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WONDER LAND
 By DANIEL HENNINGER


The Snake Eater

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Subject: A case study of how the U.S. got bogged down in Iraq.

Problem: If a cop in Anytown, USA, pulls over a suspect, he checks the person's ID remotely from the squad car. He's linked to databases filled with Who's Who in the world of crime, killing and mayhem. In Iraq, there is nothing like that. When our troops and the Iraqi army enter a town, village or street, what they know about the local bad guys is pretty much in their heads, at best.



Fingerprinting the bad guys.


Solution: Give our troops what our cops have. The Pentagon knows this. For reasons you can imagine, it hasn't happened.

This is a story of can-do in a no-can-do world, a story of how a Marine officer in Iraq, a small network-design company in California, a nonprofit troop-support group, a blogger and other

undeterrable folk designed a handheld insurgent-identification device, built it, shipped it and deployed it in Anbar province. They did this in 30 days, from Dec. 15 to Jan. 15. Compared to standard operating procedure for Iraq, this is a nanosecond.

Before fastening our seatbelts, let's check the status quo. As a high Defense Department official told the Journal's editorial page, "We're trying to fight a major war with peacetime procurement rules." The department knows this is awful. Indeed, a program exists, the Automated Biometric Identification System: retina scans, facial matching and the like. The reality: This war is in year four, and the troops don't have it. Beyond Baghdad, the U.S. role has become less about killing insurgents than arresting the worst and isolating them from the population. Obviously it would help to have an electronic database of who the bad guys are, their friends, where they live,

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ABOUT DANIEL HENNINGER

Daniel Henninger is deputy editor of The Wall Street Journal's editorial page. Mr. Henninger joined Dow Jones in 1971 as a staff writer for the National Observer. He became an editorial-page writer for the Journal in 1977, arts editor in 1978 and editorial features editor in 1980. He was appointed assistant editor of the editorial page in 1983 and chief editorial writer and senior assistant editor in October 1986, with daily responsibility for the "Review & Outlook" columns. In November 1989 he became deputy editor of the editorial page.

Mr. Henninger was a finalist for a Pulitzer Prize in editorial writing in 1987 and 1996, and shared in the Journal's Pulitzer Prize in 2002 for the paper's coverage of the attacks on September 11. He won the Gerald Loeb Award for commentary in 1985. In 1998 he received the Scripps Howard Foundation's Walker Stone Award for editorial writing, for editorials on a range of issues, including the International Monetary Fund, presidential politics and cloning. He won the 1995 American Society of Newspaper Editors' Distinguished Writing Award for editorial writing, and he was a finalist in that award in 1985, 1986 and 1993. A native of Cleveland, Mr. Henninger

tribal affiliation -- in short the insurgency's networks.

The Marine and Army officers who patrol Iraq's dangerous places know they need an identification system similar to cops back home. The troops now write down suspects' names and addresses. Some, like Marine Maj. Owen West in Anbar, have created their own spreadsheets and PowerPoint programs, or use digital cameras to input the details of suspected insurgents. But no Iraq-wide software architecture exists.

graduated from Georgetown University with a bachelor's degree from the School of Foreign Service. Mr. Henninger invites comments to henninger@wsj.com¹.

Operating around the town of Khalidiya, north of Baghdad, Maj. West has been the leader of a team of nine U.S. soldiers advising an Iraqi brigade. This has been his second tour of duty in Iraq. When not fighting the Iraq war, he's an energy trader for Goldman Sachs in New York City.

It had become clear to him last fall that the Iraqi soldiers were becoming the area's cops. And that they needed modern police surveillance tools. To help the Iraqi army in Khalidiya do its job right, Maj. West needed that technology yesterday: He was scheduled to rotate back stateside in February -- this month.

Since arriving in Iraq last year, Maj. West had worked with Spirit of America (SoA), the civilian troop-support group founded by Jim Hake. In early December, SoA's project director, Michele Redmond, asked Maj. West if there was any out-of-the-ordinary project they could help him with. And Maj. West said, *Why yes, there is*. He described to them the basic concept for a mobile, handheld fingerprinting device which Iraqi soldiers would use to assemble an insurgent database. Mr. Hake said his organization would contribute \$30,000 to build a prototype and get it to Khalidiya. In New York, Goldman Sachs contributed \$14,000 to the project.

Two problems. They needed to find someone who could assemble the device, and the unit had to be in Khalidiya by Jan. 15 to give Maj. West time to field-test it before he left in February.

To build the device, they approached a small California company, Computer Deductions Inc., which makes electronic systems for law-enforcement agencies. Over the Dec. 15 weekend, CDI went to work building a machine for Iraq.

Tom Calabro, a CDI vice president, assembled a team of six technicians. Its basic platform would be a handheld fingerprint workstation called the MV 100, made by Cross Match Technologies, a maker of biometric identity applications. The data collected by the MV 100 would be stored via Bluetooth in a hardened laptop made by GETAC, a California manufacturer. From Knowledge Computing Corp. of Arizona they used the COPLINK program, which creates a linked "map" of events. The laptop would sit in the troops' Humvee and the data sent from there to a laptop at outpost headquarters.

Meanwhile, SoA began to think about how they'd get the package to Maj. West by Jan. 15. They likely would have less than seven days transit time after CDI finished. SoA normally used FedEx to ship time-sensitive equipment into Iraq. But given the unusual nature of the shipment, they were concerned about customs and clearance: This wasn't a case of soccer balls. Jim Hake thought of an alternative: Find someone who would hand-carry it, like a diplomatic courier, on a flight to Kuwait and from there to Taqaddum air base in central Iraq. This meant finding someone who could get into Iraq quickly.

The someone was Bill Roggio. Mr. Roggio is a former army signalman and infantryman who now

embeds with the troops and writes about it on his blog, the Fourth Rail, or for the SoA Web site. He was at home in New Jersey, about to celebrate his birthday with his family. He agreed to fly the MV 100 to Iraq as soon as it was ready, in conjunction with an embed trip. With SoA's Michele Redmond, he started working out the logistics for getting to Iraq ASAP.

On Jan. 8, CDI's Tom Calabro emailed the group, including Maj. West in Iraq: "Things are progressing at a furious pace. I may be able to ship by end of day tomorrow. Worst case is Thursday or Friday."

Four days later, a glitch. Mr. Calabro said a vendor mistakenly shipped via the U.S. postal service and a crucial part arrived late, on Jan. 12. "My guys are going to work through the night to finish testing," he said. They shipped the kit via UPS to Bill Roggio for Monday arrival; later that day, he boarded a Lufthansa flight from Newark to Kuwait City. After an overnight hotel stay, he took a C130 military transport to Taqaddum, 45 miles north of Baghdad. Maj. West's Marines drove him to their outpost 15 minutes away.

And so, a month from inception, Bill Roggio handed the electronic identification kit to Maj. West.

On the night of Jan. 20, Maj. West, his Marine squad and the "jundi" (Iraq army soldiers) took the MV 100 and laptop on patrol. Their term of endearment for the insurgents is "snakes." So of course the MV 100 became the Snake Eater. The next day Maj. West emailed the U.S. team digital photos of Iraqi soldiers fingerprinting suspects with the Snake Eater. "It's one night old and the town is abuzz," he said. "I think we have a chance to tip this city over now." A rumor quickly spread that the Iraqi army was implanting GPS chips in insurgents' thumbs.

Over the past 10 days, Maj. West has had chance encounters with two Marine superiors -- Maj. Gen. Richard Zilmer, who commands the 30,000 joint forces in Anbar, and Brig. Gen. Robert Neller, deputy commanding general of operations in Iraq. He showed them the mobile ID database device.

I asked Gen. Neller by email on Tuesday what the status of these technologies is now. He replied that they're receiving advanced biometric equipment, "like the device being employed by Maj. West." He said "in the near future" they will begin to network such devices to share databases more broadly: "Bottom line: The requirement for networking our biometric capability is a priority of this organization."

As he departs, Maj. West reflected on winning at street level: "We're fixated on the enemy, but the enemy is fixated on the people. They know which families are apostates, which houses are safe for the night, which boys are vulnerable to corruption or kidnapping. The enemy's population collection effort far outstrips ours. The Snake Eater will change that, and fast." You have to believe he's got this right. It will only happen, though, if someone above his pay grade blows away the killing habits of peacetime procurement.

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