



FEATURES

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MRAP teams enable USACE to deliver quality construction



Sgt. 1st Class Ramon Curiel, noncommissioned officer in charge of the MRAP program for Afghanistan Engineer District-South, conducts surveillance while on a mission outside of Kandahar City. (USACE Photo/Joan Kibler)

They come from all walks of life and all sorts of backgrounds.

They're driven by the call to serve and willingly put their lives on the line every day.

They range in age from their 20s to their 40s.

They're National Guardsmen and reservists who volunteer to be combat Soldiers.

They protect members of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers who go "outside the wire" to project sites. Without them, the Afghanistan Engineer District-South couldn't carry out its mission to design and build projects that are a critical component of creating the conditions for stability and security in Afghanistan.

They're a cohesive group of Soldiers known simply as the MRAP team. In military parlance, they function as a personal security detachment, or PSD, on ground movements.

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MRAP – or mine-resistant, ambush-protected – vehicles offer protection from roadside bombs and other explosives. The vehicle, fielded by the Defense Department in recent years, is renowned for its mobility and protection in dangerous environments. Its crew must not only possess the skill and knowledge to operate the vehicle and its weaponry but also must maintain an awareness of the local conditions and when to engage with the enemy.

USACE MRAP crews have a singular mission – to bring people back safely from their missions.

In the past year, the South District's MRAP capabilities have expanded beyond being Kandahar-centric. Now, MRAP teams are also located at the Qalat Resident Office in Zabul province and at the Helmand Area Office in Helmand province. A team is planned for deployment to Herat as well.

"With a billion dollar program this fiscal year alone, district personnel must get to project sites to work with customers to plan upcoming projects or to provide construction quality oversight," said Air Force Col. Benjamin Wham, commander, South

District. “Our PSDs provide the security we need to deliver this massive construction program to the Afghan people. These Soldiers are a critical component of our team.”

MRAP teams are comprised of volunteer Soldiers and contractor personnel.

“The MRAP mission is purely defensive,” said Lt. Col. Philip Bernier, “but our Soldiers have the capability to lay down overwhelming firepower on the enemy if needed.” Bernier served as director of Operations and Security (J3) for the South District until he redeployed in August.

Getting trained

All MRAP Soldiers report to the Kandahar area initially and are stationed at Forward Operating Base Lindsey near Kandahar Airfield.

New team members progress through a structured training program, according to Sgt. 1st Class Ramon Curiel, noncommissioned officer in charge of the MRAP program. “We teach them how to act and how to react. We teach them how to perform the duties of all the MRAP positions. If they can’t perform proficiently, they will be sent home.

“Our Soldiers depend on each other,” Curiel said. “They have to pick up the responsibilities of another Soldier if something bad happens. Their job is to protect their passengers and each other.”

Positions include truck commander, gunner, driver, medic, communications specialist, mechanic and engineer.

MRAP team members are not required to have a combat MOS (military occupational specialty) “because we will make them combat Soldiers,” Curiel said. Many are military police officers or combat engineers in their reservist or National Guard positions. Some have infantry experience.

Curiel said it takes 30-60 days to train new Soldiers to be combat ready.

“We teach them how to drive the MRAPs, how to shoot all the weapons, how to react in case of an ambush, and how to react if there’s a rollover,” said Staff Sgt. Robert Moss, assistant NCO in charge, Kandahar team. They also get counter-IED (improvised explosive device) training, the combat life saver course, night driving, and radio training, Moss added.

It’s an orchestrated process carried out by the training NCO, Spec.

Travis Richmond, who keeps track of every Soldier’s training needs. “I coordinate for slots and availability for courses like driving an MRAP vehicle and combat life saver, which are week-long courses,” he said. “Some courses require recertification, so I keep records of when Soldiers are due their refresher training. Training gives points toward their next promotion as well.

“We teach weapons familiarization, including how to break them down and clean them,” Richmond continued. “We will not let a Soldier get behind a weapon to go on a mission until we are completely comfortable with the Soldier’s proficiency on that weapon.”

With an emphasis on weapons proficiency, MRAP Soldiers drill continuously. They go to the rifle range at least three times a month. New members initially focus on zeroing the weapon to make sure the sights are aligned properly; other training may focus on close quarters marksmanship.



USACE’s MRAP Soldiers train in close quarters marksmanship in southern Afghanistan. From left, Spec. Jeffrey Miller, Spec. Paul Hanneman and Sgt. 1st Class Benjamin Allen. (USACE Photo/Joan Kibler)



Spec. Dennis Kleyn, a USACE MRAP Soldier, examines where his bullets are hitting the target during training at a rifle range in southern Afghanistan. Spec. Travis Richmond helps with analyzing adjustments to the rifle. (USACE Photo/Joan Kibler)

They may find themselves drilling at almost any time.

Recently, while on site visits, Lt. Col. Douglas Hoenig, officer in charge of the Kandahar Area Office who is also in charge of the MRAP teams in Kandahar and Qalat, announced that he was a “casualty” with severe injuries who needed medical evacuation. The MRAP team kicked into high gear to save him.

“For training purposes, they treated me as though I had a sucking chest wound and was a double amputee. Within two minutes, they had applied two tourniquets and bandaged my chest. They ripped open my T-shirt and would have cut off my new uniform, but I let them forego that part of the drill,” he said with a smile.

“These sorts of drills are important so that we never become complacent,” Hoenig said.

Double duty and then some

Getting trained is just the beginning. Everyone has double duty to ensure that the unit is self-sufficient, Curiel said.

In addition to preparing for and going on missions, Soldiers are designated in other positions such as training NCO, assistant NCO in charge, maintenance NCO, and supply NCO.

MRAP team members are also responsible for the vehicles and weapons systems. “They prepare the vehicle when going on a mission and take care of routine maintenance,” Bernier said, “and they also install and maintain the weapons systems.”

The unseen component of their jobs is the liaison and coordination that it takes to move, a critical process involving several commands that may take several days.

“When it’s time to move, they understand the requirements of each specific mission before they go out,” Bernier said. “They conduct battle drills or rehearsals before each movement. They plan what to do for certain scenarios – what they’ll do if ‘this’ happens, their order of movement, and what actions they’ll take on contact. They know the rules of engagement and what to do if escalation of force is required. If they must defend themselves and their passengers, they will.

“They know they are entrusted with the care of their passengers,” Bernier added.

Whether transporting generals or colonels or USACE civilians, the NCO in charge is responsible for bringing passengers back safely, Bernier said. “The general will put himself in that E-7’s care and follows his orders during a movement.”

Once the MRAP team has transported its passengers to the project location, the team secures the area. The NCO in charge issues specific instructions to USACE employees about movement in the area, and then the team, both mounted and dismounted, carries out its protocols for maintaining security. Throughout, they ensure redundant communications while conducting the mission.

“The MRAP NCO in charge also maintains situational awareness of the security of the entire team so that they’re ready to pull out on a moment’s notice if necessary,” Bernier said.



USACE’s Kandahar-based MRAP team hoists Lt. Col. Douglas Hoenig into an all-terrain vehicle during a training exercise where Hoenig is the simulated casualty. (USACE Photo)



Members of Afghanistan Engineer District-South conduct construction inspections near Kandahar City while the MRAP team provides security. (USACE Photo/Joan Kibler)

“The job is rigorous,” Moss said. “Everyone who comes here to serve on the MRAP team volunteers for this job. When there are problems, they come up with solutions. This is not the place for anyone who wants an easy ride. These Soldiers know that. Without exception, they are motivated when they’re on missions.”

With uncompromising mission requirements, “MRAP team members must be in good physical shape,” Curiel said. “We must carry 100 pounds of equipment as we do our jobs. The schedule is full, day in and day out.”

Always on alert

No mission is without risk.

“Our Soldiers literally put their lives on the line every day,” Curiel said. “The insurgents are out there. We have to stay a step ahead of them.”

Curiel’s intensity about the mission is reflected in his regimented approach whether conducting a mission or drilling his Soldiers on the rifle range. He barks orders with precision. It’s obvious that his mind is always racing. He cares about the mission: “our first job is to protect our passengers” – and he cares about his Soldiers, calling them his “extended family.”

In Helmand Cpt. John Shelton is the officer in charge of the MRAP team, with assistance from Sgt. 1st Class Timothy Burd and Staff Sgt. Christopher Binder. In Qalat, Sgt. 1st Class Benjamin Allen leads the team, assisted by Staff Sgt. Alberto Garcia, Staff Sgt. Ronald Stidham and Staff Sgt. Tony Bean.



During rifle training in southern Afghanistan, USACE’s MRAP Soldiers identify the target and neutralize it. From left, Sgt. Nathan Olmstead, Spec. Jeffrey Miller, Spec. Paul Hanneman, Sgt. 1st Class Benjamin Allen, Staff Sgt. Robert Moss, and Spec. Marcus Gross. (USACE Photo/Joan Kibler)

The teams travel in convoys using three types of MRAPs: the M-ATV all-terrain version known for its mobility, the Cougar and the MaxxPro. The vehicles are fully equipped with the latest communications equipment and sophisticated weaponry.

Team members use their individual weapons plus crew-served weapons. Crew-served weapons require more than one person to operate them due to their complexity or size; these weapons include machine guns and grenade launchers.

“If we have to, we are prepared to engage,” Curiel said. “Most of us have fought the enemy in other assignments.”

Curiel is on his fourth deployment to Afghanistan. His previous assignments include serving as a mentor for the Afghan National Army and Police; a tour with Task Force Paladin, a unit formed by ISAF in 2006 to combat the threat of IEDs; and a tour with a PSD for Combined Security Transition Command-Afghanistan. He also served as a machine gunner in Iraq. Before joining the Army Reserves, he fought in Somalia as a U.S. Marine.

Moss is on his third deployment to Afghanistan. His assignments included route reconnaissance from Bagram Air Base, detainee operations at Bagram and Kandahar, and combat patrols and village assessments with the 10th Mountain Division at Ghosni. He also served in Iraq as part of the police transition team.

Practically all the MRAP Soldiers have seen prior combat experience, primarily in Iraq and Afghanistan.

“You always have to be prepared for the worst,” said Spec. Marcus Gross. “A Soldier must always be ready to deploy, engage and destroy. When you serve overseas, in an environment like this, you never look at a (U.S.) flag the same way.”

In his nine months as the J3 director, Bernier was impressed with the quality of volunteers for the MRAP teams. “Even though they come from varied backgrounds, these individuals are Soldiers first, and they come here serious about what they want to do.

They want this professional experience. Some of them want to build their careers in this field. Some want to be back with a military unit. They want to contribute to the organization.”

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MRAP team members find fulfillment doing their part for the United States’ mission in Afghanistan.

“I like what I do here to provide security for the USACE employees who are going to jobsites,” said Staff Sgt. Michael Conner. “I know this work is making a difference, and I’m proud to be part of this team.”

“I like my job,” Moss said. “I like to help the new guys. I can pass along lessons learned to make them better able to perform their jobs.”

Staff Sgt. Tony Bean said that this job gets him back to a military environment. “I was in the Marine Corps for more than 13 years, spent four years as a civilian, and then joined the North Carolina National Guard. This job helps me work toward a military retirement while working on my master’s degree.

“Most of all, it gives me the opportunity to serve – to make sure that with every mission everyone comes back safe,” Bean said.

“I admire the courage and level of respect that these Soldiers have for their jobs and for each other,” Bernier said. “They demonstrate this cohesiveness all the time.”

Without them, USACE couldn’t deliver construction projects.



Staff Sgt. Michael Conner, a member of the USACE MRAP team in southern Afghanistan, trains on the M.50-caliber machine gun, as part of the team’s regularly scheduled marksmanship training. (USACE Photo/Joan Kibler)

USACE’s Afghanistan Engineer District-South provides design and construction services throughout southern Afghanistan to support the International Security Assistance Force and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan. The work is carried out in Regional Commands South, Southwest and West with the goal of achieving counterinsurgency effects and bolstering the Afghan Government’s services to its people.

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