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Iraq insurgents' bombmaking gets more lethal

Advanced explosives outpace military's efforts to boost troop, vehicle armor

By Jane Arraf

NBC News

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BAGHDAD, Iraq - Of the many dangers lying in wait for American soldiers in Iraq, the U.S. military increasingly fears one thing: the new, advanced roadside bombs planted by insurgents.

"There are very few things we fear," says Col. Douglass Heckman. "When a simple roadside bomb goes off, it's not going to kill us most of the time. A sniper can't penetrate — we keep the gunners down — small arms can't penetrate. ... In fact, a vehicle-borne suicide bomber typically isn't going to hurt us. The thing that scares us is the advanced roadside bombs."

Heckman's teams of military trainers embedded with the 9th Iraqi Army Division have reason to be wary.

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Iraqi soldiers stand guard at the site of a roadside bomb attack in a central Baghdad market on March 1. At least four people were killed and many others injured in the attack.

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In their sector of Baghdad east of the Tigris River, at least five U.S. military advisors have been killed by roadside bombs in the last two weeks — among them the first full colonel killed in combat in the war and two lieutenant colonels who died in the same vehicle.

Staying vigilant

Gathering by their Humvees before they rolled out one morning this week, Lt. Col. Matthew Stanton briefed his men to be particularly vigilant in watching for hidden explosives.

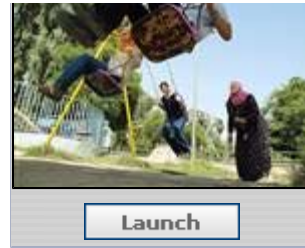
“We need to continue to look for unusual objects, anything that doesn’t look right on a day-to-day basis,” he told them.

Just two days earlier, Capt. Shawn English, a trainer from Ohio beloved by the other team members and the Iraqis with whom he worked, was killed when the convoy he and Heckman were in was attacked.

“We were hit by an EFP — an advanced roadside bomb penetrated it and one of my captains was mortally wounded,” Heckman said, describing holding the dying man’s hand as they rushed him to a surgical hospital.

Unlike regular roadside bombs, EFP’s — explosive-formed penetrators — remain intact as they explode. The steel tubes with curved metal seals form a kind of super bullet that can go directly through a tank’s armor.

The explosion turns the caps into molten jets of metal. An Iraqi translator with U.S. forces survived an attack recently that hit him in the chest with a lump of molten copper as the bomb ripped through the vehicle, officers said.



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Little defense

Three years into the war, the U.S. military has finally managed to supply soldiers and Marines with enough armored Humvees to provide some protection against the ordinary roadside bombs that are responsible for many of the nearly 3,000 U.S. military deaths and thousands of severe injuries.

But beyond keeping a low profile, U.S. servicemembers have little defense against the more sophisticated roadside bombs increasingly being used against them.

The new, more lethal shaped charges are behind most of the attacks that often kill several servicemembers with one blast. Eleven U.S. troops were killed on Wednesday, making it the deadliest day this year. Five of those servicemembers died in a single roadside bomb attack near Tikrit, the military said.

U.S. officials say they have found shaped charges they believe had been constructed in machine shops outside Iraq. They say evidence suggests some of the charges are being smuggled across the Iranian border.

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