

Colonel Ian Gibb, Commanding Officer of the Joint CBRN Regiment, talks to Gwyn Winfield about the continuing evolution in the force

# Let there be light...

IT SEEM to visit the UK's Joint CBRN Regiment (JCBRNR) every two or so years to interview the CO, and there is always something different happening. It is endemic in any force that is used as much as CBRN troops seem to be that there is always a change underway. Five years ago with Colonel Patrick Kidd it was the urgent operational requirements (UORs) and the transition from warfighting and CWA that had been the threat of Iraq; three years ago with Colonel Hamish De Bretton Gordon it was the Integrated Biological Detection System (IBDS) Version Two, the Future Army Structure and the role of the Regiment in 'special forces' operations. Colonel Ian Gibb's time now seems to be focused on the growth of the Light Role Team (LRT) in both men and equipment and also with which direction the regiment should take.

This is, of course, not unique to the British; most serious CBRN nations are looking at making their CBRN troops lighter and more versatile. Few, however, have the operational footprint and size of the British Army. While the UK is drawing down in Iraq it is increasing its presence in Afghanistan – as well as all its other regular deployments in places like Cyprus – meaning this is probably one of the most sustained periods of large-scale activity in the British Army for 40 years. Operations have also adapted to circumstance; as much as Donald Rumsfeld might have pontificated five years ago that “we” weren't in the business of “nation building”, there is a far wider application of Military Aid to a Civilian Authority (MACA) and a more complex threat. Now there is a need for detection of chemicals used in the manufacture of narcotics and explosives – as well as the classification of home made laboratories. Yet just because

there is a need, and an availability of the inherent skills and technology (much of the same processes needed for TICs detection are used for narcotics and explosive detection), is not to say that the job is appropriate or even wanted.

## Bitting off more...

Any movement towards narcotics detection is inevitably going to be seen as a MACA-type role and something national security forces, rather than military ones, should be undertaking. Yet the scale of the task in Afghanistan, and the fact that the narcotics business is both a direct cause of instability and a way of raising revenue for the insurgents, dictates that something must be done. The explosives detection role is less troublesome, acting in a support role to existing military assets – albeit in a new way. Does the Regiment have the desire to tackle both the narcotics and explosives detection piece.

however? Colonel Gibb suggested that it warranted further investigation. “I have a view that you have heard before – that the traditional lines are blurring,” he said. “When you have such a capability and a skills set, there are often areas in an operation where you can achieve a positive effect on a campaign. If you looked at it in its purist definition you wouldn't think it is in the bailiwick of a capability like the LRT – yet that has been shown to not be the case. As a rule we should seek to support operations in whatever manner available; these are areas that we are interested in, rather than formal ones. We are expanding our integration with DEODS [See CBRNe World Winter 2007], so we are getting the EOD piece involved, and the National Search Centre, so we are active in those fields. On the narcotics thing, we are not required to do that, but it is not that much of a leap in capability required if we had to look into that – but we are not there yet.”

The immediate future of the Regiment is the maturity of the LRT concept, soon to be bolstered by the windfall of equipment enshrined in the new LRT equipment programme. The exact makeup of this equipment and even the capability that it will provide is not publicly available at the moment, yet it is expected to be a vast improvement on the current LRT



The JCBRNR is keen to retain it's heavier, Fuchs mounted, capability ©JCBRNR

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# Let there be light...



Mixing with the locals and gaining Humint is as important as detector work. ©UCBRN

equipment which was procured under the UOR with all of the disadvantages that brought (lack of support and training and a tendency to be procured quickly for short-term gain). "The SMTs, which are what we currently have, are based on our operational experience and the new equipment will as well to incorporate some of the operational lessons we have learned," said Colonel Gibb. "We need to make sure we transition those lessons from the old SMTs into the LRT programme. We are very lucky as we have worked closely with industry and the IPT to make sure we get the equipment which we need to stay ahead of the game. The way the Regiment was founded meant a lot of our equipment came at short notice through the UOR and it has equipped us pretty well for the threat, but the key now is to ensure we have a full programme, supported logistically – a system approach to a capability and it is essential that we get it. It is scheduled to deliver from the end of 2008 onwards and we will see how it goes. I am not going to go into detail about what the new LRT equipment programme will bring; suffice to say the two key bits are that we stay ahead of the threat in terms of what we can bring to bear on current operations and the foreseeable future ones, but also that we have a programme that can sustain that capability into the future along with other pieces of technology that might come on line.

"It is important to remember," he continued, "that the LRT is only one

part of the CBRN Force Protection that we can deliver, in both the high intensity manoeuvre support but also the low intensity piece: more discrete, but not less intense."

Colonel Gibb is keen to point out that the role of the Regiment is to provide support to warfighting troops and that the assets, in both equipment and skill set, need to be tailored to that. The position of CBRN Soldiers in the force package has been debated over the past few issues of CBRNe World – whether soldiers should be scientists, or have and rely on a more robust reachback. The UK rotates its CBRN soldiers through other parts of the British Army, as opposed to having a separate branch as the Germans and Czechs (for example) do, and Colonel Gibb was keen to champion the former approach. "All my operatives and soldiers come from a combat arm background and we rotate the majority through this role. What does that give us? It means that people coming into the CBRN world have a good knowledge base of combined arms manoeuvre and have real operational experience. That means when they are operating in a threat environment alongside manoeuvre forces, multi-national or otherwise, they have a deep understanding of what is going on around them. This is very important in terms of knowing what to expect, how to react, and the risks that people are taking around them in order to provide the force protection package, or when something is going on in the wider

contact picture they know the stresses – and that is very important. You have a shared experience, so if one of the LRTs goes with a light infantry battalion, the infantry battalion knows my people are combat arms experienced and proven – this adds the bond when you are under pressure from a live enemy trying to kill people in operations. So, for us, having that background is useful – I don't see any requirement for a specific CBRN branch. We also need to be careful as there is some debate – and I saw this in your leader in the last issue – about whether you have scientists or soldiers at the front. Experience has shown us that they, absolutely, must be soldiers. You need to operate alongside scientists, and talk to them but that is why you have the reachback capability for that kind of advice. Other nations have different approaches but our experience says we need soldiers trained in this role who have a broad comprehension of combined arms experience behind them to deliver the capability that we do – and my soldiers do it very well."

As the Colonel suggests, there are advantages to having soldiers who understand the stresses that combat puts on the rest of the force, and stops them being too focused on the importance of their niche. But there are disadvantages too. Operations in Iraq and Afghanistan have thrown up home-grown labs in garages and buildings, and the first thing that happens is the specialists get called in. They will need to make a decision on whether what they are seeing is a narcotic 'meth' lab, bomb making factory, chemical IED facility or even a bio lab. While the latter might be more obvious (some form of higher lab safety equipment), the others all use much of the same equipment, and to realise it is a chemical lab that has been producing phosphene/chlorine mix has a far more immediate impact on the battlefield than just another meth lab. Yet without the scientific knowledge that comes from having a scientific background you might not appreciate exactly what you are seeing, as so many of the components are common to all three – and do you have the time to organise the necessary reachback?

Colonel Gibb felt the training members of the Regiment undertakes is