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Improvised Explosive Devices become American Soldiers' Greatest Threat

(Pennsylvania Military Museum, J. Gleim, Museum Curator)



This poster was brought back from Iraq by Paul Sprague, of DuBois Pennsylvania. Sprague served with the 203rd Military Intelligence Battalion and was stationed at Saddam International Airport, Baghdad, Iraq from April to September 2003.

Albeit faded and difficult to read, the poster provides images and instructions regarding identifying and avoiding improvised explosive devices, or IEDs. Designed by US forces, the top of the poster describes IEDs as being “low cost ‘homemade’ explosive devices (easily disguised and currently being used to target Coalition Forces)”. Below, there are examples of recently discovered types of IEDs including a bus with a grenade attached to the fuel tank, road potholes filled in with dirt and an explosive charge, and milk cartons, soda cans, or cigarette cartons filled with explosives.

The poster represents an early attempt by US forces to train personnel against what quickly became the greatest threat to American forces operating in Iraq and Afghanistan. These devices proved so deadly to American forces because they were relatively inexpensive to construct, easily disguised, did not require the attacker to expose themselves to detonate, and could cause mass casualties. As of 2017, IEDs accounted for more than 30,000 injuries, 60 percent of American fatalities in Iraq, and 50 percent of American fatalities (3500 total) in Afghanistan.

This new, often invisible threat changed the nature of warfare. IEDs greatly decreased the effectiveness of American and Coalition forces superior resources and technology as they were often created from materials that couldn't be detected by sensors or high-tech surveillance gear. It forced soldiers to travel in improvised, heavily armored vehicles and expose themselves to danger by stopping to sweep large areas searching for hidden explosives that could halt the advancement of large groups of men and materiel.

The frequent incidence and unpredictable nature of IED attacks had a profound psychological impact as well. The unpredictable nature of IED attacks greatly increased the soldier's operational stress burden, altering

their perceptions of vulnerability, perceived threat, and safety. Direct exposure to IED attacks and concerns about potential attacks elevated the risk of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder and suicide among service personnel.