

AMATEUR

Lieutenant Colonel Christopher Garver, Director of the Coalition Press Information Center, Multi National Force Iraq, tells CBRNe World about the competence of the Chlorine attacks.

CW: Are we still seeing attacks with chlorine, or have the insurgents moved onto any other chemicals?

CG: There was one incident where we thought they had rigged nitric acid under explosives, but it turned out to be a car bomb that we stopped before it had detonated. So they found that although the tanks were marked nitric acid, they were filled with just gasoline, so the only chemical we have seen used in this fashion is chlorine. In Karmah, between Fallujah and Baghdad, we took down two car bomb factories in the last four months and one of them had some other chemicals in a room where there was chlorine, and they had some amounts of others chemicals and a large amount of industrial chlorine, but they were the typical chemicals used in homemade explosives. It looked like they were going to be used to make their own explosives, rather than be used in some improvised chemical weapon.

CW: From the outside the devices seem to be very basic – rather amateurish in terms of chemical weapons. They are putting far too much explosive in the device, seemingly trying to create two weapons rather than one – and not realising that it is counterproductive.

CG: Right. That is something that I have thought about a lot. As a weapon it is not effective compared to an explosive. To get a lethal dose of chlorine in this way, the average healthy person has to be close enough so that the blast will get you before the chlorine does.

CW: The first attack seemed to catch people by surprise and caused a lot of fear. It seemed to be a punishment attack and special because of it, but subsequent chlorine attacks seem to have lost their “terror weapon” tag and have become just another weapon.

CG: There are multifaceted reasons for them using it. Our analysis is based on what we see here, but until we catch someone and interrogate them you can only suspect their motive. But we know al-Qaeda affiliates – the insurgents – are attempting to pull off headline-grabbing attacks and that is one of the reasons why they use the car bombs the way that they do: they know it will get on TV. They know people will pay attention to it, it makes them appear stronger, and the government weaker – in the current conflict you are vying for the population, forcing them to choose between the government and the insurgents. So anything that can make their group seem stronger and more capable than it might be, and the more headlines they grab, the better off they are. So to a certain extent they are still using chlorine because they know if it is used then they’ll get extended coverage – more than just a regular car bomb

CW: That would seem to run contrary to what we had spoken about – that chlorine had lost its shock. Do you see that they have put any more planning into these attacks? Things like downwind hazard seem to be an alien concept – the plan seems to be drive up to the target and let it off and if the explosion doesn’t get them then the gas might. They seem to treat these exactly the same as conventional VBIED.

CG: Exactly. They appear to be an afterthought. If you look at downwind hazard, looking at how to get an effective cloud of vapour to travel across a population, then there are other ways of doing that that are much better than strapped to a car bomb where the explosion destroys much of the chemical. They have not realised that it is not an effective use of the chemical because much of the chemical is destroyed when it goes off.

CW: Presumably the reason that they use chlorine is because there is lots of it around. While we have not seen mustard used there is still some around – a shell was detonated a couple of years ago that they thought was HE, and I am surprised the insurgents haven’t got their hands on anything better. It signifies the amateur nature of these attacks...

CG: I would agree with that. We see a lot of copycat attacks, and sometimes it is difficult to know whether it is a copycat attack, where someone sees it on TV and says, “We’ll try that”, or something more considered. We are seeing attacks in areas where there is little collaboration between the insurgents or terrorist groups, so some of it is the “Hey, I saw it on TV, it seemed to work and we can do that” syndrome. You end up with a regular car bomb with a couple of big tanks of chlorine attached to it, hoping to get some kind of effect; maybe you’ll get lucky and kill somebody – but you will get on TV. But there is still – even

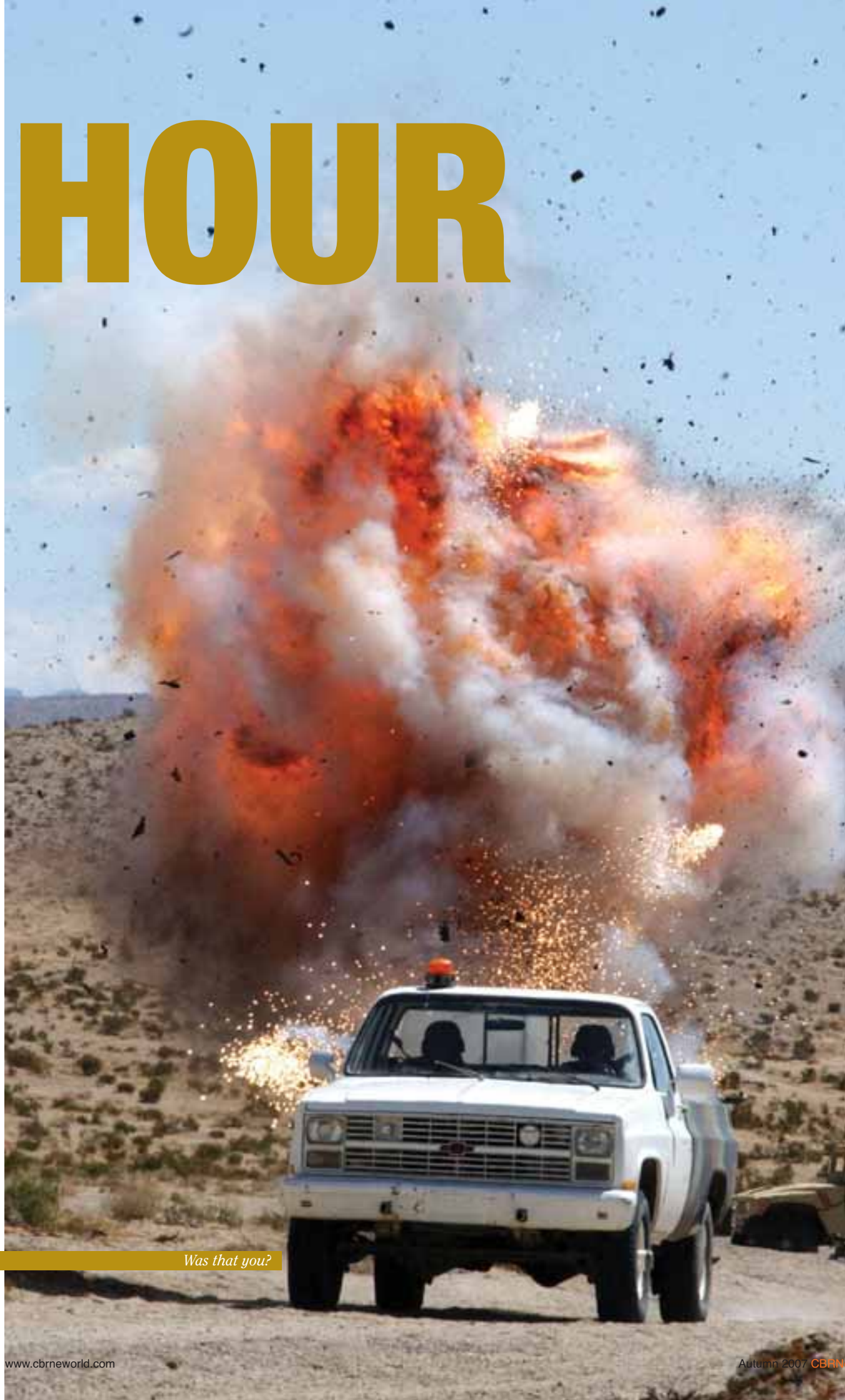
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HOUR

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Was that you?

though the tactics have been explained in the press for what it is, not an effective weaponised system – an attempt to scare and cow the population. The press haven't helped – when this first happened and we started hearing the phrase “dirty bomb”, I said “That is a term for a rad weapon; that is not accurate, don't use it, it sounds scarier than what we are seeing.” So that initial response gave them a bit of a push that they had been looking for.

CW: That is quite a psychological change from - dirty bomb ('it'll be the end of the world') - to the measured response (as long as you are not too close to it it'll all be over in 30 minutes).

CG: The ones we have seen recently have not been targeted against civilians; the target was the coalition and Iraq police mainly. So we have not recently seen the population being the target, where you get a lot of people with red eyes and lung problems. We haven't seen that in a while, and those reports which used to stay in the media for several days when it first happened quickly go out of the media now. Part of that is because it is not new, part of it is we haven't documented lots of deaths from it – it hasn't proved to be an effective method of delivery and the car bomb is worse than the agent.

CW: Did you see an increase in MOPP gear, or that people started keeping their respirators closer to hand?

CG: The MOPP posture is designated by commanders based on the threat in the area. So there was initially a response – we didn't put people in MOPP suits, but we made sure they knew where their gear was, especially their mask, to be able to respond to a threat if something happened. There was also the concern that they had done this – what will they try next? There might be mustard, where is it, could they potentially have some, etc?

CW: It seems to be a move back to the earliest days. When you look at the chemicals used in the petrochemical industry you would think that you'd see the traditional chlorine-phosgene mix, for example...

CG: Right. So having that protection handy in a war where we are not seeing a lot of chemical is useful. It is not like when we first came in, so having that kit handy,

making sure all your equipment is working, that is what has come out of this – let's make sure we are more careful than we have been in the past. But it is based on threat level – we hadn't seen a threat for several years and we are now seeing a threat. It is not a high threat, because if it was then they would be in their MOPP suits sweating all day in their charcoal, but it is still there and commanders will make a decision based on the threat level and the likelihood of attack.

CW: Since the attacks seem to have been on the civil forces, has the US given them any form of protection? There is a lot of legacy kit in Iraq – have they been issued with respirators, for example?

CG: If the government of Iraq has issued any masks then I am unaware of it and I haven't seen any. Part of it is that there was great worry when the first one went off, but after the fourth one there was a feeling that we have the threat in context – we know what the threat really is. It is not something we should be as concerned about as other concerns. You are more likely to be killed by the car bomb and if you make it through the car bomb and you just have some chlorine in your eyes then you are probably not doing too bad.

CW: After the first one there was a knee-jerk reaction to see whether the flow of chlorine could be stopped or limited. From the outside that idea seems to have been shelved...

CG: There was some consternation about how we can control the flow of chemicals or stop chlorine? We had to explain to people that it is a pretty common chemical – we couldn't stop it going anywhere as it is already everywhere. We get rid of large amounts that we find with other explosive tools or in the factories, but there is no concerted effort to take chlorine out of the

whole country. People are careful and aware of the chlorine tankers, but they need to be equally careful of all the other large tankers too, filled with gasoline or other flammable material. Those being detonated is worse than one filled with chlorine.

CW: What is the next step? Are there any thoughts on further support to a civil authority? For things like mass decon, does the US Army have a role there?

CL: Some thought and discussion has gone into that, but I have not been privy to it. We bring an expertise in that area and we have been doing CIMIC in the US since 9/11 – and we have been doing it before then for hurricane relief. Admittedly this has been directed at the US in a homeland defence role, in conjunction with other agencies. So could that capability be deployed over here? It certainly could, and we could definitely see that brought in if the need was there and the threat started ratcheting up with an attempt to go to more dangerous chemical.

It is vital that this is tied into why these car bomb networks are so important to take out, and the best way to prevent something like this is to prevent the car bomber before he builds his car and goes off to detonate it. We do that by attacking the finances, the factories, the flow of foreign fighters – who are generally the suicide attackers – and we do that through stemming the flow of the facilitation networks – the networks that move equipment and people. We do it by controlling the access into bits of Baghdad, so if a vehicle like that is up and moving in the back yard then we know that and interdict it before it gets to the target. You want to stop the car bomb network and that is a concerted effort. If they get more creative with their use of chemicals then the angle of attack would still be taking down the car bomb networks as we are doing now.

Chlorine is ubiquitous in Iraq and has been found in a number of bomb making factories



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