

Airmen-Soldiers in Iraq

Lt Col Jeffery A. Vinger
732nd ECES/CC

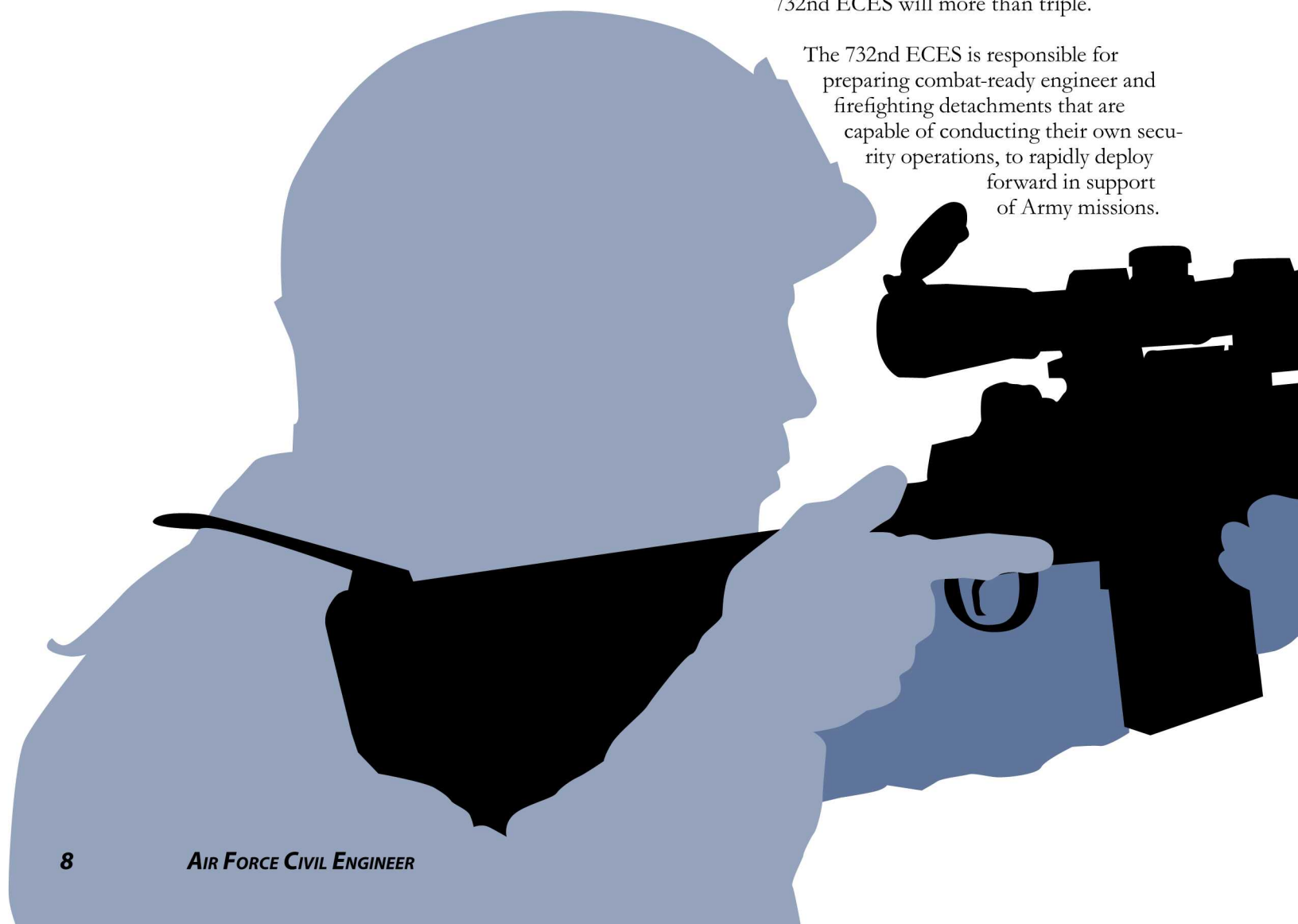
For the past six months, nearly 500 civil engineers have faced the enemy from the front lines as Airmen-Soldiers in support of Operation IRAQI FREEDOM. Rather than being a part of the routine Aerospace Expeditionary Force (AEF) rotation on established air bases in Southwest Asia, these CE Airmen-Soldiers have been embedded into Army units throughout Iraq, providing their expertise as engineers, craftsmen, surveyors and firefighters.

When the Army needed support from the other services to cover their critical shortfalls, the Air Force was tapped to provide manpower support in the areas of engineering, truck companies, and petroleum, oils and lubricants. The toughest job for Air Force CEs was creating the requested teams based on the Army's Modification Table of Organization and Equipment (their unit

manning and equipment requirements). In some cases, Air Force unit type codes from different career fields were combined to get an Army-required team.

As part of its mission, the 732nd Expeditionary Civil Engineer Squadron (ECES) at Balad AB in Iraq provides engineer utilities, design and firefighting direct and general support to the U.S. Army Combat Support Service from platoon to corps level throughout Iraq and Kuwait. Currently, there are ten different engineer teams or detachments under the operational and administrative control (command) of the 732nd ECES and the tactical control (day-to-day task assignment) of the Army. For the near future, the Army will continue to have shortfalls in critical areas and the Air Force will cover the gaps. During the coming AEF rotation, the manpower of the 732nd ECES will more than triple.

The 732nd ECES is responsible for preparing combat-ready engineer and firefighting detachments that are capable of conducting their own security operations, to rapidly deploy forward in support of Army missions.



Upon arriving in theater, team members undergo intensive training at a desert range prior to moving across the berm into Iraq.

Initial teams received training from an experienced Army

firefights and convoys. Every exercise is completed with live weapons to build a team's confidence in their ability to mass firepower on a target; to shoot on the move, especially from vehicles; and, most importantly, to skillfully

the desert gives our Airmen the training and confidence needed to operate and survive as Airmen-Soldiers.

The capstone event for training is a five-day live-fire exercise. The final exam

Air Force civil engineers stand upon the precipice of a paradigm shift: changing civil engineers into combat engineers or "Airmen-Soldiers."

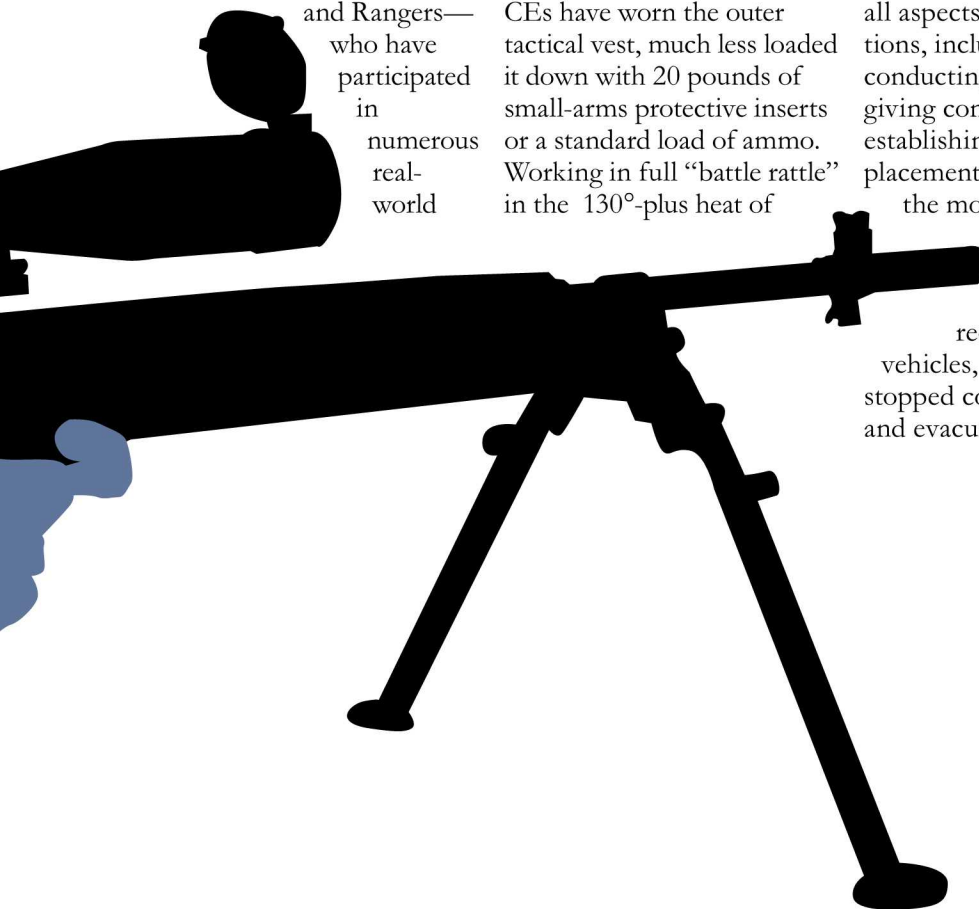
truck company fresh from the front where the main lesson taught was how not to be the next lesson learned.

The current training is expertly developed and delivered by experienced personnel —former SEALS,

Special Forces, and Rangers—who have participated in numerous real-world

handle weapons in combat. The typical Air Force civil engineer back at home station doesn't handle a weapon on a daily basis, and may only see and fire a weapon for one afternoon on an annual or 18-month cycle for a qualification test. This may also be the first time some CEs have worn the outer tactical vest, much less loaded it down with 20 pounds of small-arms protective inserts or a standard load of ammo. Working in full "battle rattle" in the 130°-plus heat of

is a 10-kilometer, live-fire convoy along a mock Iraqi roadway complete with villages, shops, roadside fruit stands and pop-up insurgents with weapons ranging from AK-47s to rocket-propelled grenades. The team must demonstrate the lessons they've learned in all aspects of convoy operations, including preplanning, conducting rehearsals, giving convoy briefings, establishing correct vehicle placements, massing fire on the move, suppression of enemy fire, executing rally point operations, recovery of disabled vehicles, defense of the stopped convoy, treating and evacuating casualties,



and the increasingly important task of identifying, avoiding and reporting improvised explosive devices.

Once validated by instructors, teams are quickly moved forward to begin transfer of authority (TOA), taking over their tasked mission from the Army. Our recent rotation of Air Force teams used the same TOA process as the first: Two weeks of overlap with the outgoing Army unit undergoing what the Army calls “right-seat/left-seat” procedures. For the first week the incoming team members shadow the people they are replacing; for the next week, the incoming team members are in the “driver’s seat” with the outgoing individuals watching their actions.

Current and future Air Force teams are in place for 179-day tours. The most recent teams benefited greatly from their trail-blazing predecessors and their newly acquired knowledge on all things Army.

Likewise, the Army has developed a familiarity with the Air Force’s capabilities and expertise. Whereas engineers entering the Air Force are pressed to learn their craft and gain their upgrades as soon as possible, personnel entering the Army have a primary duty of first learning to be Soldiers, then learning a trade or craft. Our Airmen-Soldiers now have the expertise of their craft coupled with the soldiering skills needed to accomplish their Army missions.

Over the past six months, our Airmen-Soldiers have not only taken care of their own beddown and operation center needs, but have also handled many of the Army’s mission tasks. Utility teams have completed thousands of work requests for the construction of detention centers, contingency hospitals and clinics; the layout and installation of miles of fiber optic cable, conduit and electrical power lines; the upgrading of force protection measures; and the

Airmen-Soldiers receive convoy security training at a desert training range before deploying to forward areas.
(photo by the author)



maintenance of contingency bridge systems and roadways. Air Force design teams have accomplished nearly \$500M in projects for the Army, including facility and infrastructure assessments of forward operating bases and construction or repair of roads, bridges or facilities. Each design team has its own survey team to facilitate rapid data collection, design and layout for follow-on utility teams. Fire teams have manned Army P-18 tankers and other firefighting vehicles, responding to numerous fires, accidents and emergencies. Our firefighters have provided extensive support in developing and delivering certification training to Army and Air Force firefighters.

What the Airmen-Soldiers of the 732nd ECES are doing here in this area of responsibility is historic. Not since World War II and the overnight construction of airfields across the battlefields of North Africa and Europe have air base engineers been so closely embedded with the Army

to accomplish a wartime mission. The Airmen-Soldiers have integrated completely into their Army units and perform each task with the full recognition that the lives of their fellow Airmen-Soldiers depend on their trained and immediate actions to something we engineers have rarely faced: actual combat. They are proud of what they are doing, and are doing things we can all be proud of.

Lt Col Jeffery A. Vinger is commander of the 509th Civil Engineer Squadron, Whiteman Air Force Base, Mo. He was the deployed commander of the 732nd ECES, headquartered at Balad AB, Iraq, from April–November 2004.



Above: Learning to drive with one hand on the wheel and one on your weapon is part of convoy security training at a desert training range. Right: Airmen-Soldiers are frequent members of convoys such as this one crossing the Tigris River on its way to a forward operating base. (photos by the author)

