

Colonel John Pollock, Commanding Officer of CBIRF, tells Gwyn Winfield about saving lives and taking names

CBRN - ER

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The last time I interviewed anyone from CBIRF – Chemical Biological Incident Response Force – was 2004 and the CBRN world was very different.

Colonel Trafton, the then CO of CBIRF in 2004, was very much the US point man for

CBRN, the civilian responders were largely a long way behind the curve in training and equipment, and CBIRF was the band aid that had been stuck over that wound since 2001 (though the unit was first stood up in 1996). Since then, first responders throughout the US have embraced CBRN and, in some cases, the skills that they have to offer are of high value to the military – especially in counter narcotics, sensitive-site exploitation and forensics.

Yet it is not just the first responders who have changed but also CBIRF. In 2004 Colonel Trafton suggested that it was one of the roles of CBIRF to be able to power into the hot zone and lead by example – to demythologise the CBRN environment. Now CBIRF has a far more defined role: they are the CBRN search-and-extraction providers for the CBRN Consequence Management Response Force (or CCMRF, pronounced Sea Smurf!), providing search and extraction, decontamination, emergency medicine and triage in the hot zone.

CCMRF is also a new development, first announced in the summer of this year (coming to international public attention at the Joint CBRN Conference in Fort Leonard Wood). This will provide a range of forces, from

the conventional infantry brigades through to specialist assets such as CBIRF. Colonel Pollock outlined the relationship between CBIRF and CCMRF: “We work for the CCMRF Commander. We just conducted an exercise in Fort Stewart, Georgia, where the scenario was a 10-kiloton nuclear detonation in Indianapolis and how would we deal with that. We conducted the exercise with subject matter experts from the first responder community, FEMA and State National Guard as well as bringing in the CCMRF, once the state governor had requested that assistance from executive branch of the federal government through DoD. The CCMRF executed operations with local and state agencies to try and mitigate the effects of the incident and we learned a lot being the first time that we were trained to that level.”

The Colonel added: “We are one of the few standing organisations that will continually belong to the CCMRF; the vast majority of the units that fall under CCMRF are on a one-year mission rotation. For example, an Army Brigade Combat Team is a major subordinate element under the CCMRF, acting as Task Force Operations – and we work as a subordinate element under Task Force Operations. The challenge is that those units will rotate out every year, but there are some specialists like CBIRF and the USAF Radiological Assessment Team that are always part of the CCMRF and don't rotate out. We are one of the foundational capabilities that will constantly be resident under the CCMRF concept, while Task Force Aviation, Medical and Operations, which are formed around Army brigade-sized units, will be on a one-year rotation and then relieved by a like unit after 12 months.”

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Yet there would seem to be a problem inherent in this. CBIRF has prided itself on its medical capability, for example, and if it is going to be tasked only under CCMRF, which has a Task Force Medical, then it would seem that there will either be duplication, or CBIRF will have to shed capability. Does CBIRF therefore have other non-CCMRF roles that will allow it to keep this capability?

“We’ve got responsibilities under the CCMRF and COCOM, under North Com. That doesn’t correspond to CCMRF, so we can also scale our deployments – so if the CCMRF isn’t deployed, and there is an incident that doesn’t require their entire capability, we can still be called out by a Defence Coordinating Officer at a lower level instead of deploying the entire CCMRF as we would for a larger incident,” said Colonel Pollock.

There has been a change in mission however, since the early days. At first the role was to get there fast, as – depending on where the incident was – there might be no other capability there. Now, as well as the first responders, there are the WMD Civil Support Teams (CSTs) and the CBRNE Enhanced Response Force (CERF, or CERFP) who will be able to field a capability faster than even the ever-sprightly CBIRF. So does that mean, since CBIRF will now inevitably be part of a force package, that they have been able to shed some capability – to make room for the new – or does not knowing what package you will have to plug into mean that you need to retain everything?

“From an overall perspective it is a good news story for the US,” said Colonel Pollock, “as we as a nation have made significant improvement in our first-responder capability. We have seen the National Guard CERFs and CSTs, which has given National Guard and state governors a tremendous capability that is responsive to that state. As we build more capability what does that mean for CBIRF, as we are no longer the single capability that deals with these incidents? That is a good thing though! We remain the only Title 10, active-duty military component that deals with these types of incidents, so local government has their first responders, State government under Title 32 has its National Guard, and then Title 10, DoD, has CBIRF. The trick is integrating those capabilities, each with distinctive and

separate chains of command, and synchronising and synergising the operations of those different entities. A lot of our exercises are focussed on understanding how first responders work, understanding how the CSTs and CERFs work, so when we hit the ground we can integrate our operations for maximum effect by not creating gaps and duplication of effort during a large-scale event.”

CBIRF, while it is still counted as a CBRN asset, has evolved past that, in many respects, to a search and extraction (S&E) and technical rescue capability – the ability to go into hazardous environments, whether CBRN or conventional (collapsed buildings etc) and rescue people and save lives. The trouble with this is the fact that there is usually, especially in CBRN, a very small window for this sort of role, that dose over time means that even with CBIRF’s short notice to move period, that it is unlikely that they will have much of a role, unless prepositioned.

Colonel Pollock suggested that it wasn’t that bleak, “There are some variables in there that are hard to determine, but you can find survivors in a catastrophic incident like this well after the time when most experts would say that you are in the recovery phase, rather than search-and-rescue phase. We also have a role in high yield explosive events, a scenario one could argue that the casualty viability window would be significantly extended. We always want to get into the incident site as quickly as we can but part of the calculus is geographic distance – if an incident takes place in California it will take us longer to get there and save lives than if the incident was 20 miles up the road in DC. So the tyranny of time and space will challenge us in some scenarios. The Request For Assistance process from the State thru the Federal government may also play into the timeline, but if we can get there within the 24/48 hour window we feel confident we will be able to find some viable casualties in the incident area.”

One of the complicating factors is that if it is a CBRN incident it will be, at best, a crime scene (though more likely a terrorist scene – though the distinction is blurred, and non-existent in terms of CBIRF’s response), and there is always a conflict between saving lives

and saving evidence. Firefighters often get the brunt of this criticism, that in their rush to save lives they destroy or tamper with the scene in such a way that evidence is useless – and firefighters have the advantage of working with their law enforcement colleagues every day, which cannot be said of CBIRF. So how do they manage the crime scene, respecting forensic highways and evidence while they are barreling in to save lives?

“That is something that we are just trying to get our hands around,” admitted Colonel Pollock. “Crime scene and evidence collection hasn’t been something that we have done a lot of in the past and we want to bring in some law enforcement expertise for training on: how do we approach this as a crime scene; how do we approach chain of custody; sketching out the blast area; marking components that might be evidence. We don’t have a lot of experience and see it as an area where we can improve our capabilities. Last week we worked with a team from Alcohol Tobacco and Firearms (ATF) during one of our internal exercises and their insights were invaluable. Currently when we go into a building and do our primary and secondary searches we will do a sketch of where we find the victims in the building, to try and get something to law enforcement to allow them to build a case in terms of the incident, but we need to do more.”

This would seem to be one of the areas where there could be inter-DoD support as the 20th Support Command have done a lot of work on Sensitive Site Exploitation and have a military understanding of forensic highways etc that would be useful to CBIRF. So has there been any cross-pollination?

“We are not at the same level yet. 20th Support Command, and some of the other organisations that are involved in that line of work, do a great job, but our mission sets are a bit different. I view us as a life-saving capability that operates in a contaminated environment – our real mission is search and extract, and everything else we do enables that mission. The primary mission is search and extract of victims in order to save lives and minimize suffering. We do agent identification as an enabling function, in order to make a

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determination on PPE, medical treatment, and clean routes in and out, we do decon operations in order to mitigate the effects of the agent on the victim and prevent the contaminants spread, we do medical support in order to stabilize the victims for follow on treatment. We do EOD in order to deal with threats that we find in the battlespace, and we do technical rescue for search-and-extract victims who are incapacitated and in areas that are difficult for us to get into with our base search-and-extract capability. That is different from what a lot of the conventional chemical units have as mission profiles.”

Technical rescue is a more advanced form of search and extraction, so while S&E training is provided to all Marines and revolves around a basic operators’ course, technical rescue operatives are trained in five of the six urban search-and-rescue (USAR) skill sets to provide them with a more sophisticated capability. While CBIRF has TICs and CWA detectors, limited bio and rad detection and EOD assets, as Colonel Pollock explained, these are merely enablers to allow them to rescue the wounded – rather than skills and assets in their own right. “It is all about search and extract, we will do our best to identify the isotope and levels of radiation, for example, so we can work out clean routes and areas to conduct our operation, but the ability to identify the threat is done to facilitate the search-and-extract role. So if you need a high level identification of the RDD, for example, then 20th Support Command is better suited: we don’t have nuclear technicians in our organisation.”

While CBIRF is going to work on their forensic training, one area where they need investment is in communications equipment. “One of the things that we need to do is improve our communication capability. CBIRF has been a first-responder organisation and hasn’t had robust communications capability. The XTS5,000 handheld radio, which is interoperable with the first responders’ capability, has been our communications backbone. What we have found as part of the larger CCMRF, with its conventional military backbone, is that we don’t have the capability to satisfy communications interoperability



CBIRF is heavily involved in search and extraction, for both conventional and non-conventional incidents . ©CBIRF

requirements that allow for the passage of data intensive information between the CBIRF and our higher HQ. This requirement will require a much more advanced equipment suite than what the CBIRF currently owns, but the solution has already been identified. We will get the same type of capability that the CERFs are using – the Unified Command Suite and the Advon vehicle which will give us a capability to access email .pass files and access military and First Responder web sites. This capability also includes a down-range camera system that can be taken into the Hot Zone with the Identification Platoon during their initial identification operations. This allows us to see into the hot zone, at the Cold Zone CP, or the feed may be accessed through an IP address as streaming video by any number of users.”

CBIRF’s new role is also analogous to that of Australia’s Incident Response Regiment (IRR – see CBRNe World Spring 2007), who also had a major CBRN role and have morphed into a search-and-rescue (among other roles) force with CBRN heritage – indeed, CBIRF is going to send three Marines out to observe their training in November. It shows part of the complexity and acceptance of the CBRN challenge that units, as they mature, become more complex and specific. So all CBIRF personnel are now being trained at DRDC to be able to deal with

wounds infected with nerve agent, stabilising them and preparing them for treatment – medical skills that are unlikely to be found in general medical staff. As well as the forensic and communication skills that the Force is going to improve on, the next challenge will be to deal with some of the logistic issues incumbent upon CBIRF being part of CCMRF. “One of the things that we saw when we ran this 10-kt detonation scenario in downtown Indianapolis was that the scale of the disaster was so large that a single Incident Response Force (IRF) from CBIRF was just not enough. A 130- man push downrange was swallowed up in the magnitude of the event, so we looked at pushing a follow on force down range, another company of CBIRF Marines, but that is something that we haven’t exercised before. So now we are looking at how we do command and control when we have committed our entire skill-set into the fight: how do we exercise command and control under CCMRF and furthermore under a conventional Army infantry brigade? So we need to expand our horizons within CBIRF, and the communications piece and information management is a big part of it. Commanding two IRFs simultaneously, while synchronising our efforts with First Responders, CSTs and CERF-Ps all under the CCMRF construct is something that I want to focus on during my time in command.”

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