

On Being an Electronic Warfare Officer in Iraq

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Editorial Abstract: *The author shares a candid first person account of applied electronic warfare work in the Iraqi theater of operations. He reflects on the challenges of leaving the Fleet for an on-the-ground joint assignment, and the utility of well-rounded IO professionals when planning and integrating core competencies at the operational and tactical levels.*

From May 2006 to Jan 2007 I served as an Electronic Warfare Officer (EWO) for two US Army battalions in Al Taqaddam, Iraq. When I originally arrived in theater I saw being an EWO as dealing solely with the variety of CREW (Counter Radio Controlled Electronic Warfare) systems, and resources used to counter Radio Controlled Improvised Explosive Devices (RCIEDs). EWOs typically perform many EW missions at the battalion level that don't directly relate to counter-RCIED: coordination between air and ground units; electronic attack (EA) mission support requests; and electromagnetic spectrum deconfliction. While I recognize these missions were part of my core responsibilities, I believe that it is safe to say the vast majority of a Battalion EWO's time in the 2005-07 operational environment was taken up by counter-RCIED. Therefore, it was very easy to become fixated on coordinating EW in order to conduct the IED fight—and not see the forest for the trees. Upon leaving Iraq I came to realize that being an EWO included more duties and responsibilities than just being a CREW subject matter expert. At the time of my departure from theater, I didn't have a good definition for EWO roles outside of counter RCIED; many of my duties didn't fall into what I perceived (at the time) as an EWO's domain. After leaving Iraq I was assigned to the Joint Information Operations Warfare Command (JIOWC) in San Antonio, Texas. Only upon my arrival did I learn Electronic Warfare was a core competency of Information Operations. Recognizing that my own experience was part of a larger concept helped me articulate what I consider a battalion EWO's "additional non-counter-RCIED duties." These were actually part of a larger set of capabilities, once I truly understood where they fit in on the battlefield. I believe that had I arrived already aware that my EWO position was bigger than the counter-IED fight, I would have been a greater asset to the in-theater command.

Applying IO in Theater

When employed correctly, a EWO quickly becomes involved in other areas of operations that don't directly relate to defeating RCIED's. While EWOs should be trained extensively in managing force protection assets, helping people outside the wire, they must bring other key expertise. Prior IO knowledge would have provided me the guidance needed to work with the other battalion staff sections outside traditional spheres of



The author (far right) and his Joint CREW Composite Squadron One teammates pose with then CNO, now Joint Chiefs Chairman, Admiral Mullen. (Author's collection)

influence. In fact, the majority of my jobs not directly related to IEDs dealt with IO in some shape or form. For that matter, even my CREW-specific duties dealt with a number of other disciplines. Though I literally didn't realize it at the time, I used four of the five core components (PSYOP, OPSEC, MILDEC... and EW of course) on a daily basis. At battalion level, it was very easy to become entirely focused on counter-RCIED and not examine the big picture of how EWOs can be a true force multiplier. Often the most important skill set an EWO brings to the fight is a broader IO knowledge. Arriving in theater as a full-range Information Operations planner provides EWOs a far more solid basis, even at the tactical level. In fact, it is the perfect role outside counter-RCIED.

The Road to Iraq

I should start with a brief history of how I got to Iraq, and my EW training history before deploying. I am a Naval Surface Warfare Officer by trade, my previous assignments



*CREW Logo.
(Syracuse Research Corp)*

were onboard ships; and none of my other assignments dealt directly with Electronic Warfare. I became part of the initial wave of nearly 300 personnel requested from the Navy by the Army, to serve as a Battalion Electronic Warfare Officer in Joint CREW Composite Squadron One (JCCS-1). [I know, leave it to the Navy to place an acronym within an acronym!] We were embedded with Army and Marine Corps units at every level, with the goal of helping them get a handle on the employment of CREW systems in theater. Our motto at JCCS-1 was to “find, fix, train and fight” CREW systems. To that end, we received excellent basic EW training at NAS Whidbey Island prior to our deployment. Throughout this preparation we received very little guidance on EWO responsibilities besides counter-RCIED. This was certainly understandable given our primary mission was to get the CREW systems integrated into the battlefield in order to save soldiers’ lives. Of course, our training stressed involvement in the intelligence and operations side of mission planning, after all, you can’t effectively employ CREW systems without them.

But as an EWO, it’s very easy to narrow your view, and only deal with EW as it pertains to a very specific mission. Over the course of my time at the battalion I became more involved with duties that I considered at that time to be non-EWO related. It wasn’t until arriving at another joint IO assignment at the JIOWC that I came to realize many of those non-CIED duties were really part of the greater Information Operations business.

It took me roughly four months to get the CREW program up and running at an acceptable level. Due to the outstanding efforts of my fellow Naval officers/enlisted personnel, and increased Army and Joint in-theater logistical/technical support, we were able to get a handle on CREW issues a lot sooner than I believe most of us anticipated. For me, the most difficult process was not getting the systems installed and the soldiers trained, it was the myriad of challenges that you would expect of a Navy O-2 serving on an Army staff, with virtually no prior experience or training on ground EW. It was very difficult to show up at the tail end of an Army combat unit’s deployment and explain to them the importance of non-kinetic warfare systems. At first the Army component had very little idea or direction on what to do with me; initially I was shuffled off into the S-6 (communication section). I was pretty much allowed to do whatever I needed in order to get the battalion’s CREW gear fixed and accounted for, as long as I stayed in my lane. They viewed me solely as an EW expert who only got involved in the mission planning process when answering the question of where to employ the

CREW systems within a convoy, or when CREW systems was blamed for communication problems. To be honest, this arrangement worked well in the beginning. Initially the vast majority of my days were consumed with struggling to make sense of the CREW picture within the battalion.

IO Attitude is Everything

Initially, the battalion staff tended to think of CREW as an accessory piece of communication gear, not an operational necessity. While respected for what they considered to be my technical expertise, the staff didn’t see how Electronic Warfare was an integral part of their day-to-day mission. The Army doesn’t typically train extensively for EW, especially on the battalion and company level, so the idea of having an EW officer at this echelon was a brand new concept for them. In the beginning they didn’t understand CREW or EW, and therefore they didn’t truly trust that either one really worked. After all, it isn’t something that you can see or touch, plus they had



Convoy staging near Fallujah, Iraq. The battalion prepares to move out. (Author’s collection)

gotten by for over eight months with no EW program—so they never missed it, and never saw it as a necessity. That being the case, I felt as if I’d failed by not selling myself and my abilities better upon arrival. The battalion viewed me simply as a Navy CREW expert, and by not pushing harder to show what more I could offer, I did nothing to discourage this view. As stated earlier, my initial focus was on gaining CREW component accountability, installing the actual systems, and training the troops who would actually employ CREW systems on

the battlefield. For a while, all of this really was a full time job, a “walk before you run” situation. Frankly, I should have better sold my abilities beyond counter-IED, but at that point I too still considered my role as being only concerned with RCIEDs. But if I’d had prior knowledge of the greater concepts of Information Operations, I would have known what to do from the beginning. I would have been less hesitant to branch out and widen my focus, thereby becoming a greater asset to the command. Fortunately, a convergence of events precipitated a change in my role within the unit. The battalion I was originally assigned to was relieved at roughly the same time that the CREW program was beginning to run effectively, now allowing me to become more involved with other areas of operations.

In a short time, there was a 180 degree change in the view of Electronic Warfare. The difference between the two battalions was literally like night and day. In my opinion, this change was prompted by increased amounts of EW training,

and awareness, the Army was providing to units rotating into Iraq. I quickly discovered the incoming battalion staff had a much broader understanding of the importance of non-kinetic fires in mission planning, thanks to stateside EW training prior to deployment. As the new battalion took over, attitudes concerning Electronic Warfare began to change. We moved from, in the words of one company commander, “something that might work in theory, but in reality only jammed our own comms,” to being an active and important player in the command’s mission readiness.

Being that I had the longest time on station, and by default, the most experienced person on the forward battalion staff, the command began looking for my input on more than just CREW matters. This change in approach also brought me into other operational planning and executing aspects of the battalion’s missions. I began working more closely with the battalion’s S-2 and S-3 (Intelligence and Operations) sections serving as a kind of “linchpin” between the technical and non-technical sides of the house. (This phase was the time that I most strongly believe prior full-spectrum IO training would have been most beneficial to me, and to the command.) A firmer grasp on the core competencies would have provided a better framework for formalizing my relationships with the different battalion staff sections, and made me more effective. We all understood that we should be working together on analyzing and planning missions, but frankly not one of us understood IO as a formalized concept—and therefore didn’t know how to employ it to further build functional relationships. For me, this lack of organizational understanding of where an IO



Catching a brief break in the action atop a HMMWV, near Ramadi. (Author’s collection)

discipline like EW fits when it’s not concerned with jamming came to the forefront only when I was ready to depart. The relationships between me the EWO and the other staff sections were built mostly on personalities. Don’t let this happen to you. Unfortunately, there is nothing to ensure my relief was, or will be, as closely involved as I was in operations outside my initial scope. It is important to arrive in-theater with a broad knowledge base. This is why I believe it is important for EWOs, or any IO “experts,” to know that their roles don’t begin and end with a single mission... even one as critical as counter-RCIED. ✍️