

New task force

faces biggest killer

Bert Schwarz

A US Department of Defense report, published in *USA Today* on 09 August this year, quoted the head of the Pentagon's Joint Improvised Explosive Device Defeat Organisation as stating that Iraqi insurgents attacked coalition forces with IEDs over 1200 times in August, compared with 1100 attacks in July. The report further noted that IEDs are the top killers of US troops in Iraq. Since 2003 they have caused 1000 military deaths and have wounded more than 10,000 more US personnel.

The disposal of IEDs is inherently dangerous. The task requires a certain mindset and attitude as well as adequate training, doctrine, intelligence and command support. While the exact figures have not been officially reported, as of March this year the US Army has had 16 IED technicians killed in Iraq and it is known that the USMC, USAF and USN have all taken similar casualties from this small population of specialists.

Australian forces in Iraq and Afghanistan have been subjected to numerous IED attacks, few of which have been reported in the Australian media. We have been fortunate that there have been no fatalities, yet. In a welcome and long overdue initiative the CDF has announced the formation of a specialist task force to counter the overall IED threat both domestically and with deployed forces. The technically correct but unimaginatively named Counter-Improvised Explosive Device Task Force (CIEDTF) has been raised as a joint formation, sponsored by the Chief of Army, in recognition of the increased threat posed by IEDs.

An historical struggle

The ADF's IED disposal (IEDD) and Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) capabilities are provided by RAN Clearance Divers in the Navy, the Engineer and Ordnance Corps in the Army and EOD specialists in the Air Force. The basic functions, roles and training are similar across the Services. At the tactical level there has always been good co-operation and sharing of information but at higher levels there has been inflexibility and the defending of single-Service empires. This has seen previous attempts to co-ordinate and better integrate ADF IED and EOD capabilities flounder among inter-Service and even intra-Service mistrust and rivalries.

Many of these deficiencies were discussed in the Winter 2004 issue of *Defender*. The nascent CIED Task Force has considerable potential to address and rectify these

longstanding concerns, especially the lack of understanding and commitment by senior staff, the need for co-ordinated training, and the clear operational requirement for a centralised system of tasking, command and control.

IEDs, including the use of modified military explosive ordnance, have been the weapon of choice for terrorist groups going back to the Balkan Black Hand societies, Fenians, anarchists and nihilists of the late 19th Century. In the current wars in Iraq and Afghanistan the use of such weapons as an asymmetric tactic has become prolific, and the spread of modern but cheap electronics technologies has allowed non-State belligerents to easily acquire and deploy complex initiating and anti-deactivation mechanisms.

In Australia, the ADF was responsible for all IED disposal from World War II to the late 1980s when it started to hand primacy to state and territory police forces and withdraw to a supporting role. The ADF also retains responsibility for identifying and safely disposing of unexploded military explosive ordnance (EOD) across Australia – including the large numbers of war souvenirs that still turn up regularly as echoes of Australia's significant involvement in previous conflicts.

Centralised co-ordination and control of the ADF's limited IEDD assets is something that has been long sought by many of the practitioners. The CIED Task Force has been granted technical control over all CIED-related activities through the existing deployed headquarters.

It used to be that the geographically spread RAAOC EOD/IEDD assets were under technical control of Army Headquarters and had the authority to undertake tasks, in the civil community, at a moments notice without having to seek permission from the intervening commands. When the Corps Directorates were relocated to the Corps schools this technical control was moved to Logistics, later Support, Command, which created friction as the technical control was now at the same level as the headquarters with command over the assets and the ability to task IEDD assets became a topic of negotiation. The RAE, RAAF and RAN EOD and IEDD assets remained under command of their environmental commands. IEDD assets are a rare commodity and the enemy does not appreciate the intricacies of tasking across command and Service boundaries. The nearest suitable IEDD assets must be able to respond to an IED regardless of uniform colour or unit boundaries.

The challenge

The integration of adequate intelligence support into the CIED Task Force is an obvious and essential step. The Task Force is to authorise and co-ordinate all defence CIED-related interaction with government and international partners. It is pleasing to see that the ADF liaison positions within the (Federal Police) Australian Bomb Data Centre (ABDC) have not been sacrificed. The ABDC has 28 years experience in developing and maintaining international contacts and gathering the type of information needed by the CIED Task Force.

In 1976 there was an unsuccessful move to establish a Defence EOD School (DEODS). Even the amalgamation of many Service training establishments in the 1980s and 1990s did not include the four IED/EOD schools. Centralised Defence EOD training was only approved last year. The CIED Task Force is now tasked to 'oversee the development and validation of all CIED-related training and employment doctrine'. Perhaps it will wield sufficient authority to break down the walls.

Given overseas experiences with Islamist bombing attacks, and with Australia at a state of medium-level alert for terrorist attack, the domestic risk from terrorist IEDs cannot be lightly dismissed. The mission of the CIED Task Force includes ensuring that the ADF is fully prepared to support domestic security responsibilities. The Task Force has the responsibility, 'in consultation with Strategy Executive staff' to provide a central ADF contribution to whole-of-government CIED initiatives. Given the significant ADF commitment to search, IEDD and related skills to major events such as CHOGM, the Olympic and Commonwealth Games and the upcoming APEC, this role is unlikely to diminish for the foreseeable future.

The opportunity should be taken to re-examine and then decide what, if any, role the ADF should play in providing general IEDD support to civil authorities. Having handed primacy for bomb disposal to the police, the ADF's regional IEDD capabilities have atrophied to the point where many of the regional 'Army Bomb Squads' have been closed down or forced to rely on on-call IEDD teams filled out with superannuated reservists.

In any event the ADF retains the responsibility to defend its own bases and people from bomb attack. Following recent terrorist trials in Australia where defence facilities featured prominently in the target lists seized by police, together with related reliable intelligence about the targeting intentions of visiting terrorists such as Willie Brigitte, the ability to provide IEDD capabilities at ADF bases and other defence facilities can no longer be discounted.

The CIED Task Force, in conjunction with the relevant Defence science agencies, is also to co-ordinate scientific research, capability development and procurement concerning the countering of IEDs. There is always a risk that something as new as the CIED Task Force can be swayed or biased by technology rather than procedures. While the IED threat is constantly changing, particularly in the area of remote triggering, current examples in Iraq show that counter-technology will always be playing catch-up and that the emphasis must remain on selection, training, equipping and commanding the IEDD operators. In particular the outline structure of the CIED Task Force suggests an emphasis on Electronic Counter Measures (ECM). While ECM is an important capability against some (but by no means all IEDs)

the CIED Task Force must take care that it does not become driven by technology or research imperatives rather than a broader philosophical and operational approach centred on the safe disposal of these 'infernal devices'. It is interesting, for example, that there is a Staff Officer Grade 2 ECM but only a Staff Officer Grade 3 IED/EOD within the Operations and Coordination Section of the Task Force headquarters. Hopefully this does not reflect perceptions of the relative importance of the two functions.

The issue of EOD is curiously not listed in the mission, roles or responsibilities of the CIED Task Force. The clearance of explosive ordnance from the battle area, and the domestic environment, is a long standing ADF task as demonstrated by the excellent work of the RAN clearing demolition charges and booby traps from Kuwait Harbour and the RAE assisting our Pacific neighbours with the clearance of World War II munitions.

In the broader sense, two issues need to be clarified. First, will the CIED Task Force have technical control over EOD clearance in Australia, where ADF EOD elements are frequently deployed to identify and safely dispose of military explosive ordnance located in civilian environments? Second, will the new Task Force be responsible for unit-level EOD in Australia, overseas operational theatres, both or neither?

Finally, another area that still requires significant attention is medical research into IED casualties. According to US statistics, for example, approximately 75 per cent of troops involved in an IED attack return to active service. Work now being conducted, however, shows the long-term consequences of shock, brain damage and other IED injuries that are not immediately visible. The CIED Task Force needs to be given the responsibility to work with health agencies, both within Defence and more broadly (at least at federal level), to determine IED-related health issues, and associated training, doctrine and operational requirements.

New focus is vital

In Iraq and Afghanistan improvised explosive devices kill more troops and civilians than any other type of weapon. In Australia bombs are still the preferred weapon of the ideologically-motivated terrorist and the extremist religious zealot. The personnel tasked with rendering such devices safe need support that is fully integrated with other operational and intelligence functions. They also need to be tasked and commanded in a way that permits sufficient authorities to be delegated broadly enough to maximise the responsiveness and flexibility needed for the sudden and diverse nature of IED incidents. The new Counter-IED Task Force is a sound initiative and one that is long overdue. It has significant potential as long as special interest groups are prevented from directing the emphasis away from the core skills, critical mass of IEDD operators and modern equipment needed to maintain an effective CIEDD capability. ♦

Bert Schwarz is a nom de plume for a retired ADF officer with many years of operational EOD and IEDD experience, and almost as many years arguing for a co-ordinated and cohesive IEDD command and support structure, for those about whom books are titled 'Softly Walk the Brave', 'Braver Men Walk Away' and 'A Cold Blooded Business'.