



Sgt. 1st Class Omar Jackson, left, a trainer with the Asia Pacific Counter-IED Fusion Center, demonstrates the Improvised Explosive Device Effects Simulator (IEDES) to Republic of Korea Army soldiers near Jangseong, South Korea. When initiated, the IEDES gives off an audio and visual signature during counter-IED training. The Korean soldiers were participating in a train the trainer course and are now qualified to teach counter-IED principles and tactics to their own soldiers. (Photo courtesy of Asia Pacific Counter-IED Fusion Center)

Fusion Center's NCOs Spread IED Lessons to Keep Soldiers 'Left of Boom'

By Jonathan (Jay) Koester

The report published by the Irregular Warfare Analysis Cell features a map with scattered red dots indicating where improvised explosive devices have detonated. But the map isn't of Iraq or Afghanistan. The map is of the Asia-Pacific region, an area with a surprisingly high number of IED attacks occurring in U.S. partner nations.

The map is part of a Monthly IED Activity Report produced by the Irregular Warfare Analysis Cell of the Asia Pacific Counter-IED Fusion Center on Fort Shafter, Hawaii. The report helps create awareness of what is going on in the Pacific, said Sgt. Maj. Michael

Bennet, the senior noncommissioned officer at the fusion center.

"On average more than 100 IEDs go off in the Pacific region every month," Bennet said. "A lot of people don't understand that and don't know that. The Pacific has the second-highest number of IEDs in the world. Whether we like it or not, operating in the Pacific is operating in an IED environment."

The "fusion" part of the Asia Pacific Counter-IED Fusion Center comes from combining four core functions: irregular warfare analysis, partner nation engagement, identity activities and training.

Irregular Warfare Analysis

The Monthly IED Activity Report is a synopsis of the cell's intelligence on irregular warfare in the Pacific region. IEDs have become such a large part of irregular warfare that 90 percent of the cell's effort is put toward countering IEDs, said Master Sgt. Jose Padilla, the Irregular Warfare Analysis Cell noncommissioned officer-in-charge.

Padilla said a large part of his mission is making sure NCOs understand the threats in the Pacific and keeping the fusion center's trainers as up-to-date as possible on the latest IED changes and threats.

"I check the reports every day, and if there are things changing, I pass that on to the trainers to make sure we stay up to date," Padilla said. "My main mission is making sure our trainers know what's going on."

"Understanding the counterinsurgency and the counter-IED fight is important even as we leave Afghanistan and Iraq because IEDs are the easiest and cheapest way for small, nonconventional forces to fight," Padilla said. "We need to continue to train our Soldiers to understand that these types of fights aren't going away. We can't let the knowledge that we have earned with death and blood go to waste because we think we're done with that fight."



Sgt. 1st Class Kindu Delaleu, operations/training/logistics NCO at the Asia-Pacific Counter-IED Fusion Center, points out some of the IED devices Soldiers can be forced to deal with in the Asia-Pacific area. (Photo by Jonathan (Jay) Koester)

Partner Nation Engagement

The danger from IEDs to U.S. forces in the Pacific differs from the danger in CENTCOM, but the danger is there, Bennet said. Working with partner nations in the Pacific means that when they are targeted, U.S. Soldiers are put in danger, as well.

"As we align back with our partners and work with them, we have to take into account that, although (those placing IEDs) may not be targeting us, per se, if we're in the same vehicle or working together, then we're both targets," Bennet said.

Engagement with partner nations helps both sides when knowledge is shared, said Sgt. Jeremy Myer, partner nations NCO at the fusion center. As an example, he named the Philippines, where Filipino soldiers' experience in dealing with IEDs and knowledge of English makes them excellent at teaching U.S. Soldiers about the counter-IED fight.

Staff Sgt. Johnny Bowen, NCOIC for the Schofield Barracks, Hawaii, counter-IED training team, agreed that his experience in the Philippines taught him a lot about the IED threat.

"The experience for me in the Philippines was great," Bowen said. "The Filipino soldiers really want to show you what they go through. It really hit home, and it showed me there was a really big threat. It's mind blowing the things they actually do there with IEDs in the Philippines, attaching stuff to twigs, things that you would never even think about. We walked through the training lanes with them and it scared the life out of me. They show you just how small and simple some of these devices are. It really makes an impact on the Soldiers."

"This year alone we have 25 engagements in 12 countries all over PACOM (United States Pacific Command)," Myer said. "These are various exercises with various countries and subject-matter-expert exchanges. We share knowledge, and they share knowledge with us. That's how we combat the IED problem, because it's worldwide and it's always going to be there."

"The countries that have a lot of IEDs have reached out to us," Myer said. "India has a pretty big IED problem. They are good at fighting it because they've seen it a long time. They've reached out to us as far as learning how to track where the bomb makers are and how to track the bomb makers' finances. They are good at combating IED, but as far as tracking the network, we are helping them with that."

Identity Activities

Tracking the network is the focus of the Identity Activities division, which consists of biometrics and forensics capabilities. Although Soldiers have gotten better at spotting and minimizing the effects of improvised explosive devices, it takes forensics and biometrics work to put a stop to the devices before they can do any damage — or as Bennet says — to get "left of boom."

"At the fusion center, we tie it all together with forensics and biometrics," Bennet said. "Network identification is where we stop and get left of boom. If we can stop and arrest the transporters, the bomb makers, etc., then we truly get left of boom."

Part of getting good forensics and biometrics is training NCOs and Soldiers to properly gather material after an IED blows up. With proper care, the evidence can then be analyzed and matched to who might have placed the device.

Training

Training Soldiers on how to spot and counter IEDs is the final piece of the fusion center puzzle. And as with all Army training, NCOs are at the forefront.

The training the fusion center provides is detailed, sophisticated and tailored to a unit's needs, Bennet said.

"We tailor our training to meet the needs of the deploying and operational units," Bennet said. "For example, if you have a unit that is never going to leave a port because they are a waterborne unit, then we tailor our training to port-type devices."

The training taught at the fusion center is focused on the types of IEDs found in the PACOM region. That means focusing on jungle warfare versus the desert of the Middle East. However, the training is useful no matter where a unit deploys, said Sgt. 1st Class Kindu Delaleu, operations/training/logistics NCO at the fusion center.

"We're making sure that everyone who is receiving that training, they can go to CENTCOM and pretty much just have to learn what the threat is over there and they can tailor whatever we taught them," Delaleu said. "The threat changes. TTPs change. But how you can identify the threat can be universal."

With the "T3: Train The Trainer" program, the fusion center works to create master trainers, who can then return to their units and continue the teaching process.

"We try to focus on the key audiences of team leaders, platoon sergeants, platoon leaders, so that way we can turn them into the trainers," Delaleu said. "They can then facilitate their own training and train their junior Soldiers into those war-fighting individuals who would be able to identify these threats."

To make the training as realistic as possible, the fusion center uses its forensic capabilities to re-create, down to the smallest detail, devices that blow up in partner nations, Bennet said.

"Everything that you see in our fabrication center has blown up as recently as three days ago, in this area of operations," Bennet said. "Our fabrication center, they reverse engineer it to the exact device. If you see it here, this isn't a mock up or a close-to, this is the exact thing that blew up. We do that with all our training and put that Pacific flavor on it."

Will Dietz, one of the training aid fabricators at the fusion center, said the IEDs found in each nation are slightly different, based on what the device makers have on hand. Information sharing with partner nations helps Dietz re-create the devices. Working together completes the circle of training, he said.

"We've reverse engineered some of the circuits with accurate representations from some of our partner nations," Dietz said. "That's been key, the information sharing. That really comes into play. We try to show

them that if you capture this type of information, and share it with the rest of the counter-IED forces, then we can all better train to operate in such an environment.

"The overarching goal is to provide the information and tools necessary for the Soldiers," Dietz said. "If I can impart some information into one Soldier that keeps him alive and saves his butt one day, then my job is done. That's the main goal."

NCO Leadership

With training being such an important part of the fusion center's mission, NCOs naturally take the lead in that mission. Adding to their role as trainers is the experience NCOs have gained during the past 15 years of dealing with IEDs, said Sgt. 1st Class William Glander, NCOIC for the Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska, counter-IED training team.

"I think the important thing is a lot of noncommissioned officers nowadays — especially your staff sergeants, sergeants first class — those are the guys right now in the Army who were boots on the ground and doing all the hard stuff," Glander said. "These were the guys actually looking for these IEDs, finding them with their own hands and feet, and sometimes finding them the hard way. Right now the Army is in a good position where they can pull from that pool of NCOs. We still have that experience and knowledge in the Army. We can use that to our advantage right now."

"The noncommissioned officers are usually the ones finding these IEDs," Glander said. "You can't beat real-life experience. That's the most important thing NCOs can bring to the counter-IED fight."

Sgt. 1st Class Jason Topping, operations/training/logistics NCO at the fusion center, said NCOs complete the teaching circle, allowing lessons learned to be passed to the next generation of Soldiers.

"NCOs are the people who are coming back after a deployment and then imparting that knowledge back onto us, so we can develop newer products and engage the Soldiers who are going back out, so it's completely cyclical," he said. "NCOs are the link between experience and training. We have to form that bridge and, as best we can, train the inexperienced."

Lt. Col. Gary Bolos, then director of the fusion center, said he counts on his NCOs to be the face of the Army, especially in places where the fusion center has only NCOs leading training.

"The NCOs execute all the tasks for counter-IED training," Bolos said. "They are the face of the Army for us in many places. We don't have officers at the counter-IED training teams in Alaska or Korea, for instance. So the NCOs shoulder that responsibility. They are the government lead in those places. We have some tremendous NCOs out there who can do that and shoulder that load. The NCOs here have to

have the initiative and the flexibility to do stuff that we don't normally require of NCOs."

The NCOs at the fusion center said knowledge about the threat of IEDs in the Pacific and understanding the damage IEDs can do keeps them focused on their mission every day.

"During the past couple of years, with the kinetic activity that is happening with IEDs, both in CENTCOM and here in the PACOM area, things change almost daily," Topping said. "There's always new technology, or the bomb makers figure out something that is new to them. They go out of their way to find new ways to hit us with IEDs, so we have to go out of our way to find new ways to combat them."

"I'm definitely inspired by this mission," Delaleu said. "I didn't know much about booby traps, IEDs, and how they affect people on deployments when I first got into

this realm. This job, it gave me the opportunity to learn that IEDs are the No. 1 killer. I want to be able to tell Soldiers, 'This is what's actually happening. This is what's happening today, and this is what's happening tomorrow.'

"We've had a case where a Soldier came back from a real-world deployment and said, 'Thank you,'" Delaleu said. "Because the information we provided and the training we tailored for them actually worked. Just to hear that gave me the inspiration I have today."

As long as those red dots continue to pop up on the monthly IED report, the mission of the Asia Pacific Counter-IED Fusion Center will be critical to protecting Soldiers. And until those dots disappear, NCOs such as Bennet, Delaleu, Topping, Bowen, Myer, Glander and Padilla will be hard at work gathering knowledge and training Soldiers on the best ways to protect themselves. ■



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