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2006 FLC Award Winner

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Leader

Nothing so dangerous as a little education?

This issue of *CBRNe World* has a major focus on training; not only is there a section on it specifically, but the subject comes up in some of the interviews too – cf Colonels Neumann and Osvald. It has been appreciated for quite some time that the role of the CBRN officer is becoming more difficult – the shift from CWA to TICs posed both an equipment and a training challenge. Currently the movement of CBRN into the orbits of narcotics and EOD (hopefully not a collision course) suggests that there might be a period of further change in the near future. Overlaid on top of all this is the general challenge to military CBRN forces of keeping up with the tempo of operations and the speed of manoeuvre. All of these together mean interesting times for the CBRN officer, but what shape will the future bring?

Both Germany and the Czech Republic have a long history of academic effort in CBRN, and this looks likely to increase. Lieutenant Colonel Osvald in his interview (p13) talks about the need for CBRN company commanders to have an MSc in CBRN; equally Germany is looking at decon specialists – individuals who are decontamination specialists first and soldiers second. While there is clearly no “right” path, it does raise interesting points about what these individuals are – are they soldiers or specialists? Will the involvement of extra fields, such as explosive or narcotics detection, hasten or derail this process? What happens to countries such as the UK, where CBRN is not a distinct stovepipe and officers and men will be rotated into other units and fields? Is that preferable, ensuring they can still soldier, or even beneficial, with lessons learned from other fields utilised in CBRN operations and preventing CBRN being a black art? Lieutenant Colonel Patrick Kidd re-rolled the Joint NBC Regiment (as it used to be) into a combat regiment, which caused howls of resentment from some individuals – but would that be possible as the training burden steps up? Where are the breaks? Colonel Osvald agreed in his interview that specialists, such as lab operators, were too valuable to put in harms way – but when does that process start? When do CBRN officers become akin to battlefield forensic scientists rather than soldiers – when do they stop being on the pointy end?

Equally, the US was moving towards the “soldier/scientist” approach that had been championed by BG Lillie; this seems to have gone into abeyance, but how does any organisation manage to keep up with the training requirement? For some countries, like the

Czechs, Germans and US, there is a clear financial and political force to keep their capability at the cutting edge; what happens to the others will be interesting. The Norwegian approach outlined by Colonel Ohrstrand at the Joint CBRN Commanders and Commandants Conference seems to be that countries will be forced to choose capabilities they can afford – broad spectrum capability may move out of reach of all but the most dedicated. This is already seen in the NRF rotations where many of the same countries provide the same capability – Belgium and Portugal on EOD, for example – and the gulf between the haves and have-nots (which ten years ago was rather small) has widened. Yet this causes problems for non-NRF operations. If, when the threat assessment is done, a threat is seen to be likely that a country lacks the capability to deploy, it might have a negative impact on its role in the operation – either not deploying or only in the background. While roles such as counter-narcotics might not fit into that spectrum, others such as counter CBR-IEDs might, and it will be the training rather than the equipment that will be the stumbling block.

So on the one hand you have soldiers that are costing more to train, which might result in them being too specialist to risk in combat situations, and on the other hand you have fewer possessors of broad capabilities and countries that can't deploy if certain threats are present. It would be cowardly not to try and suggest a solution to the problem, though any solution is likely to be dwarfed by the problem. It could be recognised that the issue of specialists that cannot be risked in combat has to be met by other sectors of the force package and more emphasis placed on the protection of these high-value assets than has previously been the case. In terms of the have-nots and their capability drain, it might well be necessary to think in terms of country blocks – Benelux or Nordics – where political and military co-operation might provide the economies of scale that are necessary in the same way they have for other elements of the armed forces.

In terms of civil responders, the problems facing the military are a glimpse of things to come; while there is always going to be more national laboratory support, these have to be prepared to enter hostile environments – with all the attendant health and safety risks – and if there is not legislature, or the willingness to do that, then there will have to be another solution – the first/second responder will have to carry the ball. CBRNE is not going to revert to the “ease” of ten-to-20 years ago; costs are going to rise and hard decisions are going to be made. The training burden is only the harbinger of that.

Gwyn Winfield