MAN, MACHINE: Thayer Jones, a U.S. Navy EOD tech, rests in a JERRV during a route-clearance mission on 24 July 2007.

deaths or body parts. On my last deployment, we got blown up twice, both times because an officer ran over a pressure plate."

Maybe that's why he seemed so much older than the Army specialists on their first deployment.

We turn left onto a route that loops around Bayji rather than going through it; the Americans call this the Hershey Bypass. At 9:40 a.m., we stop to answer nature's call.

"Get a good look around before you hop out," the team leader advises. "And close the door after you go out."

Later, the robot operator, a Navy lieutenant who is less experienced than the team leader, comments on the lack of action so far. "The way I feel is, I'm here; I'm away from my wife. There is s—t out there to be taken care of. If I'm here and I'm not finding it, I feel like I'm wasting my time."

The team leader shrugs wearily. "I've seen enough IEDs in my life. I really don't care if I never see one again."

The radio hisses: "Just before the overpass. There's a hole in the left side...a wire beside it. It doesn't look like the wire goes in the hole." Another false alarm. On we go.

We get to the top of our route around midday. We turn around, drive for 45 minutes or so, and pull in to FOB Summerall a little after noon. We stop by the EOD tactical operations center to drop off a coffee machine we'd brought with us from Speicher. A team leader there tells us that last night a raid in the desert nearby yielded 140 fifty-kilogram bags of homemade explosive. The pathway leading to the operations center is a line of captured 130-millimeter brass artillery shell cases, laid side by side, gleaming yellow in the brown dirt.

EVERY WAR HAS ITS ICONIC VEHICLES. World War II had the Jeep; Vietnam had Huey helicopters; the first Gulf War had the Humvee. Iraq has "mine resistant, ambush protected" vehicles, including the JERRV.

The U.S. government's approach to countering IEDs has been criticized as being overly reliant on technology and overly preoccupied with finding and disabling IEDs already on the roads. The JERRV is the apotheosis of that approach; still, there's no arguing with its success. Hundreds of EOD techs have gone on thousands of missions since the first JERRVs arrived in late 2005, and so far only two men have been killed by an IED while in a JERRV: Chief Petty Officer Patrick L. Wade and Petty Officer 1st Class Jeffrey L. Chaney.

They lost their lives on 17 July 2007, after an IED packed in a culvert underneath a road in northern Iraq threw their 26-ton vehicle several tens of meters. The equivalent weight of the explosive was later estimated to be many hundreds of kilograms of TNT. The blast crater was about 100 cubic meters.

It's hard not to love a JERRV when you're inside one, in Iraq, far from any base, cocooned within its armor and technology and massive, purpose-built utilitarianism. Its soft red lighting is easy on the eyes at night. The doors are of a composite material, the better to withstand attacks from rocket-propelled grenades and explosively formed penetrators, a particularly lethal form of IED. Steel plates protect the engine compartment. The machine gun on top fires armor-piercing incendiary rounds.

In racks in the cabin and behind the dashboard may be installed several hundred thousand dollars' worth of electronics: the jammer; a gyroscopically stabilized optical system called a Gyrocam; frequency-hopping VHF radios; and a blue-force tracker, which shows the truck's position, tracks it relative to other "friendlies," and allows them all to communicate.

On a previous route-clearance mission, Master Chief Michael Perdun had marveled at the improvement in transport. "One day you're flying around the country with canvas doors on your Hummer, and the next day you're in this," he said, with a wave to indicate the diesel-driven vault we were riding in.

Of course, JERRVs also carry the tools of the bomb-disposal trade: a big cabinet stocked with C-4 and other explosives, reels of shock tube, igniters—and the robots, usually Talons, which let the EOD techs do most of what they need to do while sitting inside the truck.

DANFUNG DENNIS/WPN