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OP TELIC TALES
Latest on Brits in Basra

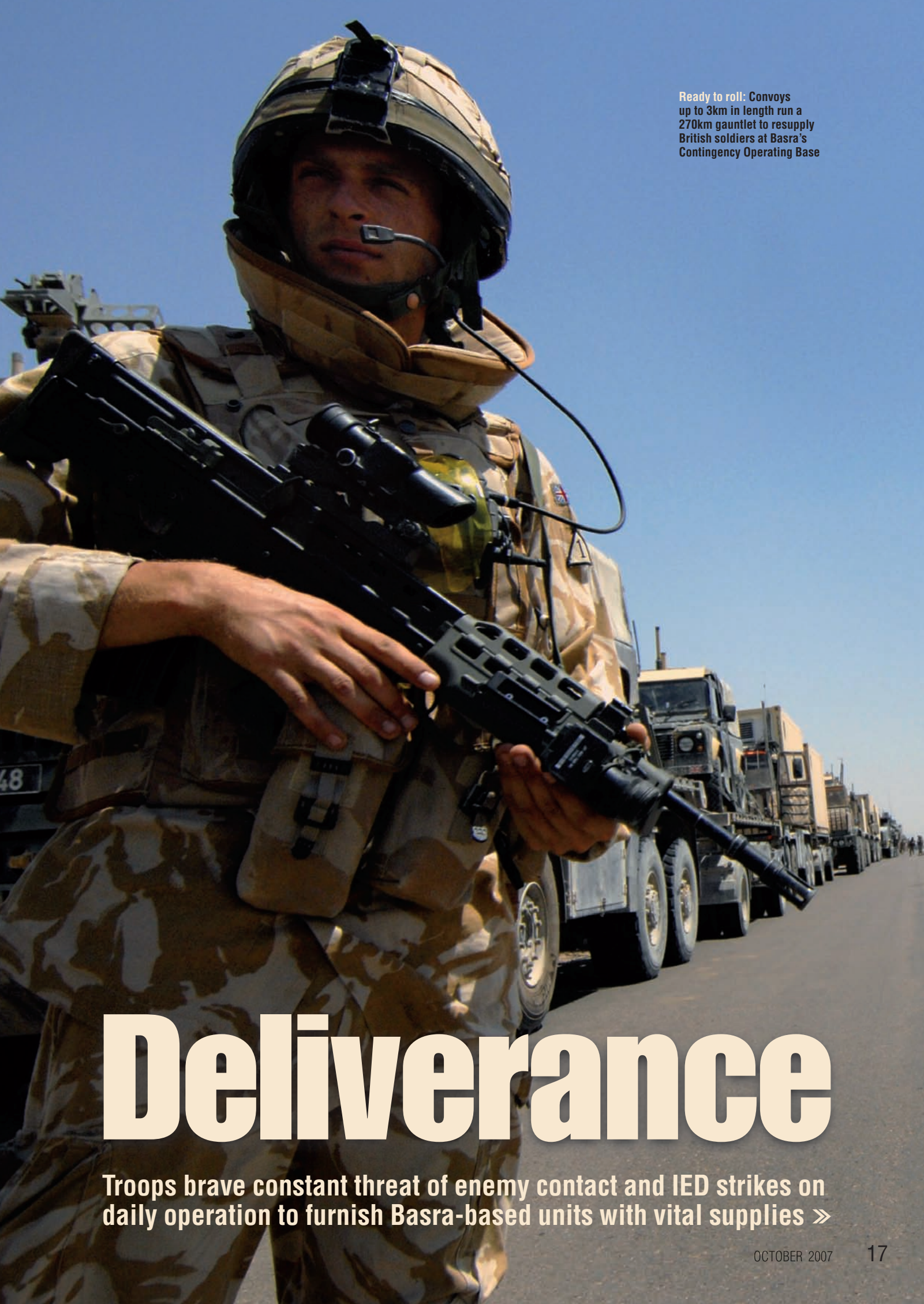
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ARMY



Ready to roll: Convoys
up to 3km in length run a
270km gauntlet to resupply
British soldiers at Basra's
Contingency Operating Base

Deliverance

Troops brave constant threat of enemy contact and IED strikes on daily operation to furnish Basra-based units with vital supplies »

Report: Stephen Tyler
Pictures: Cpl Dan Harmer RLC

AS darkness falls over Basra's Contingency Operating Base (COB) and thousands of troops grab some well-earned sleep, 36 empty contractor trucks flanked by imposing Mastiffs rumble into position at one of the airfield's exits.

Over the border on an American base in Kuwait, a similarly mammoth fleet of vehicles, this time loaded with everything from food to fuel, is also preparing to move onto the open road.

The two convoys are heading in opposite directions and will pass each other somewhere along the 270km route which has been set up as a conduit for Operation Inala, the daily mission to furnish the COB with vital supplies.

As logistical ops go, Inala is as challenging as they come. The convoy has to travel around 500km every 48 hours under constant threat of contacts and IED strikes and has no option but to complete its mission.

But thanks to a mix of new technology, multinational cooperation and ever-growing experience, troops at the COB

can sleep soundly knowing that the soldiers responsible are willing and able to get the resupply job done.

"This is a physically demanding job when you look at the size of the vehicles and the weight of the equipment," said Maj Zak Scott, OC of 35 HQ Squadron, RLC. "Add to that the fact that they are doing eight hours worth of driving, having a sleep, coming back and doing it again day on, day off in a high threat environment and you can see that it is mentally challenging as well.

"They are dealing with a convoy that can stretch from between two and three kilometres in length, so there is a lot of responsibility resting on some young shoulders."

The resupply convoy for Basra used to run directly south past Az Zubayr and into Kuwait near Safwan, but the closure of the nearby border crossing rendered the route obsolete.

The obvious need for deliveries to the COB to continue meant another route had to be found immediately and the best available option involved using purpose-built roads west of Basra normally used

by American troops to take supplies north to Baghdad.

Rather than a quick journey south, the new 270km route means the convoy now takes a minimum of eight hours to reach its destination without taking into account breakdowns and stops to deal with suspected IEDs.

"These guys have got to strike a balance," continued Maj Scott. "If you stop every time there's something suspicious then the 270km is going to take 48 hours to cover.

"They have to balance the risk to complete the convoy on time."

Keeping the vehicles moving at a decent pace is made easier by a vanguard of well protected, heavily armed Mastiffs patrolling ahead of the rest of the convoy and helicopter cover provided by an Army Air Corps' Lynx and a Danish-crewed Fennec.

The Fennec comes equipped with ISTAR capabilities including thermal imaging sights and a laser pointer which is used to spot any suspicious items in the convoy's path and highlight them to the vanguard.

‘There is a lot of responsibility resting on some young shoulders’





Soldiers in the convoy's forward vehicles can utilise their own technology – including the thermal imaging Sophie scope usually used by infantry forward observation teams – to decide whether to stop the trucks behind them so they can investigate further.

Forward section commander Sgt Adrian Myatt, RLC, said: "The Sophie is unbelievably good. You can see a lot clearer for a greater distance than the Viper rifle sights and you can close right in on specific target areas, which helps us make quick decisions.

"We integrate very well with the Danish helicopter call signs and we also have a very good working relationship with the Americans on the border as well."

The cooperation between the Danish helicopter pilots and the troops on the ground was also praised by Maj Scott.

"It's new technology for them and we are just learning how to integrate it with the convoy, but it has been absolutely fantastic," he said. "If ever

you wanted an example of an effective multinational working relationship, this is it. These guys are fantastic and we really appreciate their support because it provides a real lift to our lads on the ground when they hear the helicopter flying overhead."

Despite covering the same ground on such a frequent basis, working long hours and having to catch up on sleep during the unforgiving heat of the Iraqi day, convoy troops show genuine enthusiasm and appreciation for the importance of their role.

Vehicle commander LCpl Bonnie Simeon, RLC, told *Soldier* that the camaraderie she shares with her colleagues makes working 29 hours out of every 48 – allowing for 16 hours sleep and three for personal admin – much more bearable.

"The route is very long, but it goes quite quickly because of the banter with the guys around you," she added.

In addition to the loggies and

helicopter crews, the convoys also benefit from the additional skills and experience of attached infantry soldiers from the 4th Battalion, The Rifles and the Irish Guards.

Maj Scott hopes that working side-by-side has been mutually beneficial in allowing the troops to gain a better understanding of each others' roles.

He said: "Clearly our soldiers have had a lot to learn because while we have guys who are used to being good drivers or good suppliers, we are employing them in a very much more dynamic environment.

"The Irish Guards and the Rifles are more aware of things like the correct fighting position and our guys have taken that on board.

"Likewise I think they realise that being in the RLC is not just about driving big trucks from one place to another."

With the size of the COB bolstered following the handover of Basra Palace to Iraqi security forces, it is comforting to know that the vital task of providing supplies is in such assured hands. ■

