



EVERYTHING OLD IS NEW AGAIN

Task Force Phantom in the Iraq War

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Sometimes Army doctrine actually works when given the chance.

IT IS NO SMALL IRONY that a military intelligence (MI) brigade came to the above conclusion about infantry operations during more than 20 months of combat in 2003 and 2005. With Iraq as the laboratory and an XVIII Airborne Corps infantry long-range surveillance (LRS) company as the test animal, the Army has now produced a substantial body of evidence to show that cold war LRS doctrine is remarkably pertinent to 21st-century counterinsurgency warfare. This is a development that should not pass unnoticed by the Army's infantry and intelligence communities, and especially by the architects of the new battlefield surveillance brigade, which is designed to inherit much of the Army's responsibility for ground surveillance in combat over the next five years.

The Kindness of Strangers

Company F, 51st Infantry, returned to Iraq in late 2004 for its second tour of duty in two years. The Fort Bragg-based infantry unit—assigned, despite its provenance, to XVIII Airborne Corps' 525th MI Brigade—found itself once again in the country's northern provinces, where it had spent most of 2003. But this was the only similarity: nothing else about the return engagement was the same.

Like other corps-level LRS units, Fox Company was designed to be bigger, more mobile, and capable of operating over larger areas than the typical infantry rifle company. The Army had invented the LRS concept in the 1980s at the height of NATO's standoff with the Warsaw Pact in Europe. According to both infantry and MI doctrine, a corps-level LRS company was designed to send 18 six-man teams up to 150 kilometers behind enemy lines to observe operational- and strategic-level objectives, then guide fires on those targets. (At division level, an LRS detachment of six teams had a similar mission on a narrower, less distant strip of enemy terrain.)

To accomplish this demanding mission—almost the stuff of Hollywood thrillers—the Army had richly endowed its corps LRS companies with NCO and officer leaders trained at the Ranger, Pathfinder, and Military Free Fall courses; long-range, high-speed communications equipment and a platoon of signal troops to operate them; dozens of light vehicles and trucks; and state-of-the-art optics, individual weapons, and laser target designators. Despite this embarrassment of riches, many LRS companies struggled in the 1980s and 1990s to play the role the Army had written for them, but failed for reasons that remained depressingly consistent: they had neither the staff nor the influence to coordinate all of their support requirements.

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PHOTO: Companies E and F, 51st Infantry (Long Range Surveillance), at the handover of responsibility for Multi-National Command-Iraq's Task Force Phantom, 20 October 2005, at Al Asad airbase, Anbar province, Iraq. (USMC photo)

[LRS units were] designed to be bigger, more mobile, and capable of operating over larger areas than the typical infantry rifle company.

Like Tennessee Williams's heroine Blanche DuBois, LRS units "have always depended on the kindness of strangers." To perform a European-style surveillance mission deep in the enemy heartland, for example, the LRS company had to look far beyond its own ranks for essential support. It required Army aviators or Air Force pilots willing to fly into a hornet's nest of enemy air defenses to drop paratroopers over denied territory; logisticians of the corps support command to figure out how to resupply the teams under the same unpromising conditions; personnel recovery experts to draw up a plan to rescue LRS troops in the event of compromise; and corps frequency managers to dedicate channels for that one company, channels that were in short supply and tightly rationed. Moreover, G2 analysts, accustomed to pondering transnational battlefields, had to switch gears to produce detailed intelligence folders on narrowly defined point targets. Meanwhile, the chief of staff, absorbed with a myriad of other concerns, had to focus his staff on tying together the many loose ends of LRS support.

Not surprisingly, many staff officers preferred to wash their hands of this burden entirely. Following an impressive debut in March 2003, when three surveillance teams moved over 400 kilometers into Iraq to support the advance of 3d Infantry Division, V Corps assigned its organic LRS unit, E Company, 51st Infantry, a series of routine tasks that required little coordination by its headquarters. Even within its own leadership chain, the LRS company was largely neglected by its parent command, 205th Military Intelligence Brigade. That summer the brigade's leadership was distracted by the task of supervising the conventional intelligence operations of eight subordinate battalions—activities that included the creation of a theater-level interrogation center at Abu Ghraib prison. In the war's first months, the 205th showed little interest in enabling its lone

infantry unit to perform its intended combat role. This squandered the LRS company's unique capabilities. After March 2003, Echo Company's LRS teams functioned as little more than spare infantry in Iraq. They escorted convoys, conducted presence patrols, manned guard towers, prowled highways for homemade bombs and, for a brief period, shot feral dogs on U.S. bases. It seemed at times that the teams did almost everything *except* LRS operations.

A second LRS unit, attached to V Corps a few weeks before the invasion, fared somewhat differently. Initially, V Corps sliced Fox Company, 51st Infantry—the XVIII Airborne Corps LRS unit—into groups of free-floating teams, stripped of their organic company leadership and earmarked to individual divisions. In May, the newly-created Combined Joint Task Force 7 brought the unit back together and attached it to the 101st Airborne Division, which further subordinated the corps-level LRS unit to an infantry battalion operating in Mosul. Initially, the LRS company performed important but routine missions—delivering propane gas and guarding banks in the capital of Ninevah province.

Two months later the division commander, Major General David Petraeus, assigned Fox Company a new mission that exploited its special talents for the first time. Dispatched to the northern Kurdish occupied provinces, the unit surveyed Iraq's frontiers with Turkey and Iran and trained Peshmerga militiamen to serve as members of Iraq's new federal border police. Under the deft supervision of the division's military intelligence battalion, Fox Company teams operated with ease in remote, mountainous terrain that would have defeated the vehicles, line-of-sight radios, and back muscles of conventional infantry units. The company's operations and intelligence section came into its own, planning missions and organizing logistic support to LRS teams widely scattered across the Zagros Mountains.

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Fox Company also provided intelligence reports from border areas where few Americans had ventured since the aftermath of the Gulf War. Washington paid special attention to the unit's eyewitness reports on the shadowy Kurdish PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party) guerrilla movement, a source of growing friction between the United States and its NATO ally across the Iraqi border, Turkey. Within weeks, Petraeus's economy-of-force mission turned into a showcase for LRS strengths as U.S. military operations in Iraq began to journey down new and unforeseen paths.

LRS, Version 2.0

Upon their return to Fort Bragg, and armed with experiences in Kurdistan and a letter of support from Petraeus, Fox Company and its parent organization, 519th MI Battalion, spent nine months in 2004 acquiring equipment and training to prepare for genuine LRS operations in Iraq. Company and battalion leaders shuttled to the XVIII Airborne Corps headquarters to explain LRS capabilities and to plead for missions that would exploit the unit's unique skills.

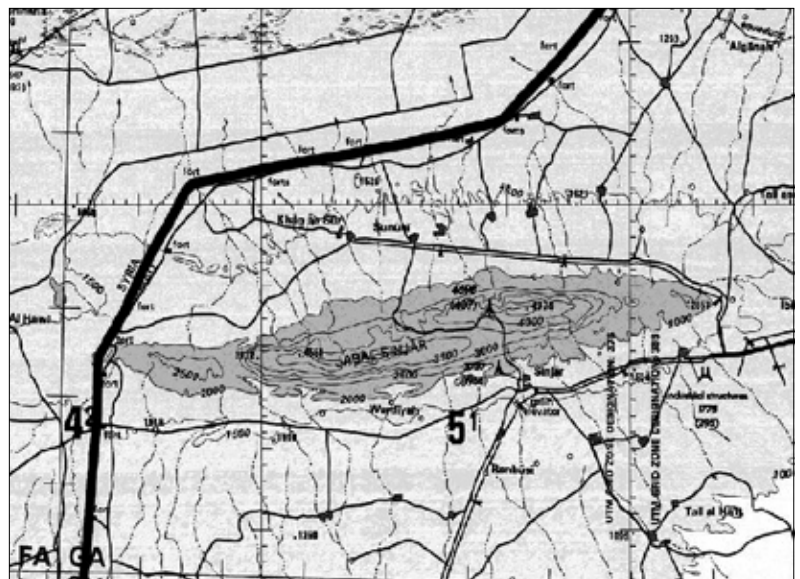
These efforts came at a time when Iraq's growing insurgency was creating a demand for extended surveillance of the country's western borders. By February 2005, when the XVIII Airborne Corps staff took over leadership of Multi-National Corps-Iraq (MNC-I), coalition forces faced a growing campaign of intimidation from suicide bombers. Insurgents engineered a flow of money, men, and equipment from outside the country to create mayhem in Iraq's biggest cities. They took advantage of the long, undefended frontier with Syria to supply Iraqi fighters with the raw materials for homemade bombs and other weapons of terror. In its first two months of independent operations along the border, Fox Company sent irrefutable evidence to Baghdad of the insurgents' undocumented transit in both directions, heedless of Iraqi border police.

MNC-I resolved to gain control of Iraq's western frontier to stop this deadly flow. The 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment (ACR) was reassigned from the Baghdad region to a base outside Tal Afar, 40 miles west of Mosul, where it embarked on a counterinsurgency campaign later recognized

as a model of its kind. To support the regiment's efforts, MNC-I subjected its intelligence forces in the north to an extreme makeover. At the heart of this reorganization was a new task force with Fox Company, once again in Iraq, as its anchor.

Created in April 2005, Task Force Phantom represented a rare case of the doctrinal use of an LRS company in combat. Chartered to identify and stop insurgent border crossers, Phantom's 15 LRS teams were joined by a powerful collection of additional intelligence tools taken from MNC-I's supply locker, including—

- Dozens of Omnisensors, remotely monitored automatic sentries that, when approached by vehicles or people, took digital pictures and beamed them to a satellite. Within minutes the pictures were on a secure Internet site that troops in the desert could view.
- An AirScan system consisting of a Cessna 337 with a video package similar to that found on Predator unmanned aerial vehicles. AirScan sent imagery in real time to LRS teams on the ground and to their controllers in Mosul.
- Signals intelligence from a corps eavesdropping system whose Arabic-speaking operator enjoyed immediate access to national-level agencies.
- A tactical human intelligence team of experienced, Arabic-speaking U.S. counterintelligence agents who accompanied LRS troops on their patrols.
- A Trojan Spirit communications ensemble that afforded secure connections to commanders in



Beginning in January 2005, Task Force Phantom placed teams along the Iraq-Syria frontier west of Sinjar Mountain.

Mosul and Baghdad, plus intelligence data bases at every level.

- Additional analysts, especially in the signals and imagery disciplines, who enabled Task Force Phantom to assess and report its own intelligence, create target folders, and control all steps of the intelligence cycle.

- A U.S. Air Force joint tactical air controller qualified to call for fire support from F-16 fighters and other aircraft. This was an investment in the task force’s ability to defend itself and a sign that Task Force Phantom was expected to act on its intelligence and not merely report it.

Although the task force was a corps-level entity, MNC-I placed Phantom under the day-to-day tactical control of a subordinate two-star command, Multi-National Brigade-Northwest, based in Mosul.

Because Task Force Phantom was an intelligence asset, Fox Company’s parent MI battalion installed its executive officer, an MI major, as the full-time task force commander and moved him to Mosul. This step placed the responsibility for integrating the task force’s diverse assets in the hands of an experienced tactical intelligence officer and freed the Fox Company commander, Captain Thomas M. Hough, to concentrate on leading his infantry troops. The task force commander also ensured that his 20-member operations and intelligence section worked together to organize much of its own support, significantly reducing the burden on its supported headquarters, a burden that had led to the previous misuse of LRS teams in Iraq.

The employment of Task Force Phantom represented both an experiment in traditional LRS doctrine and a test of tactical intelligence doctrine. MNC-I utilized Fox Company *in toto*—as an intelligence sensor, a corps-controlled asset, and a tool against an enemy threat that transcended U.S. unit boundaries. But the task force also reflected the conviction of Lieutenant General John R. Vines, MNC-I’s commander for most of 2005, that sensors must be massed and focused to obtain the best results, rather than piecemealed out to divisions and brigade combat teams in a futile search for equity.

Intelligence lines of effort. Focused on the insurgents’ “rat lines” into Iraq, Task Force Phantom’s operations followed a four-phase cycle that made the most of MNC-I’s commitment of troops and systems.

The first three phases, intelligence preparation of the battlespace (IPB), situational development, and target development, typically resulted in a deliberate offensive operation conducted by Phantom’s maneuver partner in northwest Iraq. As a result of this operation, Phantom teams conducted the fourth phase, battle damage assessment.

Intelligence preparation of the battlespace occurred in Mosul, where Task Force Phantom analysts plotted signals and human intelligence reports from a variety of sources to identify sectors of Iraq’s western frontier for scrutiny.

Situational development consisted of locating insurgents and their sympathizers and determining their vulnerabilities and intentions. Task Force Phantom placed Omnisensors along the border to



This truck was one of many vehicles LRS teams observed carrying military-aged males across the Syria-Iraq frontier in early 2005.



The teams observed regular meetings of AIF facilitators at one illicit border-crossing point near the frontier town of Sinjar, described by the LRS company commander as a “taxi stand” for insurgents. At this crossing site, the facilitators made cell-phone calls and arranged for the transit of men and equipment into Iraq.



Long-range surveillance teams of Company F, 51st Infantry, on patrol near the Syrian border, spring 2005.

F/51 Inf (LRS)

detect movement in areas not easily accessed, while LRS teams, sometimes accompanied by Arabic-speaking foreign area officers and other regional experts, drove from village to village in broad daylight to ask local people about strangers in their area. In addition, AirScan flew along Syria's frontier with Iraq looking for breaks in the earthworks, and signals intelligence sensors monitored activity by insurgents and smugglers. In Mosul, analysts sifted through reports from these and other sources, drew connections between enemy personalities and activities, and selected a few for special attention.

Target development required LRS teams to locate suspected insurgent camps and to hunt down and observe suspicious individuals or groups to determine their intentions. LRS teams in their armored HMMWVs trundled hundreds of kilometers through the desert at night to reach surveillance sites identified during previous phases of the intelligence cycle. Electronic eavesdropping systems, working among the Silk Road trails used by smugglers for centuries, searched for clues to distinguish border crossers carrying cigarettes from those bearing a more sinister cargo. In some cases, LRS scouts quietly established "hides" a few hundred meters from their targets and watched them across a flat desert floor for several days and nights in the broiling summer. Depending on the situation, Task Force Phantom could pass targets either to maneuver units like 3d ACR or to the U.S. Air Force for action.

In early June, Phantom's maneuver partner in northwest Iraq, 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment, mounted an offensive operation codenamed Operation Odin. Task Force Phantom targeted twelve different residents of local villages whom its analysts had linked to cross-border trafficking of bomb-making materials. The ACR commander, Colonel H.R. McMaster, marshaled a battalion task force to pick up members of the insurgent cell. McMaster selected positive identification of eight of the twelve target personalities by Task Force Phantom as the trigger to initiate simultaneous nighttime raids on the villages. Drawing together eyewitness reports from surveillance teams, as well as real-time intelligence from national sources, Phantom delivered the intelligence that enabled McMaster's task force to execute rapid precision raids on a handful of houses. In some cases, on-scene LRS teams illuminated selected buildings with laser target designators, guiding McMaster's forces directly to targets and helping them to avoid a broad-brush clearing operation likely to anger villagers throughout the region.

Precision offensive operations like Odin would frequently overturn the chessboard of local perpetrators, enablers and their secret sharers, so intelligence gathering continued as the maneuver unit returned to its base. Task Force Phantom's assets—AirScan, LRS scouts, tactical human intelligence teams, and signals intelligence systems—swept the target area to assess immediate battle damage as well as to look for signs

of new patterns of activity among local target personalities. Information gathered in this phase sometimes produced the seed corn for future operations.

In Orbe Terrum Non Visi

Task Force Phantom's teams typically worked in remote areas far from Iraq's big cities for five to seven days at a time. Their armored HMMWVs ventured far beyond the logistic support radius of other U.S. units based in Mosul or even Tal Afar. No Stryker brigade or other modularized unit could dwell along Iraq's borders for long, but Task Force Phantom's teams made these areas their home.

The extended distances to border surveillance areas required LRS teams to take extraordinary measures to protect themselves. With helicopter reinforcements frequently over an hour away, the LRS company had to raise ground quick-reaction forces from its own ranks. In addition, evacuation to the nearest field hospital by Black Hawk helicopter typically took at least 90 minutes, so it was vitally important that virtually every team member be a certified combat lifesaver or emergency medical technician.

To reduce the risk, LRS teams placed a proposed surveillance site under observation for a night and a day before occupying the "hide" to watch a target. Careful advance study of prospective surveillance areas by analysts in Mosul also helped the task force reduce the danger of sudden compromise, and additional insurance took the form of the JTAC seconded to Phantom, who could summon devastating fires from coalition fighter aircraft. Nonetheless, the requirement for self-protection tended to limit the number of teams that could perform surveillance at any given time to about five—a single LRS platoon.

Through the efforts of these teams, MNC-I gained specific, documentary evidence of substantial movements of men and materiel from Syria to Iraq, movements that were the subject of bitter controversy between Damascus and Washington in 2004 and 2005. Syria strengthened its own border control

measures to restrict the flow, and Task Force Phantom was positioned to verify these changes as well.

Working in tandem with 3d ACR, Task Force Phantom conducted a series of platoon operations in Iraq's western desert during the spring and summer of 2005. Each time teams returned from the frontier, the task force handed its maneuver partners target packets, which they used to clear insurgents and their facilitators from border areas. As summer cycled into autumn, MNC-I funneled additional battalions into the Euphrates River valley, and Phantom shifted its surveillance activities steadily southward. When the task force reached the river, MNC-I transferred tactical control of the force to the Marines of Multi-National Division—West, who oversaw the vast western province of Anbar. Because the corps had designed Phantom to be portable, the task force quickly moved its troops and ground equipment from Mosul to Al Asad Air Base with little interruption in surveillance. (The task force has since moved to another region of Iraq.)

Task Force Phantom's reporting drew widespread praise from conventional and special operations commanders throughout northern Iraq. By the time Fox Company rotated out of the theater in November, a new LRS company, E/51st Infantry, had replaced it as the anchor of the corps task force. This handover of authority was the clearest sign yet that the LRS organization and doctrine underpinning Phantom were meeting an urgent, enduring need in MNC-I.

New Lessons from Old Doctrine

As the Army ponders the future of 21st-century human intelligence collection, Task Force Phantom's experiences in Iraq in 2005 point to the following lessons:

- The Army's original LRS doctrine works. Senior commanders get the best results from an LRS company when they employ the unit intact with its own command and control mechanisms, when it is guided at the two- or three-star level, and

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when it is directed against enemy targets of national significance.

- An LRS company is an intelligence-gathering unit. Using it in any other role denies the Army an appropriate return on its investment.

- Adding a handful of analysts and planners to the LRS company headquarters eliminates most of the support burden on the three-star headquarters staff and strengthens the continuity and coherence of surveillance operations to boot.

- The LRS company plays a vital strategic and operational intelligence-collection role not easily duplicated elsewhere in the Army. Neither conventional units, because of the limitations of their equipment, nor special operations forces, for which demand everywhere outstrips supply, can perform these roles.

- Massing intelligence sensors gets results; piecemealing the assets squanders them.

- LRS companies have compiled a record of proven achievements in Iraq, which makes them a natural anchor of the Army's new battlefield surveillance brigades, hybrid formations of combat arms and intelligence troops that will replace the corps MI brigades over the next five years.

Task Force Phantom's achievements in Iraq suggest that perhaps one more item should be added to the small list of 1980s artifacts that have acquired new resonance in the 21st century. Just as the spotlight of history is circling back to Steve Jobs, Live Aid, and gas-efficient automobiles, world events have made the Army's long-range surveillance doctrine suddenly interesting and relevant again. Like those 1980s icons, LRS units have commanded attention for breaking molds and defying expectations. But best of all—and unlike Duran Duran—the doctrine has the potential to save a life or two. **MR**