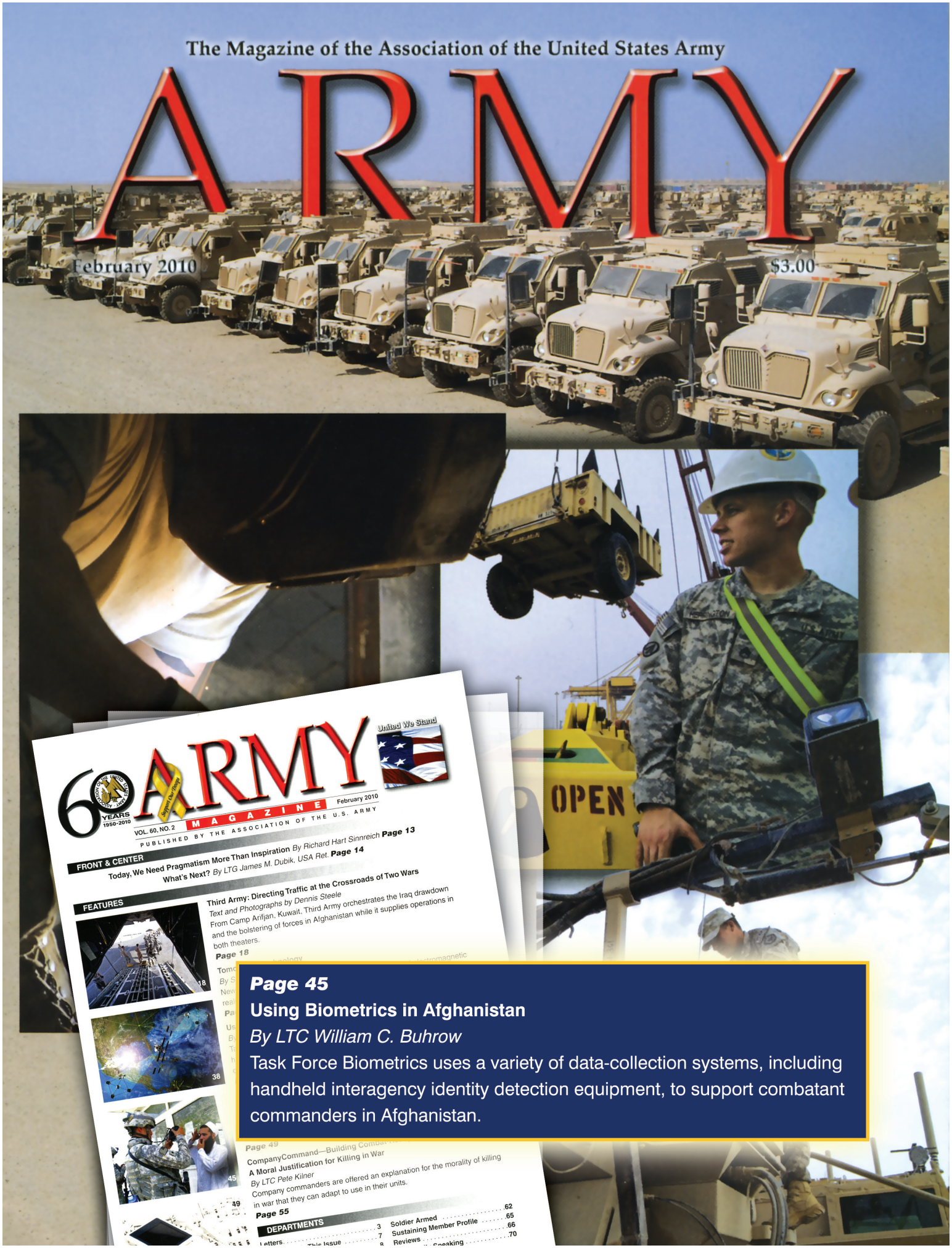

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Using Biometrics in Afghanistan

By LTC William C. Buhrow

Task Force Biometrics uses a variety of data-collection systems, including handheld interagency identity detection equipment, to support combatant commanders in Afghanistan.

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The strategy employed in Afghanistan by the commander of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) centers on protecting the Afghan populace and ensuring that only insurgents are targeted for kinetic or nonkinetic action. To effectively execute this strategy requires separating the insurgents from the populace, which is the main mission of ISAF's Task Force Biometrics.

Using a variety of biometrics collection systems, principally the biometrics automated toolset (BAT) as well as the handheld interagency identity detection equipment (HIIDE), ISAF is able to prevent potential "bad guys" from entering ISAF installations and receiving employment or military/security-force training. Biometrics is also supporting offensive operations by ensuring that only targeted individuals are detained.

Task Force Biometrics is headquartered at Bagram Airfield, which is also home to Combined Joint Task Force-82 and ISAF's Regional Command East (RC(E)). In March 2009, what had been an RC(E)-focused biometrics management office became Task Force Biometrics.

That transition included an expansion of the unit's mission to cover all of Afghanistan and an increase in projected personnel strength from fewer than 90 contractors, military personnel and DoD civilians to more than 300. The new organization will eventually include biometrics support offices (BSOs) at the regional commands and

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A soldier taking an iris scan will download it to an identification database; the scan is one capability of the handheld interagency identity detection equipment (HIIDE) that Task Force Biometrics issues directly to units in Afghanistan.

biometrics support teams supporting each brigade combat team. Recognizing that new authorities would be required for this expanded mission, the task force was officially designated as the biometrics lead for all of ISAF in July 2009.

In its current configuration, the task force has only a small U.S. military/government contingent, primarily in the unit's headquarters and in the single BSO supporting Regional Command South at Kandahar Airfield. The rest of the task force's "soldiers" are contractors serving as field service engineers (FSEs), trainers and, for certain missions, biometric enrollers throughout the Afghanistan theater of operations.

Unlike other "enablers" that help teams perform their missions in support of combat units, Task Force Biometrics primarily supports combatant commanders by issuing BATs and HIIDEs directly to units, and by providing support and training via FSEs and trainers located at larger bases and outposts.

LTC William C. Buhrow *is the deputy chief, Operations Support Division, DoD Biometrics Task Force. He has served in intelligence and intelligence-related positions for more than 25 years.*

U.S. and ISAF personnel collect biometrics at base-entry control points as part of the vetting process for hiring third-country nationals and local nationals; during targeted missions; and during unplanned military operations such as reactions to improvised explosive device (IED) detonations or cache discoveries. The collected biometrics and contextual data are forwarded through the task force to the continental United States for storage and matching by DoD's automated biometric identification system, operated by the DoD Biometrics Task Force. Reports on individuals who match previous enrollments—or whose fingerprints match those taken from IEDs or equipment and documents associated with insurgent activity—are returned to the task force, which informs the collecting unit and provides any additional information and recommendations for follow-on actions.

The task force also conducts its own enrollment operations for selected missions, one of the most important of which is conducting biometrics-collection operations at points of entry (POE) along Afghanistan's borders. The only POE where biometrics are currently being collected is

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Task Force Biometrics commander COL Joseph Smith, left, is leading a rapid increase in biometrics support to U.S. and Coalition forces in Afghanistan. Biometrics, now collected at Torkham Gate, on the border with Pakistan, will expand to other points of entry.

the critical Torkham Gate (the Khyber Pass), on the border with Pakistan. Torkham Gate is one of the busiest crossing points into Afghanistan and has been the scene of numerous suicide bombings. Biometrics operations there assist the Afghan government's efforts in limiting the movement of insurgents and their supporters into the country, and in preventing the cross-border smuggling of explosives and associated materials. Task Force Biometrics plans to increase its operations at Torkham Gate as part of a larger interagency and international effort, and to expand to other important POEs in the future.

All of these collected biometric data are of little value unless someone can tell the warfighter what they mean. In the task force, that job falls to the biometrics-enabled intelligence (BEI) team. The BEI team, supported by the U.S. Army's National Ground Intelligence Center (NGIC), uses the BAT database to create "digital dossiers" of persons of interest by linking biometric data with relevant all-source intelligence reporting to provide a complete picture of the individual. This information is then used to determine the potential threat posed by individuals, which may lead to their placement on the Afghan biometrically enabled watch list (BEWL). The BEWL is loaded into biometrics-collection devices and can provide immediate feedback if a unit encounters a potential threat on the battlefield or at a base entry point. The BEI team and NGIC have pioneered the use of geospatially depicted BEI information to create products identifying named areas of interest that commanders can use to focus combat operations or continue to collect biometrics. The BEI team has also worked closely with the developers of the distributed common ground system-Army and the tactical ground reporting system to ensure that BEI data are available to and through those widely used capabilities.

Along with its successes, Task Force Biometrics faces some considerable challenges, not the least of which is obtaining the resources to match its rapidly expanding list of missions and requirements. Biometrics is still a relatively new capability; most of the systems are not part of formal programs and are funded by supplemental appropriation. As a result, the production of systems has not kept pace with the expansion of operations in Afghanistan, leading to a serious shortfall in capability. In addition, the task force, as are many organizations, is well short of the amount of personnel required, particularly on the government and military side. As new as biometrics is, there are no formal military training programs or schools to provide "qualified" individuals. Coupled with the complex, technical nature of the mission, this means that few, if any, personnel have significant knowledge of biometrics before they join the task force. (The current commander, COL Joseph Smith, is a noteworthy exception, having come to the unit after two years with the DoD Biometrics Task Force.) The final major challenge relates to the nature of the Coalition fight in Afghanistan, where many of our ISAF allies have national restrictions on the collection and use of biometric data.

Despite these challenges, the use of biometrics is recognized as a key component of the counterinsurgency (COIN) fight at the highest levels of command in ISAF. As such, the use of biometrics to deny the anonymity of the insurgent, enable operations to separate insurgents from the populace and direct targeting at the bad guys will continue to grow. In addition, biometrics operations in Afghanistan will serve as the basis for tactical applications of this critical combat enabler in COIN fights of the future. ★