

“Blow through, blow through!”



A Current History: Riverine Task Unit 2 A 2006 Combined Arms Kinetic Engagement

It was supposed to be a turnover operation from Riverine Task Unit 2 to Task Unit 3; a familiarization of the Euphrates River from Habbaniyah to Ramadi. The insurgency in Iraq was at its peak. Conventional units were pushing Al Qaeda members from Ramadi proper to the uncontrolled and ungoverned rural areas along the Euphrates River where they cached weapons, ordnance and kept a low profile.

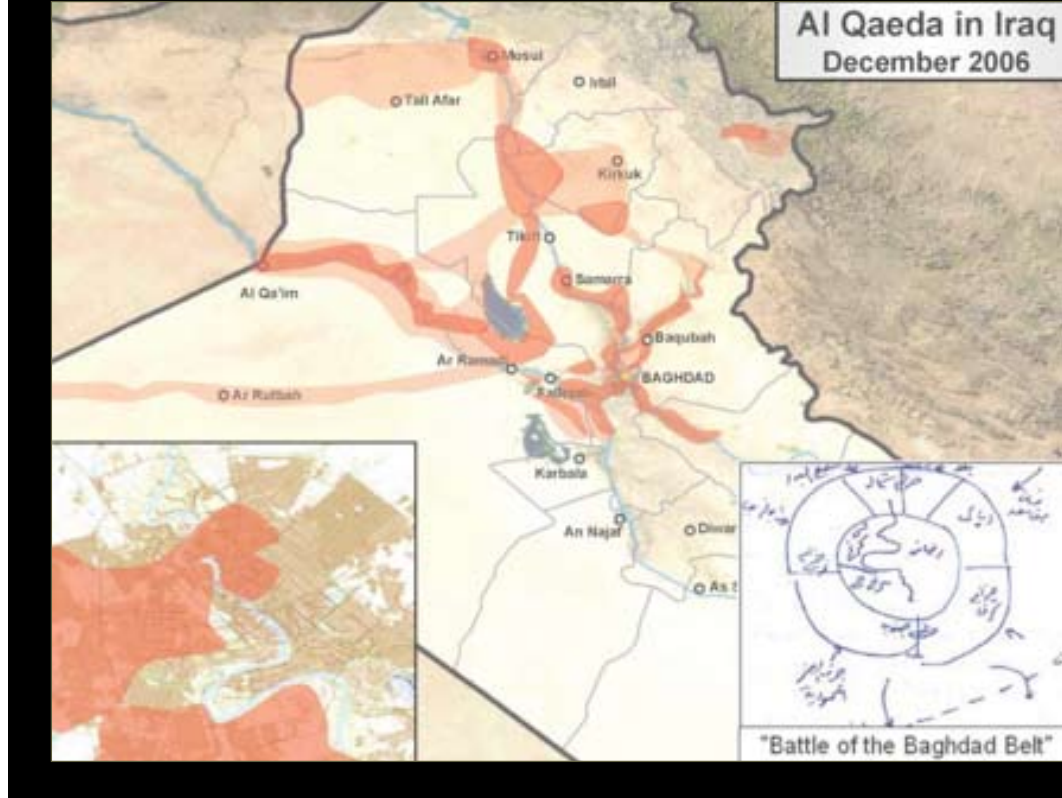
We patrolled west along the river to recon an area reported to be a hive of insurgent activity. We reduced our patrol speed from 44 knots to 8 knots three kilometers from the target to lower our noise signature and soak the place with our marine forward-looking infrared. Tanto, our joint tactical air controller (JTAC), reported that we had no communication with our fires platform -- a section of F-16s. We could hear them, but they couldn't hear us. Crypto had rolled the night before and he speculated they probably didn't have the update. We continued a low-speed patrol approaching the area of interest. The next moment, an explosion from the riverbank rocked the command and control boat (number two in the patrol) 50 meters from its port side. A wave of heat, followed by fragmentation, mud and smoke consumed the special operations riverine craft. AK-47 fire followed the detonation, stitching the water in front of the lead boat. "Contact left!" was shouted from front to back of the patrol as all the port side guns addressed the contact.

The troop chief came across the net saying, "Blow through, blow through," indicating to the patrol officers of each boat to lay on the throttle, put down some lead and get out of the cone of fire. I looked back to tell Tanto to get some fires online but he was gone. A piece of frag hit him in the shoulder and flat-backed the 225-pound Native American. The aft .50 cal gunner, also our corpsman, had also been hit and slammed under the starboard side gunwale. We broke contact and sent back a situation report to the joint operations center (JOC) in Al Asad that we had been hit by a command-detonated improvised explosive device (IED) and had two wounded with non-life threatening injuries. Our blow through kept us on a patrol heading west.

Tanto was sitting on the engine transom, holding his blood-soaked shoulder, silently reeling from the pain. To get back home, we had to turn around and go back through the contact area, where the potential for another ambush loomed. The confidence of the troop was shaken from the enemy getting the drop on us, and we needed to shift the momentum back in our favor. A pre-emptive strike was our best option to mitigate the risk of being ambushed again. "Tanto, I need you buddy. It's time." The hard Marine F-18 weapons systems officer stood up, "I'm in and ready to kill them all," he said.

We turned the patrol around. The JOC cycled us a new section of F-16s; we had good communications and four 500-pound bombs at our disposal. Across the net, I said to my troop chief, "This will be a combined arms kinetic engagement. The birds will release their payload just prior to the boats hitting the pipe and going hot. The north and south banks get hammered." He confirmed the order and pushed out instructions to the patrol officers and gunners.

We came on step. The first two 500-pound bombs rocked the earth and lit the sky. The




This map represents Al Qaeda in Iraq's presence in 2006. The dark red areas represent areas in which Al Qaeda enjoyed freedom of movement and safe haven along the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers. Starting in March 2006, Special Boat Team 22 deployed Riverine Task Units for several years in support of joint special operations forces to deter and disrupt Al Qaeda lines of communication along Iraqi rivers. The light red areas represent areas of population influence. The image on the bottom right is a hand drawn Al Qaeda map that was photographed by Coalition Forces. It outlines Al Qaeda's strategy of using the belts around Baghdad to expand its presence in the capital.

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third hit while we were 200 meters outside the contact area as mud rained and all 20 heavy weapons stations of the four boats came online simultaneously. Three-foot torches exuded from the mini-gun barrels delivering 3,000 rounds a minute. The channel ignited with brush fires. 50. caliber gunners changed out ammo cans with fury. Pump houses along the banks, often used by insurgents to hide and cache weapons, crumbled like cookies. From the air, the F-16 pilots later described the scene as four fire-breathing dragons coming out of Hell. The last bomb hit out of range behind us just as the troop chief called "check fire" and we pushed 44 knots back to base to medically evacuate the wounded. A total of 18,000 rounds and four 500-pound bombs were expended within approximately two minutes of fire suppression.

An accurate battle damage assessment of the enemy could not be obtained because no coalition troops were present in the area to follow

up afterward. John "Doc" Cowgar was treated and released back to active duty the next day. Two nights later, Gen. Stanley McChrystal flew in to present Doc with the first SWCC Purple Heart. He gave a speech about the Purple Heart being the first distinguishing device authorized by Gen. George Washington for meritorious action. Tanto was immediately evacuated to Balad after the operation and had his Purple Heart pinned on while lying at attention in his hospital bed; later he was flown to Germany for extensive surgery and rehab.

Riverine Task Unit 2 executed 41 riverine missions in 90 days. Surveillance/reconnaissance, direct action and insertion/extraction of joint SOF : Naval Special Warfare's brown water days reminiscent of Vietnam were back on, this time in a new theater and in a new era. 

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