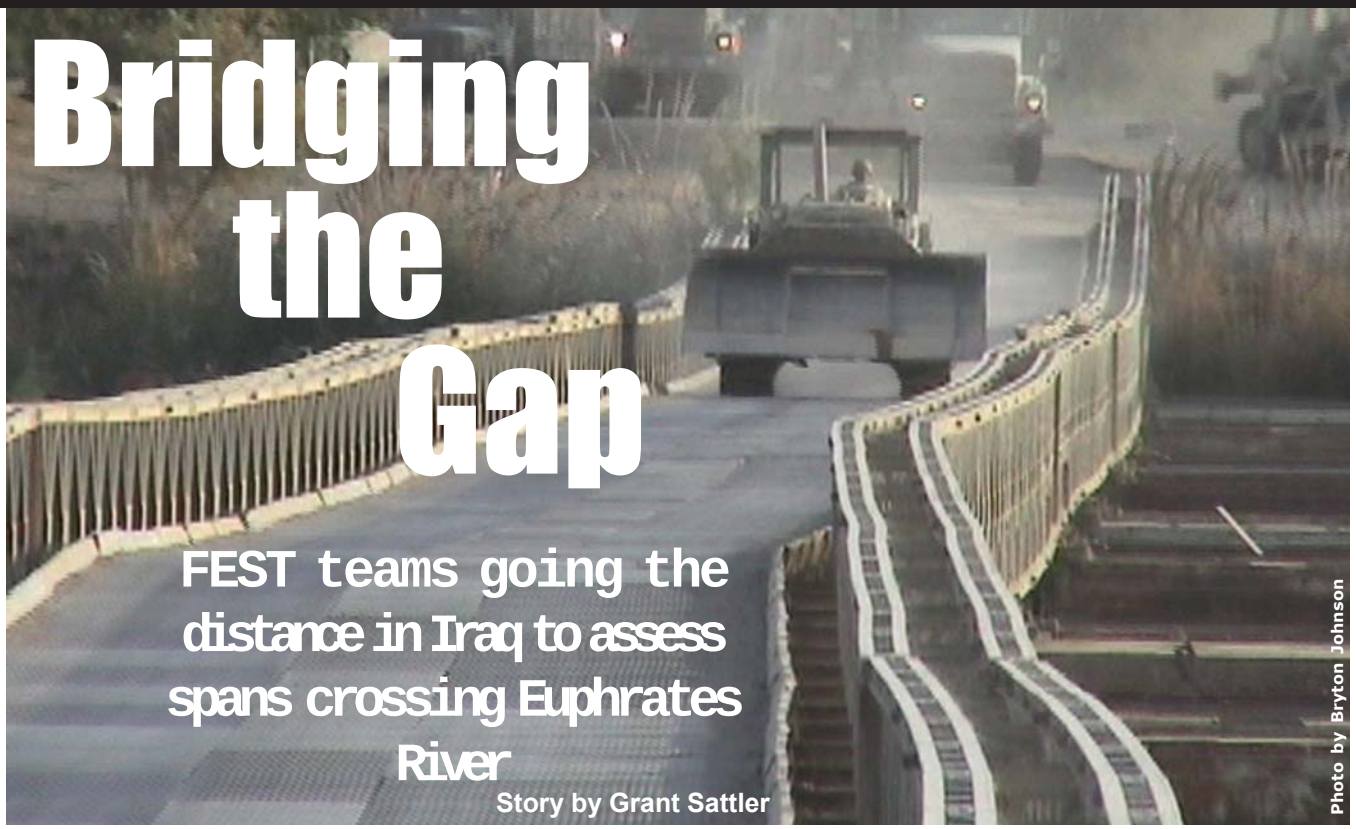
Bridging the Gap



FEST teams going the distance in Iraq to assess spans crossing Euphrates River

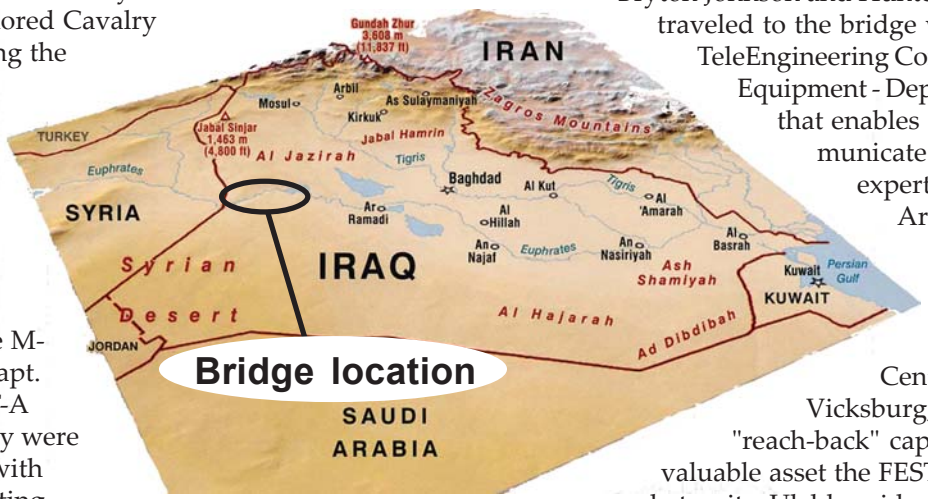
Story by Grant Sattler

Photo by Bryton Johnson

Europe District's Forward Engineer Support Team-Augmentation recently showed the lengths to which Corps of Engineers teams will go to support the warfighter.

Assigned to the Combined Joint Task Force-7, the FEST-A responded to a request for information (RFI) from the 82nd Airborne Division in Iraq to provide a bridge assessment of a span crossing the Euphrates River at Al Qa'im near the Syrian border.

The 3rd Armored Cavalry Regiment was using the bridge frequently because of continued resistance by hostile forces north of the river. "They needed to know if the bridge would support the M-1 Abrams," said Capt. Derek Ulehla, FEST-A Team Leader. "They were already crossing with their Bradley Fighting Vehicles."



Hunter Dandridge, fellow teammate and project manager, said the task was very important. "It was a critical mission," he said. "They needed to know if they could use the bridge to pursue terrorists or insurgents."

There were two float bridges in the area, one placed in the 1980s - a Mabey-Johnson Compact 100 bridge - and a locally constructed pontoon bridge of unknown vintage that was considered hazardous. A new float bridge was on the way to replace the local bridge, but for tactical reasons, a valid load classification was needed on the MJ-100 bridge to allow the safe use of two avenues of approach to the north, Ulehla said.

Combining the bridge assessment with another mission, Ulehla, and other FEST-A members Bryton Johnson and Hunter Dandridge, traveled to the bridge with their TeleEngineering Communications Equipment - Deployable (TCE-D) that enables them to communicate with technical experts with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers' Engineer Research and Development Center in Vicksburg, Miss. This "reach-back" capability is a valuable asset the FEST brings to combat units, Ulehla said.

Joining up with the 3rd ACR, the FEST-A explained what it would take to accomplish the assessment. The mission was set for the next day. Because the area was not entirely secure, the team went in an up-armored Hummer with a .50 caliber machine gun, accompanied by four Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicles and two Kiowa helicopters.

The group rolled out, and as security was

established, the bridge assessment team set up the TCE-D for video teleconferencing and set to work on what normally would take the better part of a day to accomplish.

"We measured the span, depth, and width of the pontoons. We measured the connections between the pontoons and the bridge, measured the trusses, bracing, the depth," Ulehla said. "We photographed everything. We looked for missing bolts and found five gone."

Dandridge also noted corrosion on the underside of the steel decking.

"Of importance were the connections to the pontoon and the connection of the bridge structure to the framing structure," said Johnson. "On the shores we were crawling underneath through goat crap to get pictures and measurements of the cross beams. We smelled just like a farm."

U.S. Army Photo

Capt. Derek Ulehla, Hunter Dandridge, and Bryton Johnson pause for a moment at the site of a bridge assessment in western Iraq.

The sound of mortar fire in the not-so-great distance encouraged the group to work quickly.

"We were doing this in concert with the Engineer Research and Development Center," Ulehla said. "So we ... had the bridge expert right there giving us one or two pieces of the equation. He would say look at this or that. We would go and look and take photographs and report back and give him some basic dimensions. Meanwhile, they're working on their side to ensure we're getting all the needed data."

The assessment was completed in just 2 1/2 hours.

"It was exhausting. We were hustling back and forth in the body armor, up and down measuring, with just a few stops for sips of water," Ulehla said. The team returned to the forward operating base to complete transmission of the data.

"It was as adventurous as any military project I've ever worked on," Ulehla said. "We were almost expecting mortar rounds to start splashing in the river like you see in the movies when we were out on the bridge."

For Johnson, it was his first project off post in four months in theater where security was a real issue. "It was a possible target, and then having people watching and realizing that we're there for a while, out exposed on the bridge," he said.

U.S. Army photo

Bryton Johnson with the CJTF-7 FEST-Augmentation enters data following a bridge assessment to complete reach-back to the U.S. Army Engineer Research and Development Center in Vicksburg, Miss.

The success of the assessment is due to the ERDC team of Jeff Powell, Gerardo Velazquez, and James Ray who were "... up in the middle of the night to support us," Ulehla said.

Johnson said the reach-back contacted the original manufacturer of the bridge to see if it could be repaired and brought back to its original load classification. "They said it really wasn't feasible because of all the missing parts. The components are no longer manufactured," he said.

As a result of the assessment, the 3rd ACR was given a valid load classification within two days based on the current condition of the pontoon bridge.