

UNCLASSIFIED - FOUO

Asia Times Online
October 29, 2003

(b)(3)

Every Time The Wind Blows, Part 4**Operation Decapitation**

By Nir Rosen, with the US 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment in Iraq

AL-QAIM, Iraq - In early October, Lieutenant-Colonel Gregg Reilly, the SCO, or squadron commander, of the 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment's (ACR) Tiger Base in western Iraq decided he had enough "actionable intelligence" to pursue those Iraqis attacking his soldiers every day.

"We have the most concrete set of targetable data in Iraq," the SCO says of the operation code named Tiger Strike. "We have built this over many months with multiple sources." He has two organizational charts on his wall. One chart is for al-Qaeda cells, including safe houses, financiers and fighters. Reilly and his intelligence staff do not know why the cells are alleged to belong to al-Qaeda. "Other sources have said they are al-Qaeda," they explain. The other chart is for the resistance led by senior military officers from elite units of the former Iraqi army. It, too, contains the names of several high-level officials who coordinate cells of suppliers, trainers, financiers, suppliers and trigger pullers.

Altogether there are 62 names on the wanted list. On the wall beside the charts are large satellite images of the towns with the targeted houses marked and numbered. A minimum of 29 locations will be raided, taking out the "nervous system of the area" resistance "and the guys who actually do the shooting".

Reilly slaps the satellite images on the wall. "Everything I have here will be there, two cavalry troops, 14 tanks, 23 Bradleys, 15 gun trucks, 100 dismounts, a total of 300 soldiers." He will also be using all his human resources, including a paramilitary officer from the OGA, or "Other Government Agency", as the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) is euphemistically known in Iraq, and a team of ODA, or Operational Detachment Alpha, as the special forces are called.

In case he needs it, the SCO can call on an Orion spy plane and a UAV, or unmanned aerial vehicle, as well as the listening capacities of several different intelligence agencies. The plan is to target the leaders' homes and the "al-Qaeda" safe houses first. This will be a "dynamic operation", he says, meaning they will not be knocking on doors.

On the afternoon before the mission, Captain Justin Brown, commander of Apache Troop, call sign Apache 6, gathers the key officers and non-commissioned officers of his troop's 133 soldiers outside their TOC, or tactical operations center, called Apache X-Ray, for the "rehearsal" of Operation Decapitation, as he has called his half of Tiger Strike. Seated on plastic chairs, his men encircle a satellite image of the town placed on the floor.

Brown, a 29-year-old Texan, reminds his men that "decisions are going to be made at the lowest level ... we will dominate our battle space. Nothing will move in your area without you having control over it ... Tiger 6 has defined success on this mission as getting 50 percent of the people on list ... we will bring in every person on this list one way or the other."

N 28 1-5

Brown exhorts them to watch roofs and windows and urges them to drink enough water and make certain their men stayed hydrated. Brown tells his men to "maintain momentum, keep adrenaline flowing". Because teams will be operating close to each other, Brown warns them that "fratricide is the biggest risk in this mission". Several times in the briefing he discusses precautions to avoid hurting innocent civilians.

Brown has divided the 100 men in his six platoons into three teams, Vodka, Scotch and Bourbon. Each team was then subdivided into an outer cordon, inner cordon and entry team. One by one the leaders of Vodka, Scotch and Bourbon brief Apache 6 and the others present on their operations. A minimum of 27 locations will be raided. Brown questions each leader to see whether they have considered every detail and prepared for every contingency.

"Where will your detainees go, how will you communicate with each other, talk us through movement to subsequent locations, what will you do if a vehicle is disabled, how will you evacuate your wounded, where would the QRF [quick reaction force] be?" he demands. Each team will also have an interpreter or army linguist accompanying it.

The Long Range Surveillance Team leader, a staff sergeant, then briefs Apache. LRS, pronounced "lirs", is part of the 51st Infantry Division, and is a "gun for hire" called in whenever somebody needs a team. They will be using the call sign Ghost Rider. The staff sergeant has seven years' experience conducting long-range surveillance operations in locations such as Kosovo and Bosnia-Herzegovina. His small teams were inserted 300 kilometers behind enemy lines during Operation Iraqi Freedom. They will depart earlier to get "eyes on" the target. During the operation, if they see guys with guns leaving they will "take them down", aided by the night scopes on their weapons.

Chief Warrant Officer "Big" Fred Denning, a Nomad pilot, sits and takes notes. The 30-year-old Kiowa Warrior helicopter pilot from Texas reminds the men of Apache that they will have to rotate "birds" if they run out of fuel, but because Tiger X Ray is only five minutes away he can fly back on fumes.

Each Kiowa has a crew of two pilots, one flying and the other conducting reconnaissance. Capable of speeds up to 90 knots, he will fly far slower, hovering or circling above the target areas, sometimes 1.5 meters off tanks, usually about 30m above. When daylight breaks, Nomads will have to return to base to switch from night-vision mode, he cautions.

"When we're coming up to the target all we see is an eight-foot wall," Brown explains of the importance of Nomad. "Nomad tells us if it's four men on the roof, two men in the courtyard, two trucks in front so when my guys hit the ground running they know all the possible target locations." He adds that the mere presence of a Nomad, which is also equipped with defensive weapons, is intimidating to the enemy.

Brown's XO, or executive officer, gives the order of march, the order in which the vehicles will proceed out of the base, following routes with such names as Penthouse, Playboy and Hustler. Brown reminds his men about the PIRs, or Priority Information Requirements, including cellular phones, computers, notebooks, photo albums and any documents or other potential intelligence resources.

To avoid having the women in the house call other cell members, he tells his men to disable landlines - "Rip them out of the walls." Finally, he urges them to tell their men to sleep before the mission, which will begin at 0200. "I'm fuckin' excited about this," Apache 6 says. "The bottom line is we're gonna get 38 motherfuckers who shoot at us on a daily basis." He tells his men that one day they will tell their grandchildren about the operation.

N28 2-5

By 0100 the vehicles are being moved into position, guided by flashlights and their own headlights. The mood among the men is like that of athletes before a big game. They joke, psyche themselves up and receive final reminders from their team leaders, like coaches, to focus, to keep their eye on the ball.

One after another the vehicles in the convoy rumble out the gate of Tiger X Ray, round the bend, go past the electrical station, and stop at the test fire range. Some of Bandit's vehicles get lost and Tiger 6 gets on the radio: "We have some roaming elephants," he says, in jest. Bandit 6 is not amused.

Apache 6 and his driver Sergeant Bentley discuss football. Brown likes the Dallas Cowboys. "The hardest part of the mission is going in there and pulling some father away from his kids," says Brown. "Yeah, it sucks," sergeant Bentley avers. "But," continues Brown, "if it's gonna let my men get home safe to see their kids, I'll do it."

Apache's teams drive in black light, guided by the nods, or night-vision goggles, worn by the driver. After half an hour of navigating in the dark, the convoy approaches the first house, and the vehicles go into white light, illuminating the target area as a tank breaks the stone wall. "Fuck yeah!" cheers Sergeant Bentley. "Hi honey, I'm home!" The teams charge over the rubble from the hole in the wall, breaking through the door with a sledgehammer and dragging several men out.

The barefoot prisoners, dazed from their slumber, are forcefully marched over rocks and hard ground. One short middle-aged man, clearly injured and limping with painful difficulty, is violently pushed forward in the grip of a soldier who says: "You'll fucking learn how to walk."

Each male is asked his name. None of them match the names on the list. A prisoner is asked where the military officer lives. "Down the road," he points. "Show us!" he is told, and shoved ahead stumbling over the rocky street, terrified that he will be seen as an informer in the neighborhood. He stops at the house, but the soldiers run ahead.

"No, no, it's here," yells a sergeant, and they run back, breaking through the gate and bursting into the house. It is a large villa, with grapevines covering the driveway. The women and children are ordered to sit in the garden. The men are pushed to the ground on the driveway and asked their names. It is indeed the first high-value target. His son begs the soldiers: "Take me for 10 years but leave my father!" Both are taken as the children scream, "Daddy, Daddy!"

House after house meets the same fate. Some homes only have women in them; they, too, are ransacked, closets broken, mattresses overturned, clothes thrown out of drawers. In one house, the CIA commando and soldiers fail to recognize the smiling face in the large picture pasted to the suspect's bedroom dresser. It is Oday, one of Saddam Hussein's notorious sons, dressed in tribal clothes.

As her husband is taken away, one woman angrily asks Allah to curse the soldiers, calling them "dogs! Jews!" over and over. When his soldiers leave a house, Brown emerges to slap them on the back like a coach congratulating his players during half-time in a winning game.

In a big compound of several houses the soldiers take all the men, even the ones not on the list. A sergeant explains that the others will be held for questioning to see if they have any useful information. The men cry out that they have children still inside. In several houses soldiers tenderly carry out babies that have been left sleeping in their cribs when families are ordered out and hand them to the women.

When a house is complete, or at the Home Run stage (stages are divided into 1st, 2nd, 3rd, Home Run and Grand Slam, meaning ready to move on), soldiers relax and joke, breaking their own tension and ignoring

the trembling and shocked women and children crouched together on the lawns behind them.

Prisoners with duct tape on their eyes and their hands cuffed behind them with plastic "zip ties" sit in the back of the truck for hours without water. They move their heads toward sounds, disoriented and frightened, trying to understand what is happening around them. Any time a prisoner moves or twitches a soldier bellows at him angrily and curses.

By daylight the whole town can see a large truck full of prisoners. Two men walking to work with their breakfast in a basket are stopped at gunpoint, ordered to the ground, cuffed and told to "shut the fuck up" as their basket's contents are tossed out and they are questioned about the location of a suspect.

The soldier guarding them speaks of the importance of intimidating Iraqis and instilling fear in them. "If they got something to tell us I'd rather they be scared," he explains. An Iraqi policeman drives by in a white sport-utility vehicle clearly marked "Police". He, too, is stopped at gunpoint and ordered not to move or talk until the last raid is complete.

From the list of 34 names, Apache brings in about 16 positively identified men, along with another 54 men who were neighbors, relatives or just happened to be around. By 0830, Apache is done, and starts driving back to base. As the main element departs, the psychological-operations vehicle blasts AC/DC rock music through neighborhood streets. "It's good for morale after such a long mission," Captain Brown says.

Crowds of children cluster on porches smiling, waving and giving the passing soldiers little thumbs up. Sergeant Bentley waves back. Neighbors awakened by the noise huddle outside and watch the convoy. One little girl stands before her father and guards him from the soldiers with her arms outstretched and legs wide.

Bandit Troop handles the other half of Operation Decapitation, aimed at the "al-Qaeda elements": A baby girl blows a kiss at Bandit Troop's 1st Sergeant Reiss. His men discover Osama bin Laden pictures and a thin book supporting bin Laden and defending his actions titled *Bin Ladin: Our Enemy is America*, as well as a grease gun and a rocket-propelled-grenade launcher. In one house they raid a woman runs out carrying several AK-47s and their magazines.

Bandit troop does not return to base until 11am. They have arrested 38 men. Six of them were from the list, three others were relatives and the rest were "military-age males" who were present. One man confronted Bandit troop demanding, "Arrest me, I have some information for you." Like many sources, he did not want to be seen as a collaborator.

That night the prisoners are visible on a large dirt field in a square of concertina wire, and beneath immense spotlights and to the sound of loud generators they try to sleep on the ground, guarded by soldiers. One non-commissioned officer is surprised by the high number of prisoners Apache has taken. "Did they just arrest every man they found?" he asks, wondering whether "we just made another 300 people hate us".

The following day 57 prisoners are transported to a larger base for further interrogation. Some are not the suspects, just relatives of the suspects, or men suspected of being the suspects. Three days after the operation, a dozen prisoners can be seen marching in a circle outside the detention center, surrounded by barbed wire. They are shouting "USA, USA!" over and over.

"They were talkin' when we told 'em not to, so we made 'em talk somethin' we liked to hear," grins one of the soldiers guarding them. Another gestures up with his hands, letting them know they have to raise their



voices. A first sergeant quips that the ones who are not guilty "will be guilty next time", after such treatment.

Even if the men are guilty, no proof will be provided to the community. There will be no process of transparent justice. The only thing evident to the Iraqi public will be American guilt.

N28501