

Robot Repair Shop Helps Keep Troops Safe

By: Summer Barkley, 402nd Army Field Support Brigade

JOINT BASE BALAD, Iraq -- A few Soldiers, Marines and civilians work with equipment right out of the pages of yesterday's science fiction when they keep a fleet of robots in the fight at the Joint Robotics Repair Detachment, or JRRD, located at Victory Base Complex in Baghdad, Iraq.

The robots are not the lumbering hulks of old movies, nor are they the sleek, almost human creations of more recent films. They range in size from a few pounds to over 6 tons and offer Soldiers a way to gain situational awareness and search for improvised explosive devices and explosive-force projectiles from safe distances.



An iRobot PackBot picks up a demonstration object at the Joint Robotics Repair Detachment at Victory Base Complex, Baghdad, Iraq. The robots can be operated by a commercial off-the-shelf controller or a heads-up display. (Army Photo)

"We repair and maintain all robots in theater," said Master Sgt. Ronald L. Helsley, JRRD noncommissioned officer-in-charge. "Units bring equipment to the shop and if it can be repaired in four hours or less we will do the work and return the equipment to the unit."

Helsley estimates that the team returns well over 90 percent of the equipment within the four hour time-frame. If JRRD can't fix the equipment within four hours, a one-for-one exchange is done and the damaged equipment is either repaired in JRRD's workshop or transferred to a facility with greater capability.

The equipment, accounted for on the 2nd Battalion, 402nd Army Field Support Brigade theater property book, is issued to units for use in explosive ordnance disposal, route clearance and other missions.

"My job is very interesting," said Marine Cpl. Jose A. Torres, as he demonstrated using a video-game controller and a heads-up display to maneuver a robot at the facility. Torres, a trainer and technician, said the "X-box generation picks up the skills quickly."

Marine Maj. John Amiss, JRRD commander, said he talked with a sergeant in Kuwait who told him that a robot saved his life by detecting and detonating a "daisy chain" of improvised explosive devices.

"Last week we had a Talon [robot] blown up," Amiss said. "Thank goodness it was a robot. We can lose a million of them and it's worth it."

Sgt. David A. Thomas, robotics technician, said when the units bring their equipment in, "they want their robots back and in the hunt."

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