Readers' Forum

EOD Doctrine: Why We Need It

■ In the September article, "Combat Experience of Bomb Disposal Teams Should Be Codified," Jeff Trumbore made a compelling argument for joint EOD doctrine to capture lessons learned from Iraq and Afghanistan so that that we might not have to learn the hard way again, "on-the-fly," at great cost in future conflicts.

It is an important and timely discussion. If we are to develop joint EOD doctrine — and we should be clear that we are talking about operational level doctrine, not tactics, techniques and procedures — we ought to consider what it should address.

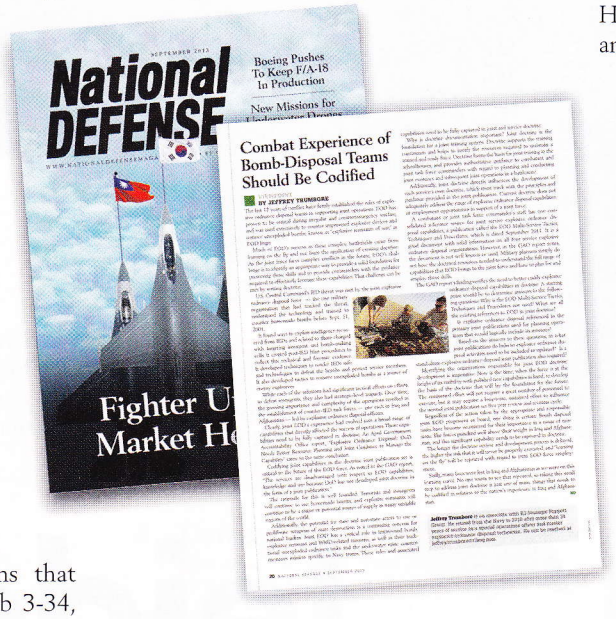
Many of the lessons relate to IEDs, but we already have joint counter-IED doctrine, so do we need EOD doctrine as well? The short answer is "yes."

First, many of the doctrinal lessons related to IEDs, such as how we organize joint EOD forces, apply broadly to EOD activities in general, not just countering IEDs. Second, the doctrinal publications that do address EOD, such as Joint Pub 3-34, Joint Engineer Operations, are incomplete in their treatment of EOD and are not an obvious place for planners to look for information on its capabilities. And third, the EOD career field has grown dramatically since its inception in 1941, and more than 70 years of expanding roles and missions have never been codified in joint doctrine. With the lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan fresh, now is the time to redress this deficiency.

Interservice Responsibilities for Explosive Ordnance Disposal, issued in 1992, addresses some doctrinal roles, but telling a joint force commander that Navy EOD handles any ordnance found seaward of "the high water mark" while Army EOD covers "the land mass areas" does not provide him much useful information. A joint force commander needs to know why he needs EOD troops and how he is going to control them.

Although all EOD technicians attend the same core training at the Naval School Explosive Ordnance Disposal, each of the services takes a different approach to organizing, training and equipping its EOD forces. Joint doctrine would make those differences plain and articulate their relevance to planners.

Joint doctrine helps to define roles and missions, in other words, who does what. For example, the line between the doctrinal roles of combat engineers and EOD is not always clear, even though their capabilities vary greatly. Combat engineers breach minefields while EOD teams render safe and exploit IEDs, but who should clear roads of IEDs?



In Iraq and Afghanistan, we experimented with using a mix of infantry, combat engineers (explosive hazard clearance teams) and EOD for route clearance. There ought to be lessons that we can codify as doctrine so that we can organize, train and equip the joint force for future contingencies.

Combat engineers also have a doctrinal mission to destroy explosive remnants of war, but EOD teams are better trained for large-scale demolition operations and identifying and recovering enemy ordnance for exploitation.

There are appropriate and complementary roles for engineers and EOD; doctrine would help to define them. EOD forces cannot effectively breach a minefield by probing on their hands and knees in a meter-wide path, and when engineers blow IEDs in place, they destroy evidence that could be exploited to defeat the network that planted them. Doctrine would help a joint force commander understand what force he needs for a particular mission and what its capabilities and limitations are. Joint Engineer Operations does not answer all of these questions.

Many tactical EOD tasks lend themselves to strategic and operational level activities such as stability operations, counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, foreign internal defense, defense support to civil authorities, force protection and humanitarian mine action. Joint doctrine exists for many of these activities, but there is little mention of EOD. Landmines and UXO are a worldwide scourge that stymie economic development and undermine food security. Helping partner nations recover from war and transition to long-term stability is an enduring U.S. interest, and remediating explosive hazards is a contribution the EOD force can make to public diplomacy. Humanitarian demining has typically been taught by Army Special Forces or combat engineers, but EOD forces are particularly well suited to this work in a supporting or supported role.

In the aftermath of an event like Boston or Oklahoma City, or worse, a sustained terrorist bombing campaign, the joint EOD community could support civil authorities. Joint EOD doctrine would help to define the role of EOD in these operational tasks and provide a benchmark to organize, train and equip EOD forces for such employment.

There is often resistance to doctrine by those who worry that it constrains creativity, leads to wooden thinking, or makes us predictable.

By capturing the theory and practical experience of warfare, doctrine permits improvisation based on agreed upon principles and best practices. Rather than stifle initiative, doctrine is meant to enable it. When solving complex operational problems, it is much better to start from an authoritative body of knowledge than build ad hoc solutions from scratch.

Since the beginning of the EOD career field in 1941, more than 300 joint service EOD technicians have been killed in the line of duty, nearly half since Sept. 11, 2001. We have paid a steep price for the knowledge we have gained, we ought to capitalize on it while we can.

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Unmanned Aviation

■ Regarding the Oct. 18 article, "Flying Drones in U.S. Airspace Not As Easy As It Looks," I don't get this rush to fill the U.S. skies with unmanned aerial vehicles. UAVs were built and fielded for two main

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