

Welcome to NRBC Country

If there needed to be a metaphor for the changes happening in the 2nd CBRN Dragon Regiment (or 2e RD) then the weather on an early March day fitted the bill – bright sunshine, rain, gusty wind and snow. The Regiment itself is a new one – only started in 2005 – and since then its growth and puissance have been frantic, building on old capabilities and expanding new ones. July this year will see the Regiment become lead nation in the Multinational CBRN Battalion, a tall order for any nation and something that you don't want to get wrong. With that in mind, the Regiment is currently being put through its paces in Exercise Mars, spread over 50kms between Tours and Fontevraud in northern France.

Fontevraud also has the recommendation of being one of the prettier homes of a CBRN (or, as CBRN is called in France, NRBC) Regiment, boasting the wine-rich region of the Loire and also the burial Cathedral of Richard the Lionheart, among others. Yet, like everything in the Regiment, it is a new home for them and one that is expanding. Commanding Officer Colonel Edouard Perrin explained the history of the Dragon Regiment. "The 2e RD is the only CBRN Company in the French Army," he said. "Fontevraud itself is a large camp, in French terms, and comes with its own training area – shared between us and the Cavalry Regiment at Saumur – which measures 7km by 5km. The Regiment was created on the first of July 2005, so it is still a very young CBRN unit, though thanks to its GNBC background it goes back a lot further than that. It came from the 2eme RD Leclerc MBT Regiment, which

initially composed 54 per cent of its personnel. The GNBC part, from Draguignan, composed 31 per cent, and 15 per cent came from the army generally; when the Regiment was initially merged it had 745 personnel. The 2e RD was disbanded during a restructuring of the army, and the decision was made that they wanted to increase the strength of CBRN.

"At that time the GNBC had two CBRN Companies but no support; that all came from 2e RD. Initially there had to be a period of intensive training, as the GNBC were all trained to a far higher standard than the 2e RD were – yet the Regt kept the 2e RD name as it is one of France's earliest Cavalry regiments, with battle honours dating back to the 17th Century. The tradition, and the name, are the only link with the past that there

is; there are no other links to tank battalions, all the soldiers remain in the Regiment and there is no rotation, as there is in the UK, for example.

"There is the Multirole Company which dates back to 2005 which has 159 personnel and a wide variety of assets, not just detection. The decontamination company has 109 personnel and just does decon. Our total numbers on the books are 903, but we are a little below that – in 2008, with the addition of the Bio squadron and some other changes, we will be up to 920 personnel. It has been a busy time – we added another decon unit in 2006, spent 2007 reinforcing generally and will have the new Bio squadron at the end of this year. Fontevraud is also expanding – we are having to build a range of facilities, such as accommodation, to be able to



The ERCP has provided useful as a training mass decon unit, but will soon be supplanted by their new CERPE ©CBRNe World

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house the influx. We also have two reservist companies – one for force protection and another specialist decon company that was stood up in December last year. We have a large outreach into the civil community; one of the reservists, for example, is a captain in the reserves but a Lieutenant Colonel in the Fire Brigade. We also go through some of the same training as the civil forces – this shared understanding and common approach helps us in some of our missions.”

The French military have a slightly different role in homeland defence than other nations; while they only provide support as a second responder, they are trained and equipped to be part of the response. Partly this is because France is a large country and CBRN defence outside of Paris and Marseille is patchy to say the least. Yet the other side of the coin has to be that the military are

actively prepared – and seem to relish – the idea of helping to deal with a CBRN attack on French soil. Colonel Perrin explained the mission-set of the Regiment. “We have three broad missions,” he said. “The first is to provide support to the commander and troops on the battlefield – the traditional mission. The second is that we are to participate, in a support role, in the protection of the homeland. The third is to participate in overseas territory protection. In the latter one we have no CBRN missions currently, but we do have a light observation team – for example in Bosnia, performing an information mission. We are also doing some counter-proliferation missions (under PST), such as in Djibouti in forthcoming weeks.”

The spearpoint of the Dragon’s contribution to civil defence is their Light Role Teams; as in many forward-

thinking nations these are light, easily transportable and equipped with a wide range of handheld detectors – and these are about to undergo another iteration. “One of our newer developments is our Light Role Teams – or ERE as they are in French (based on the French translation of Evaluation, Recce team),” said Colonel Perrin. “Their mission is similar in some ways to the UK’s LRTs – but we, for example, have far more decon assets. They were designed for SIBCA and technical risk assessment, have a wide range of chemical and radiological sensors and are able to work with EOD. We have 12 of these teams, each with six personnel. These teams are often used to complement each other – especially for some of the Level A operations, where you need one team in support at all times to be able to go in and rescue the first team should it become necessary – because they have run out of air, etc.”

Another difference from the UK, and other nations, is that the team has no bio detection capability. “Currently they have no bio detection capability – though we used to use the Smart Ticket system – as the MoD have decided that the technology is too immature to be relied on, so we take samples and send them back to a lab – which is a fairly good system,” explained Colonel Perrin.

While French EOD and CBRN soldiers have a close relationship, this has not reached the stage it has in other countries, where there are courses devised for each discipline to educate them as to the role of the other – to allow their support to be more critical. “Currently we just co-operate with EOD; we have a lot of general information on each other, but there is no formalised exchange of information,” said Colonel Perrin. “Perhaps sometime in the future we will offer courses to each other – it is a good idea – but we would need to work up to that level of exchange.”

Another element of the force that has found itself creditably embedded in the civilian response is the Regiment’s decon assets. While the detection capability in the Light Role Teams might be found in a number of nations, the thought that has gone into providing a decon capability that can hit both the military



The Regiment’s growth has been tremendous and is expected to continue. ©CBRN World

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and civilian mass decon requirements was first class. Colonel Perrin described the Dragon Regiment's decon assets. "We have 48 light decon vehicles, which are air transportable," he said. "We also have 28 heavy decon vehicles, and these can set up a total of 12 decon sites. We have a new role for the heavy assets – that of infrastructure decon. We have a cherry picker basket on the truck which can reach up to 12metres, and the civil forces have nothing like this, so our vehicles and crew will be used for this. It is a new mission so that means that we have to do more training for it. Equally, we are getting involved in mass decontamination of civilians and military personnel, which we have no experience of and so need to develop. In terms of mass decontamination we have some new assets to enable us to do this. We will have our new CERPE personnel decon system, manufactured by Utilis, and we also have two decon ERCP tents which, while they have a limited capability, enabled us to use them for training and to develop a concept of operations and requirement for the CERPE. We currently have one new CERPE but

eventually we will have 16 shelters, with four by the end of 2008. The system comes in one container, with everything inside – it then expands outwards. It has been designed for civilian and military operations, so we can use it to support homeland operations – for example it has two corridors for male and female decon. The Regiment only deals with ambulant casualties – any non-ambulant are done by the Medical Team, which is not part of the Regiment but who will also be getting a new decon capability."

Civilian infrastructure decontamination could be a rod to beat the Regiment's back, however. It brings up the whole "how clean is clean" debate, and the research that has been done in places like Spiez on the absorptive powers of surfaces like asphalt and brick work shows that it is a Sisyphean task. Does the military really want to be involved in cleaning infrastructure, only to be told one day later that they need to do it again? Colonel Perrin admitted it was a problem, but that they were working towards a solution. "The decon of infrastructure is a difficult topic – issues like 'how clean is clean', etc." he

said. "What level of assurance the army provides as to how clean the infrastructure is has yet to be decided. It is a difficult legal problem and has yet to be agreed with the civil agencies."

While the LRTs might be free from the bio mission, that will not be true of the rest of the Regiment. Soon they will be given a new bio detection capability, called DetectBio, which will plug this gap – quite to what extent is not publicly known, however. "We are working towards DetectBio, but there is little that can be said about that at the moment – a great deal of it is classified," said Colonel Perrin. "The air force currently has a bio detection capability – the CBRN capability in the air force is very small – the size of a small company – but we will be getting one soon and we have expanded our force and started the training to allow us to do it. While the exact make up is not known, there will be a mobile lab with a network of [Proengin's] Mab and air samplers."

The Regiment has not yet had the fortune to be involved in operations in Iraq or Afghanistan, but this is not to

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suggest they have not been busy. The Regiment has provided ten TICs teams to Kosovo from 1999 to 2006 – and still provide an officer to the International Northern Task Force. The Regiment has also been busy at major sporting events, providing a LRT and decon squadron to the Qatari Civil Authorities for the Asian Games and also providing support, at an hour's notice, for the Rugby World Cup (held in France in 2007, and still a shameful memory for the Editor). Yet, undoubtedly the greatest challenge is as lead Multinational CBRN Battalion nation in July 2008. Lieutenant Colonel LeFebvre, Deputy Commanding Officer – and the new Commanding Officer by the time of deployment – explained the Gallic style behind their lead nation role. "We are going to be the lead nation for NRF11, from July 2008 to December," he said. "It will be a small, mainly French Battalion, around 471 personnel, and we will provide the HQ, key response unit, decon, part of a lab, etc, but we will be supported by the Czechs, Hungarians, Poles, and some Slovenians. We will be working up to it

with Exercise Loyal Ledger in March and April of this year. The current Exercise – Exercise Mars – is a dry run for that exercise and is based on Loyal Ledger. We will be certified during Loyal Ledger, which will mainly be a Command Post Exercise; then in April we will have Exercise Fortel, with 400 personnel training with the Slovenians and Polish, that will certify us for interoperability and then we will have Exercise Steadfast Juncture for Joint Command Lisbon."

He went on to explain the scenarios behind Exercise Mars. "Exercise Mars has tested every element of the Regiment: LRT, recce and decon," he said. So you will see the LRT involved in a Kosovo-type scenario, where the team is called in because some soldiers have been taken sick and have been smelt a strange odour. They eventually track it down to a factory where they find a large amount of ammonia and eventually a chemical lab; in turn this becomes apparent that it is a lab for dealing with the emptying of old chemical-fill shells, but the team has to

come to all those conclusions and find the lab. The decon units have been dealing with the effects of a chemical scud impact on HQ, which created military and civilian ambulant and non-ambulant casualties. Meanwhile, the recce units have been out scouting and mapping an area of contamination. It is a six-day exercise and will test all the assets in the Regiment."

While the Regiment is new, it has big plans. Primary among these is to try and improve its outreach and is keen to work closely with its neighbours – such as the British – but also some of the Central and Eastern European countries, such as Slovenia. NRF11 is lucky enough to not have any major events – G8, Nato Summits etc – during its rotation, so this should be a quiet period of high readiness for the Regiment. It would be a major surprise if the 2e RD didn't come out of the experience, however, with a bumper bundle of lessons learned, that will, in turn, help provide some more fuel for the growth spurts that the Dragon is going through.



The unit demands a higher level of fitness from their Level A soldiers ©CBRNe World

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