secure retrograde operations during Operation New Dawn.

By Lt. Col. Devon Blake and Chief Warrant Officer 4 Deloye Meacham

From an intelligence perspective, the Iraq drawdown offers many important lessons learned and critical points to capture. This article specifically focuses on intelligence support to sustainment operations during the final push of personnel and equipment out of Iraq from Oct. 21 to Dec. 18, 2011.

The 1st TSC's Retrograde Mission

The 1st Theater Sustainment Command (TSC) was activated on April 18, 2006, as one of three active duty TSCs in the Army. This two-star command consists of approximately 22,000 personnel whose mission is to provide logistics support to the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) theater of operations. The 1st TSC operates two command posts: the main command post at Fort Bragg, N.C., and the forward command post at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait.

In March 2012, the unit was assigned the retrograde mission for U.S. Forces Afghanistan and directed to establish a third command post in Afghanistan. The 1st TSC's primary mission is sustainment operations for the CENTCOM area of responsibility. However, its primary focus became retrograde operations for Operation New Dawn in Iraq on Oct. 21, 2011, the day that President Barack Obama announced that all U.S. troops and trainers would be out of Iraq and home for the December holidays.

At the time of the president's speech, 24 major operational bases and more than 86,000 personnel were still in Iraq. The 1st TSC had only 58 days to complete the retrograde mission. In order to meet the president's deadline, the commanding general rallied his staff to develop a plan for this seemingly insurmountable task, which was comparable to the Red Ball Express in World War II or the Cold War's Berlin Airlift.

At the time of the president's announcement, the second and third order effects on sustainment seemed astronomical, yet ensuring the safe return home of our brothers and sisters in arms was viewed as a challenge worthy of devoting time, energy, and resources.

Threats to Transportation

The 1st TSC G–2 conducts split-based operations at command posts in North Carolina, Kuwait, and Afghanistan and has a mission to provide timely, accurate, and predictive logistics-based intelligence to the 1st TSC's commanding general, his staff, subordinate units, Soldiers, and civilian agencies across the globe. Several threats affect the transportation carriers that provide crucial resupply along the ground, sea, and air lines of communication that sustain our forces throughout Iraq, Afghanistan, the Northern Distribution Network, the Horn of Africa, and Yemen.

The G–2's theater sustainment intelligence center produces and distributes daily, weekly, and monthly intelligence to a comprehensive audience. In addition to a talented team of analysts that develop the products, the G–2 also has organic counterintelligence agents who investigate and report potential threats to the 1st TSC mission.

In order to meet the commanding general's intelligence demands for retrograde operations and the drawdown, the G–2 deployed additional personnel from the main command post at Fort Bragg to the forward command post in Kuwait.

The 1st TSC and its subordinate sustainment brigades do not conduct lethal targeting, nor do they own any organic intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets. The 1st TSC relies on area of operations (AO) owners and national-level assets for ISR support. However, subordinate logistics units often provide critical intelligence through convoy debrief-

ings. The drivers of these missions understand that they are intelligence sensors who are familiar with their AOs as a result of driving the routes daily and are able to recognize changes in the environment.

Two of the 1st TSC subordinate unit intelligence sections (the S–2 from the Minnesota National Guard's 1st Brigade Combat Team, 34th Infantry Division [1/34th BCT], and the S–2 from the Tennessee National Guard's 230th Sustainment Brigade) conducted convoy commander debriefings to collect pertinent information on criminal and insurgent activity, including attack trends, local atmospherics, and tactics, techniques, and procedures (TTP). From this information, the best course of action could be assessed.

For example, logistics drivers could provide information on common methods and locations for explosively formed penetrator (EFP) and improvised explosive device (IED) emplacement. To further assist with the debriefings, the counterintelligence agents from the TSC developed and implemented a list of open-ended questions to bolster discussion and trigger the drivers' memories. As a result of these driver debriefings, AO owners discussed and shared intelligence daily across the joint operating area. Also, TTP were developed to help drivers avoid EFPs and IEDs.

Typically, sustainment convoys in Iraq drove close to the center of two- and three-lane roads to avoid the EFPs and IEDs typically planted along the shoulder. They also drove at high rates of speed to pass quickly through known elevated threat zones. Insurgents observed these TTP and soon adjusted their practices accordingly. They began to angle their EFPs precisely to target drivers, gunners, and known soft spots in armor.

To reduce the risks to the logistics convoys, the unit S–2s compiled data such as time of day, IED and EFP emplacement statistics, areas of increased activity, and types of initiators employed. The S–2s then provided briefings to truck and convoy commanders to raise awareness of the elevated threat zones and recommended which lane to drive in for a particular length of the road.

For example, if EFPs were generally set up along a three-lane road in an elevated threat zone to target a vehicle in the center lane, then the unit S–2 would recommend the convoy vehicles drive either along the far side of the road (farthest away from known EFP sites) or close to the shoulder of the road (near known EFP sites). By driving on the far side of the road, the majority of shrapnel from an EFP will overshoot a designated target vehicle and prevent injuries to the vehicle's occupants. Vehicles driving close to the shoulder will be hit by shrapnel, but the aim will be off and affect only the lower areas such as the tires and wheel wells.

To prevent insurgents from adapting to 1st TSC convoy lane changes, S–2s routinely changed the driving lane TTP. The S–2s in the 1/34th BCT effectively used computer-aided design software to rebuild attack models of recent IED and EFP detonations, giving drivers a visual reference of the insurgents' techniques.

Rock Throwing Incidents

The 1st TSC's sustainment drivers were also critical in providing local atmospherics. A noted trend that caused concern for sustainment convoys, as well as for combat units, was rock throwing. The incidents occurred primarily in the vicinity of military forward operating bases. Iraqis with anti-U.S. sentiments recruited Iraqi children, young adults, and occasionally local security forces to throw rocks at convoys waiting to enter military bases. On several occasions, significant damage was caused to personnel and equipment.

Intelligence indicated that insurgents paid the children and some adults to throw rocks at U.S. convoys in order to push Soldiers into a defensive posture. From the G–2 perspective, one of the principal concerns was that a coalition force member might shoot a rock thrower in self-defense. Another concern was that insurgents might merge with volatile local crowds outside military installations, initiate an attack, and then blend back in with the local populace as coalition forces returned fire in self-defense.

A third scenario of concern was that a rock thrower might toss a homemade explosive in lieu of a rock, causing damage similar to that of a hand grenade. Any of these scenarios would lead to an information operations nightmare with insurgents undoubtedly and defiantly claiming that coalition forces egregiously fired at innocent protestors. The end result likely would have been an increase in attacks and further opposition toward U.S. forces.

At the time of the incidents, primarily during the summer months of 2011, senior leaders were debating about the use of lethal and nonlethal force in rock throwing incidents. It was decided that a lethal posture would cause undue media attention and launch a negative information operations campaign. Using nonlethal means, such as rubberized bullets, would be misconstrued by the media as a lethal posture and also cause damage to U.S. Soldiers' reputations.

To deter convoy Soldiers' growing anxiety, the 1st TSC's convoys were typically notified prior to arrival of crowds gathering outside bases. Despite the occasional damage to equipment and injuries to personnel, convoy members understood the importance of their actions.

Another effective countermeasure was the involvement of the AO owners in engaging local leaders through a proactive information operations campaign. After coalition leaders spoke to heads of schools, city council members and shura leaders, the children were soon discouraged from throwing rocks and the activity in those areas ceased for several months. This took a

large effort on the part of the AO owners, but it was extremely helpful for the convoys.

Sharing Intelligence

Daily intelligence sharing among the 1st TSC, U.S. Army Central, U.S. Forces Iraq, the 364th Expeditionary Sustainment Command, the 1/34th BCT, the 230th Sustainment Brigade, the 595th Transportation Brigade, and the Military Surface Deployment and Distribution Command proved to be essential to successful retrograde operations. The intelligence professionals within these units took measures to ensure that all source intelligence was briefed down to the lowest level—the users on the ground who were driving the roads.

As often as permissible, the G–2s and S–2s had face-to-face visits, conducted secure phone calls, or shared intelligence, analyses, and assessments through a secure Internet connection. Additionally, it was paramount for intelligence officers and analysts to occasionally ride in convoys with the drivers. It was a key to truly understanding the threat, terrain, and environment firsthand.

Using Adobe Connect and a secure Internet connection, the 1st TSC G–2 hosted a weekly joint intelligence synchronization meeting with theater intelligence subject matter experts from Iraq, Kuwait, Afghanistan, and Fort Bragg. Including representatives from Afghanistan was essential in order to discuss the potential migration of insurgent activities or TTP across borders.

Also key for information sharing, the 230th Sustainment Brigade hosted a bimonthly convoy commander's conference attended by the 1st TSC G–2, in-theater logistics unit staff, convoy commanders, and truck commanders. It was not uncommon for a general officer from a higher headquarters to attend the conference to see the tactical logistics picture and to hear from the Soldiers on the road.

Although the conference had an established agenda, it consisted of informal briefings and open discussions were highly encouraged. Included as part of the conference were statistics from the latest criminal and insurgent TTP. Potential methods to defeat these threats were discussed, and convoy and truck commanders could provide immediate feedback regarding their thoughts, experiences, and assessments.

ISR for Retrograde

The use of ISR assets during retrograde operations was essential. Again, the 1st TSC does not have organic ISR assets or an assigned collections manager to facilitate and track ISR requirements. Since the 1st TSC was based in Kuwait during the Iraq drawdown, many people believed that the TSC was not involved in combat operations, making it difficult to compete for ISR with AO owners in the combined joint operations area, which was already suffering from a deficit of available resources.

The 1st TSC G–2 team campaigned heavily with the U.S. Forces Iraq J–2, explaining the mission of the TSC and the extent that the convoys traveled. Daily distances averaged 360 miles along Iraqi roadways that were targeted by insurgent networks. Different from combat patrols whose mission was to target and kill the insurgents, logistics and retrograde convoys preferred not to engage the fighters but, rather, outrun them. Nonetheless, they were still targeted while often carrying critical resources such as ammunition, fuel, equipment, and food for combat Soldiers.

The overall success of using ISR assets relied on relationship building and establishing trust among units. Sustainment brigades were granted direct liaison authority with AO owners as they traversed the routes. The TSC worked with U.S. Army Central to include national and theater requirements into the Planning Tool for Resource Integration, Synchronization, and Management database and advocated for their inclusion in the planned intelligence deck. This database is used within the intelligence community specifically for ISR requests and prioritization. National and theater requirements were satisfied, and information of interest was passed directly to units using Blue Force Tracker.

The combined efforts of the entire logistics community resulted in a fast 58-day retrograde. During this time, the 1st TSC safely conducted 481 convoy missions using 3,600 trucks and retrograded 16,032 truckloads of equipment, all while driving a combined total of 11 million miles. Notably, the sustainment drivers suffered no serious injuries or loss of life. The 1st TSC G–2 believes that the talented team of intelligence professionals had something to do with the outcome.

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