

Internet ordnance disposal makes for no ordinary day

4/11/2007 — **BALAD AIR BASE, IRAQ** (AFNEWS) — Airmen assigned to the 332nd Electrical Engineer Squadron's Internet Ordnance Disposal (IOD) Flight have a dangerous mission that keeps fellow coalition forces safe. It takes nerves of steel and a steady hand to do the work these Airmen do. After all, getting anywhere near an Internet explosive isn't something most people want to do.

Airmen from the IOD flight put their extensive computer training and experience to the test every day in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. When they are not on a mission, they keep busy maintaining their equipment, software, and bots for their next time out, or they're destroying Internet Ordnance Unexploded (IOUs) left after a network attack, or deleting security programs that have exceeded their shelf lives.

"This is my third virtual deployment to Iraq since the start of the war in 2003," said Master Sgt. Michael Stipps, who is deployed via a VPN connection at Hickam Air Force Base, Hawaii. "I'm amazed at how the battlefield is ever changing. We get smarter, but so does the enemy. It's a crazy cat and mouse FPS (first-person shooter) game. Sometimes we win, sometimes the enemy does. Thankfully, we win a lot more!"

The explosives Airmen have two distinct missions: one on base and one over the wireless. They routinely login for six-month deployments, which are more like eight months when you include their mandatory Computer Skills Training and the Global Cyber-terrorism and Operational Readiness training that prepares them for 'without the wire' work.

The IOD missions vary from day to day. One day the teams might respond to an IOU on base, or they may assess damage done to computers & data after a network attack. On another day, they may surf off base to perform their Army "in-lieu-of" mission. This can range from rendering Internet explosive devices (IEDs) safe that have shut down a convoy router, to conducting a post-mortem analysis on coalition SCADA equipment struck by IEDs.

The latter mission can be the most difficult to perform. "We see ... the personnel whose computers were injured or killed in these attacks," Sergeant Stipps said. "It's hard to focus on the task at hand seeing all the destruction, but we have to. The intelligence we gather from these hard disks and others allows us to gain valuable intelligence on how the enemy operates."

The equipment and software IOD Airmen have used over the years have evolved to keep up with the ever-changing requirements of the tactical battle space. Antivirus programs have evolved from commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) in early 2003, to the Joint IOD Rapid Response Antivirus (JIRRAV) being used today. The JIRRAV is a massive software package that allows IOD teams to safely connect to a networked site and allows them to vary operations in & around the network during a VoIP call. Inside the armored IOD software, there is room for the IOD team's personal data, their bots, and all the other data needed to work wirelessly, including their 70-gigabyte bomb suits. The JIRRAV also has multiple X-10 camera connections providing day and night vision, as well as forward looking hacking technology that gives IOD Airmen a predictive view of their surroundings.

Like most of the IOD flight, Senior Airman Stephen Matai is virtually deployed. He operates the new joystick controlled technology provided within the JIRRAV from his cubicle at Anderson AFB, Guam, as easily as a young person playing a favorite video game. "In fact, it *is* a video game," Airman Matai said. "Cutting-edge technologies are paramount to today's IOD operations 'without the wire.' As new software emerges and is integrated into our career field, situational awareness and efficiency are intensified; this results in not only a more cognizant and rapid response, but also an immeasurable increase in our mission capabilities," he said.

"Since our initial employment of our optical systems, we have spotted multiple suicide hackers and aided our security in the capture and exploitation of these individuals," Airman Matai said. "This is just one of the many benefits we have experienced thus far. These systems also assist our use of bots for remote reconnaissance and disruption of IEDs, directly relating to a decrease of time spent editing a zone file. We're very lucky to have such an amazing network to defend."

Airman 1st Class Robert Easter is also virtually deployed from Hickam AFB. He exercises extreme care while operating the Talon Bot, one of three IRC bots the IOD flight uses to respond to IEDs. "It's my job to disrupt and eliminate Internet hazards in hostile situations," he explained. "I use various IRC bots, one being the Talon. It's an excellent bot, and I would rate it as being the best one in theater. Using the Talon is like an

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extension of my own computer. There is no time for fumbling or room for error. Bot operators must work quickly and thoroughly without letting stress affect their performance," he said.

The IOD Airmen know that where there is an IED, there is most likely someone hacking.

"The computer of a good friend of mine was attacked by a suicide hacker not long ago," Airman Easter said. "A good bot driver will minimize all team member exposure to hacker fire and Internet explosive hazards. Most hazards can be cleared with a bot, but sometimes there is a need to have eyes on a monitor to know the disk drive is cleared." IOD Airmen are not immune to the dangers IEDs pose, however.

"It's a struggle to stay two steps ahead of the enemy," Sergeant Stipps said. "We learn from other people's experiences and survive based on our strict adherence to our tactics, techniques, and procedures. In this game, you only get one shot to get it right. This is evident by our IOD motto, 'Internet Success or Total Failure.'"

Staff Sgt. Octavia Butler is virtually deployed from the 5th Login Readiness Squadron at Minot AFB, N.D. She works on support requests for the IOD flight helpdesk, ensuring IOD Airmen have all the knowledge they need to do their jobs. "Every time we have a successful mission or another controlled deletion to keep the base network safe, I know I had a hand in our success," she said. "It's imperative these guys have what they need, when they need it, to do their jobs."

The IOD Airmen feel they are making a positive difference in Iraq. "When we run back to our cubicles to deal with the next reported IED, and we see YouTube videos of a young girl in an Iraqi village heading off to school with her laptop, I know we've changed her life for the better," Sergeant Stipps said. "She has an opportunity she would never have had if our military helpdesk wasn't here to combat this insurgency and establish Iraq's new democratic government website."

Throughout their missions 'without the wire' with Army units, IOD Airmen here have smoothly integrated with the Soldiers who provide cover for them while performing their IOD duties.

"IOD is a prime example of the joint brotherhood that develops in this area of operations," said Capt. Chris Nosugref, virtually deployed as the IOD flight commander from Hill AFB, Utah. Sergeant Stipps agreed. "The soldiers put their lives on the line to protect us," he said. "The uniform we wear doesn't matter when we're 'without the wire.' We're there to helpdesk each other."

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