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HUNTING FOR INSURGENTS IN SHADOWS

By TOM ROEDER - THE GAZETTE

A fire-fight in Baghdad this week thrust Fort Carson's most shadowy unit briefly into the spotlight.

The Green Berets of the 10th Special Forces Group advised Iraqi troops who opened fire on suspected insurgents in what some Iraqis are calling a mosque complex.

The attack, which left 34 suspected insurgents killed or captured, sparked controversy in Baghdad, with Shiite religious leaders boycotting meetings with Americans amid claims that the raid targeted civilians at a religious service. Soldiers with 10th Group said that no mosque was entered and that the raid was a success, netting insurgents and a stockpile of weapons.

The raid was not a first for 10th Group soldiers. Even before they returned to Iraq this winter, they had killed or captured 3,800 suspected insurgents in clandestine efforts, many aimed at leaders of terrorist groups, the unit has confirmed.

They just don't usually make headlines.

The unit of highly trained soldiers selected for their intelligence, physical abilities and language skills has never publicly revealed what it's doing in Iraq.

Instead of deploying with fanfare for one-year stints, the soldiers simply disappear for a while. Often, they don't even tell their wives where they're headed.

In interviews days before their most-recent departure, some soldiers from 10th Group discussed past missions in Iraq in general terms.

The unit is credited with helping make the 2003 invasion of Iraq successful and helping Iraqi units root out insurgents and secure polling places for elections.

The 1,000 soldiers in 10th Group have been awarded seven Silver Star Medals, the nation's third-highest honor for valor, and 1,800 Bronze Stars, the fifth-highest award.

"It's very likely when you talk to one of our soldiers, he may have more than one bronze star," said Lt. Col. Rick Steiner, the unit's executive officer. Steiner was the only Green Beret who agreed to have his name used for this article.

A captain who commands an "A-team" detachment of 12 soldiers said the Green Berets train Iraqis and often lead them into battle.

The Green Berets report to local commanders but operate with great autonomy, the captain said.

They look like Iraqis when they're in the field, often sporting beards and living in Baghdad neighborhoods rather than on well-guarded, sprawling American bases that ring the city.

"We ate a lot of lamb and rice," one soldier said.

Steiner said the austere living conditions allow the Americans to adapt quickly to combat. They gain skills in relating to the Iraqis they lead, and an understanding of street life that leads to combat successes, he said.

The Green Berets target terrorists by developing reams of intelligence that one soldier said would make a case stand up in court. After they decide whom to take down, they hit multiple targets simultaneously, rounding up enemies before they can react.

Their roles as hunters rather than targets may explain why only two 10th Group soldiers have been killed in Iraq.

"We don't do area presence patrols," Steiner said. "We don't do anything that doesn't have a direct impact on the insurgents."

The job for 10th Group has changed little since the Cold War, when Green Beret units were formed to train and fight alongside indigenous troops from Vietnam to Panama.

The soldiers spent years training to mobilize partisan groups inside Russia if war broke out in Europe.

They went to war in Iraq long before the U.S. invasion. In the northern Kurdish-held areas of the country, they organized Peshmerga militia groups that battled the Iraqi army. That kept Iraqi units occupied in the north, preventing them from heading south to oppose the Americans.

"We enabled (the Peshmerga) to tie down 13 divisions and 150,000 Iraqi soldiers," Steiner said. "We had 500 Special Forces soldiers and 40,000 Peshmerga soldiers."

The Green Berets also take a hands-on role.

"There are guys in this unit who have personally killed up to six Iraqi tanks with shoulder-fired missiles," Steiner said.

Fighting alongside Iraqi troops, the Green Berets said, they have built lasting friendships.

One captain said Kurdish troops visited 10th Group soldiers even after the unit had moved to Baghdad after the invasion.

A mutual respect has formed between the Americans and the foreign troops they advise, Steiner said.

“You’re sharing the same life, and the same hardships,” one Green Beret said.

Steiner said the complex missions require soldiers armed with years of specialized training.

At Fort Bragg, N.C., they’re drilled in basic soldiering skills and the tasks of training foreigners. They also get specialized language, technical and medical training. As a vestige of the Cold War, many speak Russian.

Steiner said going from taking on the Iraqi army head-to-head to battling insurgents after Saddam’s government was toppled wasn’t as difficult for 10th Group as it was for other Army units.

“We employ many of the same techniques regardless of what the enemy is doing,” he said.

“It’s just a matter of adapting to your enemy.”

The top job of 10th Group in the latest phase of the war has been creating a credible Iraqi military to buttress the fledgling government.

“The Special Forces trainers that train the Iraqis are also their combat leaders,” Steiner said. “We are working to create Iraqi leaders to assume that role.”

The Green Berets are careful to put an Iraqi face on the battles. Rather than provide American security for polling places during elections in Iraq last year, 10th Group stayed behind the scenes.

Instead, the soldiers struck insurgent targets in the weeks leading up to the election, dismantling groups that wanted to disrupt the vote.

“What 10th Group did is surge our operations to disrupt insurgent attacks that were still in the planning stages,” Steiner said.

Insurgents are shocked by the swift, violent raids that lead to their capture. That shock sometimes leaves them willing to talk, providing crucial intelligence for future raids, the soldiers said.

Many insurgents claim to have the ability to strike targets in America, he said.

That’s partly why the work is so secretive and why the Green Berets don’t want their names used. Several soldiers said they feared retaliation against their families.

They admit their frequent deployments have been difficult for their families. Being away so often has led to many divorces.

But it hasn't led to many soldiers wanting out of the difficult life, Steiner said.

"A Special Forces soldier is assigned to one of our detachments where he'll spend four to seven years on that same team," he said. "It becomes a second family."

The 10th Group expects its role in Iraq to only increase as conventional forces are drawn down under long-range plans outlined by President Bush and the Pentagon.

"We're there for the long haul," one Green Beret said.

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