

Talkin' 'bout IRRevolution

Lieutenant Colonel Stephen Alexander, CO of the Australian Incident Response Regiment (IRR), tells Gwyn Winfield about the changes that are coming

GW: Australia has long had a highly competent CBR capability, and IRR would seem to be the latest incarnation of this. Could you go into detail on the role and capability of the IRR?

SA: The history of the IRR comes from the Joint Incident Response Unit (JIRU) which was set up to deal with the Olympic Games in 2000. Our role was support and incident management-style tasks, where fire, ambulance, police and other emergency services had reached their capacity. At that stage the states and territories had just started moving into the CBR area and it was thought that the military would be able to raise a capability quite quickly to look after any threats to the Olympics. So the JIRU was established, and within that unit there was a search capability, a bomb response capability and a CBR response capability. The CBR capability was reduced after the games, but after 2001 things were ramped up again to form the Incident Response Unit, which was the predecessor of the IRR.

The IRR was a combination of the old CBR Response Squadron and the Emergency Response Squadron (ERS). The ERS was a fire response capacity within defence, and merging the two together provided us with considerable synergies as the CBR response squadron was based primarily an engineer and fire response capability. Putting the two together allowed us to do such things as bomb response, search, decontamination and a whole range of other skills associated with fire and emergency response. Around 2003 the IRR was moved into

Special Operations Command. At that early stage it was a little bit of an uncomfortable fit. However, as time has passed the IRR has focused more on special operations or special forces (SF)-type operations as the rest of the army has picked up the consequence management role, but also the states and territories have ramped up their CBR response capability and other agencies have also improved in this area. The states and territories under the guidance of Emergency Management Australia (EMA) have taken on the integration of high-end emergency response into their daily routine for CBR response and they have a significantly greater capacity than they did in 2000. We don't do as much consequence management anymore, but we still are ready to do things with the States and Territories if called upon.

GW: Special operations and CBRN are a difficult fit. Special ops require speed of movement, light rugged equipment and soldiers, whereas CBRN requires time, method, logistics tail and specialists. Do you just take parts of CBRN, SIBCRA or recce? How does the SF mindset fit into CBRN – does it have to take a back seat or have you tried to encompass that mentality into the response?

SA: That is an important point. When we were a consequence response unit it was a difficult and major task to get a lot of equipment out to a site to integrate with emergency services. We were responsive,

in that we were more practised in getting on our vehicles and getting to an incident in a quick timeframe.

We don't want to lose that responsiveness but what we have realised is that we can't take tonnes of equipment to an incident site or to work with other special forces. We need to downsize our equipment and we need technical equipment that can provide a broader yet much more specific range of detection for all the CBR threats. We also need, from our personnel perspective, to be physically robust and mentally agile and have the ability to operate a variety of special forces-style equipment such as weapon systems and the like. What we have done is take the fireman who would have responded with heavy equipment and made him more physically robust and given him greater technical equipment. We are integrating him into the Special Forces systems and getting him out there to do a special operations tasks. Some of those tasks include things like sensitive site exploitation and might include getting onto a moving vessel and searching that vessel, moving through dangerous environments – such as low oxygen and the like – and towards a device or material that needs to be made safe. Those capabilities need skills like disablement, search, access, rescue and recovery, CBR medical and the ability to provide advice up to the highest end of government so we can assist in the informed decision-making process.

GW: You said it quite quickly, but there are a lot of tasks in there. Are you providing the skills to get in quickly and identify that this is a generic chemical or radiological threat, or is it the ability to go in and say this is sulphur mustard with this concentration, purity, quantity, etc?

SA: Our optimum would be equipment that is able to give us enough of an understanding of what we are dealing with and the ability to grab the spectrum and get it back to the higher technical personnel that can do higher end analysis – such as



Australia's IRR work closely with the Singapore Armed Forces ©CBRN World

the folks in DSTO. One of the areas that we are having to come to terms with is how much training we can force onto the individual soldier. The fact that one soldier might have to operate a complex GCMS as well as be suited and come out of a helicopter and roped down to a vessel and all the other tasks is difficult enough. So the simpler the instrument, with the ability to send information back, is what we are working towards. There are scenarios where we do need that high-end detection capacity and where we do need to detect on site to a finite, forensic level so we can move towards prosecution. That is a tall order to ensure that one individual, or even a handful of individuals, has all of those skills to operate that equipment...

GW: The training burden must be quite fierce; the fitness, weapons training and specialist CBRE training require a lot from an individual. Do you train everyone up to a set level and then have specialists, or does everyone know how to operate a GCMS, for example?

SA: We try and get everyone to a base level, especially at a fitness level and operating certain weapon systems, but what is essential is making sure that we have certain experts within the unit who are subject-matter experts within a certain area. Not everyone needs to be able to operate all of the equipment, but most of them need to operate the majority of it. We still need the experts, so if anyone has difficulty operating their equipment they can turn to the expert, or if they have a sensitive job we'll feed the expert in. There is such a range of skills that are required that it is near-impossible to train everyone as experts on all the skills required. Throughout the IRR there are some sections who can do search, access and recovery but are not experts in decontamination, or there are others who can do decontamination and search but are not specialists in access and recovery. 'Disablement' personnel are more specialised, all they do is disablement – if CBRN device disposal is required then we move those people forward to deal with the task.

GW: You have both expeditionary and homeland roles but only a small force. How do you balance the roles? Is it a case that if the threat in the homeland is high then you don't deploy?

SA: The land army, outside the SF area, is starting to pick up the consequence management role, so some of the burden of the domestic stuff has been taken away from us – also the states and territories have improved their capability and capacity. I am not suggesting that we are only expeditionary, just that when we look at these tasks that we want to conduct we ensure we are able to do both domestic and offshore. It is not up to the unit to decide where the primacy of response is; we just need to articulate the risks to any operation, whether domestic or offshore, and what the outcomes might be for the other theatre. In previous times we would move around in large elements – now we are able to work in smaller sections so that gives us a greater degree of versatility. If we only need to do a search task then we will only send forward a search section; if it is a

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large search task then we will send a large amount of search sections, be that overseas or domestically.

GW: At the Grand Strategic level there is an Australian desire to force project to the surrounding areas to ensure that the Australian homeland is protected – something that is part of the Australian Federal Police (AFP) role. Is this something you get tasked with by the government – to augment AFP assets and get involved in policing? How do you get involved in a civil emergency, or don't you?

SA: The AFP has a good understanding of what is going on in the region and often the police capacity and the military capacity have duplication. We might be able to assist on the military side of these countries while the AFP are working on the police side. There can be crossover on occasion and it is not unexpected or planned for, but it is the effect of working in some of the countries. We understand what AFP are doing in the region and they understand what we are doing, but our general focus is working with military units that have a consequence management response. If we are requested by a foreign government to provide assistance, then there are plans to move across and assist and, as you saw at Sispot, we work closely with the Singaporeans – though I have to doubt that there would come a scenario where the IRR would need to move overseas at the request of a foreign government, but if we are asked, we are practised to deploy internationally.

GW: Should there be a regional military consequence management role – in the way that Nato has NRF – through ASEAN or another organisation? I know this is above your pay grade but what is your opinion? Should there be a dedicated capability that rotates between nations or should you retain that ad hoc nature and go when called?

SA: It is a combination. When incidents occur there is a short time scale to respond, either pre-emptively or post incident, so I think there is a need for small countries to have a capability – even if it is an emergency response capability. On top of that are the capabilities that Singapore has, or we have, that can respond if requested, and then there is the possibility of Australia

combining with Singapore to assist in the region – if an incident gets to the stage that that might be required. There are a lot of issues in assisting other countries and moving offshore to get there and providing an effective response. We visit Singapore for Exercise Lion Bridge every second year and the Singaporeans come to Australia every second year. Practising our response procedures is part of our exercise, and while it may be an exercise we are pretty well practiced on getting on the aircraft, and rolling off the other end

GW: With your wide range of skills you have the ability to plug into many different foreign and national assets. While this is an advantage on one hand, on the other it means you need to deal with all the different tactical languages and procedures. How do you manage that or is it a case of turning up, doing it your own way and having people arc round you?

SA: You can't get into a situation where you can expect to do your own thing. Even in Australia we need to work with a variety of different fire and police agencies and you have to be flexible with your procedures. It is something that we encourage within the unit; our soldiers need a basic understanding of what they are doing, and they need to ensure that they can morph that capability quite quickly to get the task complete.

From the international perspective there are many forums where we share information: the AUSCANUKUS CB Quadrilateral Technical Response Groups; and at a national level the National CBR Working Group, chaired by EMA. They are good opportunities for Defence to share information internationally and domestically and move towards interoperability. Obviously other nations and the states and territories are not going to respond like us, or vice versa, but where possible we try to make sure we have the basic skills to ensure we can understand each other and work towards a common end.

GW: So what is next for the IRR? With the conventional military and civil agencies improving their CBRN capability what happens to you? Do you become the 'go-to guy' for Western Australia?

SA: A lot of the work we were doing in

2000, just consequence management, has been taken up by other agencies, which is a good thing; they are more responsive than we could have been. The playing field has grown bigger, and that is because the threat is changing. We need to make sure we need to cover the gaps that appear as they emerge. We are looking at where those gaps may appear and ensure that, if it takes several years to be in a position to have a capability to cover those gaps, then we will be ready.

Saying that, we are looking more to SF than the conventional area, as the conventional area is being covered by conventional forces. We believe that we are leaders in developing the CBR response capabilities and as such it is our responsibility to crack some of the hard nuts that are coming to the fore. Once we have developed a capability in some of those niche areas we can hand on our knowledge to the conventional army or to states and territories so that they to may be able to respond.

GW: Not wanting to dwell on what you think the gaps might be and stay on generalities, where do you think the most likely challenge will be? CBR, counter-terrorism, IEDs? These are all potential directions; if you had to pick one, which would it be?

SA: In 2000, Chem/bio was a very specialised field, but as time has gone on the rest of the conventional force have developed the skills to deal with the CBR. While CBR will still remain our fundamental area of expertise, we need to put effort into other areas of counter terrorism – such as fire, search, access and recovery, CB medical and other areas.

GW: When you say "fire", is this complicated USAR or just fire-fighting?

SA: A chem/bio lab is a dangerous place, there are threats from the chemicals in and biological agents in containers, but there is also a low oxygen threat, explosives and a great risk of fire and explosion. Not all those hazards are CBR and need to be dealt with to gain access to that material. So those skills are not necessarily separate to CBR but they are needed to deal with the CBR environment.

GW: You make it sound like so much fun!

SA: It can be!