

# Better to give than receive

*As a preface to this article – since I know many of you are guilty of the sin of skim reading – I would suggest that this article is of importance to you, whether you are in the military, first responder, government or academia – but especially if you are involved in operations.*

In 1953, a European military tool to encourage interoperability was set up: Finabel. Now composed of 12 nations – France, Italy, Germany, UK, Spain, Poland, Belgium, Netherlands, Greece, Portugal, Slovakia and Luxembourg – it is neither part of Nato nor the EU, but feeds into both. Finabel is best thought of as an altruistic organisation; it aims to strengthen interoperability between Finabel, Nato and EU land forces. It does this through a top-down approach, through a meeting of Chiefs of Staff of the 12 nations who undertake its findings within their own government annually. One of the latest Finabel projects to be signed off is a new way of sharing CBRNE lessons learned; it is free, safe and open (after verification) to pretty much everyone.

There is a lot of concern in both the military and civil sector that much experience in CBRN is not being shared. Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan, or in London and Toronto, include no mechanism to ensure they are shared within the CBRN community. Commandant Yves Dubucq's new internet tool for Finabel is to put an end to this. "Within international operations there exists a problem in sharing information," he explained. "I went to the major multinational HQs and saw nothing existed, and at the national level we had a system but there was no sharing.

"So for the gaps to be filled there had to be a management system that had to be easy and comprehensive and usable everywhere through the world which was continually updated. People are concerned by exercises, operations, normal use of equipment, so all that needed to be there. I proposed a new Finabel tool via a secure internet portal and I gave instruction to a webmaster



*Exercises and operations generate valuable lessons learned for coalition partners ©DoD*

and created the site. The content has different subjects, such as pre-deployment, deployment, post-deployment and a column of the wise men – all of them focused on what you should do. Pre-deployment, for example, comes from an allied publication: what should an officer do for pre-deployment for a CBRN mission, equipment, risk assessment, topology, etc. So as an officer in that situation I would go to the website, log on, choose a pre-deployment category – epidemiology, for example – and then you get a questionnaire. The first question might be 'Are detectors calibrated for this operation?' Then you might see something else there, a lesson learned. You click on it and it is from the

Olympics – Op Distinguished Games – and reads 'The bio sensor could only be calibrated after six weeks due to the pollution of the city'. That information had not been shared, so the user would not have known that before but now it is written down for everyone. Some of the information will be sensitive, and this will be dealt with differently. For instance, the next question might be 'Has the list of the reagents been handed over to the logistics chain?' There is another lesson learned; you click on it and it says 'This lesson is classified, please contact the hot line'. You call the hotline (at the moment it is me) and then I would ask for an email explaining who you are and why you need it."

## Appropriate questions

The site, <http://cbrn.finabel.eu>, will have thousands of pages of information for users, and while it is aimed as a tool for land forces, the lessons are fairly universal. That said, however, the information is not going to be bland; it is directed at individuals who have specific CBRN tasks. "Whenever you go on a mission there should be both something new and relevant to you," said

Commandant Dubucq. "For example, in the deployment menu you would have detection, identification and monitoring (DIM). DIM would have another questionnaire just dealing with DIM – some information will be very detailed as it deals with individuals – such as sampling teams and the sampler's lessons will have specific problems for his job. That questionnaire could be very detailed; for the sampling team there are 200 questions, but this is only appropriate for one or two guys.

"It is also important for the user to know where the information has come from," he continued. "So we place the source there too – a direct post, a

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conference, an article, etc. The Wise Men menu is not a specific lessons; it is general advice on operations and things that cannot be in a questionnaire. You have different examples or things that are important to keep together – lessons learned from the Paris Fire Brigade, for example, might have been put in the questionnaires but it is useful to keep all those lessons together in one place in case someone wants to organise their own exercise on the underground – so you get objectives, team make up, context, etc.”

Currently, because of the nature of Finabel – its Charter is to encourage interoperability – there is a looseness to the nature of the site. Not only is everyone able to apply for usage, but there is no bar on knowledge or priorities – it is down to the user to decide what applies and constitutes a good lesson learned. “All lessons learned come to me,” said Commandant Dubucq. “I analyse them, which might have already been done nationally, and then decide whether it can be released. There is no attempt to prioritise it, as it is different for everyone; the Belgians might put a higher importance on decon, and what is obvious for us is not for others. It is all to do with whether it is interesting or important; the lessons should not be seen as a comment on people’s ability, the system is not judgemental.”

The system is secure, however, following all the usual guidelines, and there will be a tier system to ensure that only certain individuals are allowed into certain sections. So while some of the features – forum etc – will be open to the qualifying CBRN community, much of the sensitive information will only be viewed by a select few. “In the beginning the idea was that five individuals per nation would be allowed access, so the CBRN brigade commander/G3 level, school commander etc. Now, some of the content will be reduced but the rest will be open for the normal CBRN family. Initially there was a huge concern over the fact that it would be on the internet, but all the nations have changed their mind – even the UK! I will control who asks for information;

it is not for a young soldier or junior NCOs, but for those people who work every day in CBRN matters.”

While the system originated with Finabel, Commandant Dubucq sees other nations, such as the US, Canada, Australia, etc been quickly welcomed into the upper echelon of the system. This upper tier will be strictly controlled, and while the final number of users will be limited it has yet to have a final figure attached to it and these will be apportioned nationally. Nato is likely to take control of the system in a couple of years, and this might see a tighter control on who is allowed in – but Commandant Dubucq stressed it was down to who was past the post before that. “At the moment the decision is Finabel’s and I decide who is allowed in,” he said. “So if I decided, for example, that CBRNe World will be included in the site then that becomes a previous decision that cannot be gone back on. There will be limitations to what some people can see, but the library and exchange, the links, etc. will be open to the wider community.”

#### Share and share alike

The system has greater plans as well as the objective of sharing lessons, Commandant Dubucq is planning to have a degree of scientific reachback built into the system. While this is an attractive idea, it would seemingly be open to abuse, as individuals could see it as a short cut to their own chains of command. Commandant Dubucq suggested otherwise. “The first thing that would be asked is ‘have you tried with your own scientists and methods?’” he said. “The only reason why you could not have is that you can’t reach them or you don’t have them (which would be very rare). I could not in reality see any French officer, for example, calling us when he hasn’t asked his own scientists for the solution – he knows he would get his wrist slapped. The concept is that once they have approached their own scientists and they have seen the problem, then they might not know the solution, so they would get in touch themselves so they could ask ‘have you ever seen anything like that, what did you do?’ That sort of reachback would

work, as scientists often only have contacts within their own country.”

Equally Dubucq sees this as an opportunity for industry to get involved, to post messages on the forum telling people about upgrades or maintenance issues. As is often the case, the forum and notice board will be monitored for sledging to ensure that people behave. “This site is for lessons learned, not saying that this equipment is shit,” he said. “Someone might post that I used it in this way for this scenario and it did not work and industry could not help. This sort of feedback is useful for everyone, even industry. If people, or the company, have a solution then they can give it; if not then everyone knows that this device will not work under these circumstances.”

The site will cover all CBRN and also EOD matters, but will only work if people engage with it. Commandant Dubucq doesn’t feel that will be a problem, as the Chiefs of Staff have endorsed it and will make people use it, but the Finabel nations do not have the monopoly on the lessons. There is a gap in the market for sharing lessons, and people will have to take the plunge and share. There is a quid pro quo for this too: “If I receive a lot of lessons learned from a first responder, but he doesn’t have access to the full site, then I would give him access as he has shared and it is important for him too. You give me something I give you more access,” said Commandant Dubucq.

The baton has been passed; all are welcome to register for the site at <http://cbrn.finabel.eu>, and Commandant Dubucq has agreed that he will try and register all people as quickly as possible – and let them know whether they qualify. The site is a great opportunity for people to encourage best practice – why make the same mistake twice? – but it has to be embraced. If people don’t engage in this site – industry, military, first responders and scientists – it will go the way of many other websites: checked once in a blue moon to see whether anything has changed. Yet if there can be a regular flow of information into the site, then not only will it remain relevant but it will make the job of saving lives easier.

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