

Colonel Vance Visser, Commanding Officer of the
48th Chemical Brigade, tells Gwyn Winfield about being the
CBRNE point of the 20th Command spear

Springing from Thermopylae

The 48th Chemical Brigade has been given a strong heritage, called the Spartans, after the ancient Greek race of martial renown, but in many respects it is in the future that it will leave its mark. The 48th is the first active Chemical Brigade HQ that the US Army has had since the First World War, and it brings together all the components of successful CBRNE defeat. Part of 20th Support Command, it brings together five battalions: the 2nd Chemical Battalion, the 23rd Chemical Battalion, 83rd Chemical Battalion, 22nd (Tech Escort) Chemical Battalion and 110th (Tech Escort) Chemical Battalion. The Brigade has a full CBRNE capability, including the counter-IED and explosive piece and a range of assets from Fox and Stryker through to BIDS (Biological Integrated Detection System) as well as M12A1 and M17 decon vehicles – making them one of the only forces in the world to have the capability to deal with the whole arsenal.

The Tech Escort Battalions are very highly specialised assets, compared to the conventional Chemical Battalion, bringing in some of the more arcane bits of the CBRNE tool set – forensics,

sensitive site exploitation (SSE) and stockpile elimination. Yet Colonel Visser was keen to point out that the assets inherent in the Battalions are highly modular, and can be adapted to suit the mission. “We are emerging as a CBRNE brigade from a Chemical Brigade, it is not just limited to our brigade, but also the EOD groups that are part of 20th Support Command. We do a lot of cross/task orientated organisation and we take the field as a task force – so CBRN will be connected to E. We tailor the task organisation specifically to the mission, much like any other unit, so if we have a mission that requires decon that mission will go to a decon unit, and if they require additional resources then we would task orientate to give them the assets to complete that mission. So a suspect chemical production facility would have tailored assets to gain entry, do an initial assessment, take appropriate action to do the exploitation – take samples and gather intelligence – and then exit.

“What is really good,” he continued, “is that it is the first time that these capabilities have been consolidated into one command: concurrent with that, it

is the first time that all the chemical assets have been located in one operational command.”

SSE is an interesting area for any CBRNE force, needing as it does skills more usually attributed to civilian forces than military NBC assets. SSE is a relatively new mission set and involves troops going into a facility that is suspected of being involved in the manufacture of harmful substances – everything from TICs through to biological warfare agents or storing fissile material. Not only will the type of substance differ, but so will the size, scale and threat of the facility – everything from large pesticide companies to BSL3 labs in a garage. These differences require a different skills set and all of it must be prosecuted in such a way that every sample is a potential piece of evidence that could result in a conviction. The potential is that the soldier suddenly realises that what he thought was a TICs lab turns out to be a Meth lab – and what then? Does he suddenly throw a “hospital pass” to local law enforcement, washing his hands of the whole affair because it is not CBRNE? Colonel Visser suggested that this was not the case, but that hopefully the situation would not occur due to the amount of homework done before the event. “That is why we have the capacity to reach back to some expertise. Before we completely move ourselves, or alternatively evacuate a site, we would garner as much intelligence as we can from the site and render reports on the site. Some of the items there might not be common to what we are looking for, or have been exposed to, and when that is the case we will ask questions and reach back to the main command post and other agencies; we are able to exploit that site far beyond our limited mission framework.”

Yet perhaps the biggest challenge is the burden of responsibility that falls on the shoulders of the men and women involved in SSE. Performing in Level C, and especially Level A, is not conducive to remaining sharp and taking painstaking notes and evidence – but that is what must happen if chain of custody is to be followed and the samples turn into a tool to prosecute a legal action. A small slip from one member of the team can put the whole action in jeopardy – this regularly



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happens in civil courts – which is perhaps one of the reasons that other forces try and avoid SSE. Colonel Visser said that it was training and reach back that helped mitigate this problem: “Our specialist sampling is administratively within the chain of custody and we have our own labs within 20th Support to provide us with presumptive analysis. So this provides an idea of what we are dealing with and, if need be, we can get further confirmatory effort from a different lab and execute all that mission through a deliberate chain of custody. That is why it is important to have the skills and resources to train the teams deliberately so we don’t miss a beat in terms of methodology of the sample, whether solid, liquid or gas, how it is labelled, documented and handled, transferred all the way through – that entire process from point of discovery to the ultimate confirmatory process that says ‘yes, we have located whatever,’ and that all must connect the dots for prosecution purposes. That the ‘yes we have found it’ process was administered appropriately, all the chain of custody documents were administered to the standards needed. That is where the most critical dynamic exists, to have the skills to execute that portion of the mission. That is true for the materials that we are talking about, but the same is true for a piece of equipment or clue – like a precursor, or some other item that is part of a bigger picture; a dispersal system for example, that can be taken and properly catalogued, and expedited onto analysis.

“The real strength,” he concluded, “is having the capacity on the team with one command and control element focussed on CBRNE/WMD exploitation, and that doesn’t stop at ‘that’s a desk drawer and we don’t look in desk drawers.’ We do have the capacity to garner and collect other items of interest and to intelligence gather, so that can be transmitted, extracted or safeguarded.”

The US has long been the lone wolf in the “CBRN Pack,” but now – in true Spartan tradition – it is looking at ways of fighting alongside its allies once more. One of Colonel Visser’s drivers is looking at encouraging some form of cooperation not only with Nato allies, but other strong CBRN nations. Previously the only role that the US had in Nato Response Force (NRF) Multinational CBRN Battalion (MN CBRN Battn.) rotations was by providing a biological detection capability. Does this rapprochement mean that the US will start to take a larger role in NRF rotations, maybe even take lead nation status? Colonel Visser admitted that he was very interested in the MN CBRN Battn. but that it was too early to start talking about things like lead nation. “I don’t know that there is a specific point of entry for that to occur. As you know, there is a finite amount of resources and plenty of mission! At some point there could be a blending of capability if we had a mission where we were all confronted together that we would have to work through. In terms of bio-detection that was a role we had inside of that framework, and I don’t know when other capabilities might get folded in, or even opportunities where we might gather together and have training exercises – though I am sure those opportunities do present themselves. There are centres of excellence around the world that focus on the same kinds of problems and when mining for the genius and expertise no-one wants to reinvent the wheel! So the more dialogues and synergy of effort the better.”

Colonel Visser is keen on trying to leverage the expertise that some European countries, and other nations, have to try

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and make the 48th the best prepared it can be. This is fine on paper, but, as he says, there is just too much mission at the moment. Currently some of the busiest specialists are dealing with IEDs and other improvised devices, as opposed to decon experts (of which Europe has a wealth) who are not needed in the current mission set, and this is where European nations that don't have such experience of Iraq could benefit. Because these counter IED specialists are the busiest people they are the least likely to be available to do the sorts of exercises that Colonel Visser is talking about – operational needs take precedence. “I think that's why we are onto something with this design of the taskforce,” said Colonel Visser. “This is something similar as has been formed in the NRF – as I understand it – you have blended the very specific, tailored, capability of different nations that are expert at small portions of the mission set and that is forged together to be brought to bear when necessary – and that is how our taskforces are being brought to bear against a CBRNE mission. So in essence the two are parallel, not exactly the same, but at some point in time we could come to the place where we could have an interaction – where we are training similar elements to do maybe different mission sets beyond what is considered conventional. We may not be there at the moment but the more challenges that we are confronted with the more integrated technology that we are going to have to take advantage of and the more we will see that specialised training come about. Is there a specific exercise venue that comes to mind? Well, no, but I think we can get past ‘This is how we do decon vs. how you are doing decon’ to ‘these are lessons that we have learned from our structure and operations’.”

In some areas there might be some apprehension of the US, with its wealth of men, materiel and expertise, coming in and splitting up what could be seen as a cosy little European CBRN club (what would happen, for example, to the friendly and constructive competition between German and Czech forces?). So is this going to be a toe into the European waters, setting up liaison officers at Sonthofen and Vyskov (for example), or bombing into the water from the high board and everything

changing in the wake? Colonel Visser stated that it would not be the latter, “Most changes happen incrementally, it is the nature of change. We have a limited European liaison presence here at the CBRN School, as we do in Europe. There is professional dialogue at conferences, but the most expedient form of contact would be through some kind of exercise. This would be via a deliberately designed scenario that forges the complementary capability together – we could solve a lot of the world's problems theoretically, but we must focus on the most appropriate applications, that is where the best lessons would come from. That can happen as a tightly focussed Company team effort, a Battalion task force level-scenario driven for capability, or even a Brigade level HQ with a robust capability. It could even involve 20th Support interacting with multiple elements within coalition or Nato forces. If we are partnered against the Global War on Terrorism and CBRNE use against ourselves and our partners, then we have to prepare for the extreme response which requires all our capability at a given point in time and it is always better to train so that the first time is not the first time.”

Colonel Visser suggested that those European nations that wanted to get involved with 48th Chemical Brigade, or even with 20th Support at the higher level, should get in touch with the 20th Support Command G3 in the first place – and that this would be the same regardless of whether they wanted to be invited to the US for an exercise or wanted to invite US units to their exercise – though ultimately the decision will lie with the Office of the Secretary of Defense. Colonel Visser stressed that they were open to exercises from the Company to Brigade and above level, “The only difference is the planning effort, the resources involved and the time scale – the more elaborate the more time and resources necessary to bring that to bear. A Brigade could do it in 12 months or less, a Battalion in nine months, a Company team much shorter and then the time scales decline further. The big thing is making the decision that ‘Yes we are at the place where we want to pursue some relationships’ and then working out the how. What is important is that we are at the place where we

want to embrace this and pursue it. It is difficult to judge any country or region beforehand, many of them have unique challenges, so the dynamics are different for each country and mission. It is all a question of when.”

While this is going on in the background it is a busy time for the 48th, as well as having various units out on operation, in both Iraq and Afghanistan, the Brigade has been going through its operational demonstration phase. “The Brigade finished our initial operational capability demo in June, and in Sept we have our full operational capability exercise: that's our major training event. We will be demonstrating that our Brigade can provide command and control over CBRNE forces that are task orientated under the Brigade and support our hierarchy – 20th Support – whether they are serving as a joint taskforce, a WMD Elimination or definitive mission set, to demonstrate that we can do our part in each of the missions – from site exploitation to a smaller scale destruction effort. That is the near term challenge, but nine months after that will be taking that capability all the way to a full demonstration of the 20th Support's capability in the Spring. It is an exciting Command and we are focussed on the mission and bringing these capabilities to bear at every echelon.”

There is the old gypsy curse, of be careful what you wish for, because you might just get it – and there have been grumbles among some Alliance nations about a lack of US CBRN involvement in Nato and here is an opportunity to readdress that – if any nations are ready to take Colonel Visser up on his offer. There is no doubt that there would be a great deal that European nations can take from the 48th; SSE and C-IED are both complicated topics and the tempo on operations is such that the US probably has more experience in this than almost any other nation. Equally some of the work that European nations are doing at the squad level for detection and response, as would some of the work on decon, will be of interest and use for the 48th. What needs to happen, however, is openness on both sides. But a selfish attitude of pure self-interest will spoil the whole process and the Spartans will go back to sharpening their swords and preparing for battle on their own.

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