

Rocky road

Captain Paul Beaves of the Canadian Jt CBRN Regiment (formerly JNBCR) discusses the ups and downs of Exercise Prairie Cobra

Exercise Prairie Cobra 2005 was the first time the Jt CBRN Regiment had collectively trained since its inception, and was also the first time that the Regiment had undergone realistic CBRN training. Sadly, the nature of some of these activities are not for this article, but by the end of this exercise the Jt CBRN Regiment had more than 300 trained specialist CBRN personnel, and had confirmed its major operational concepts.

The seeds of this groundbreaking exercise lay firstly with VCDS's review of the Regiment, which commented on our lack of opportunity for collective training, and secondly in the opportunity provided by being the MN CBRN Battalion for the UK-led NRF 6. This unit is part of the Nato Response Force (NRF) concept to transform Nato by making it expeditionary and therefore more relevant. A shortage in the NRF concept was NBC defence, so the CBRN Battalion was created as a separate but supporting entity to the NRF.

The Battalion works by the nations contributing capabilities to a shopping list published by Nato, tied together and commanded by the lead nation. As part of this, the Canadian contribution was to pay for use of the experimental proving ground and the training given by their Counter Terrorist Training Centre. This facility is located in BATUS, where the armoured units of the British Army have trained since 1972, and is therefore a convenient place to undertake any form of training, as the infrastructure is already in place. For those that have not been, the area itself is roughly five times larger than the Isle of Wight, and the EPG covers about a quarter of BATUS. The EPG thus allows very large training templates to be used, and a tactical element to be introduced for added realism.

This facility provides currently unrivalled training in CBRN techniques for the emergency services and the armed forces, also covering EOD and medical skills. Units such as the US Marines CBIRF and numerous civilian first responders regularly use the facility. The Centre usually trains the SIBCRA and EOD teams from the CBRN Battalion's Analytical Laboratory, but as the Jt CBRN Regt have light role teams, these were also trained.

The light role team concept evolved in Afghanistan in 2002, and was practised fully in



Members of the regiment "investigate" the terrorist lab ©JCBNR

operations in Iraq. Essentially, the Regiment's CBRN capability is broken down into lighter equipment and deployed in Land Rover-type vehicles, and a team consists of a minimum of eight men.

As the MN CBRN Battalion took shape, it became clear that that Canada would have a Belgian SIBCRA team, some observers from Spain and Italy, with a Polish chemical laboratory. We would also have UK EOD and a small SF element for parts of the exercise, taking advantage of training not available in the UK.

The exercise was split into two phases: three weeks of squadron-level training and four days of collective regimental exercising. Of the three weeks, only one week was CBRN specific, as the CTTC staff could only support that level of activity. The squadrons therefore had one week of adventure training and a live fire/laser simulation exercise in a "round robin" before the CTTC week. Fundamental to

this training was the field exercise philosophy, which meant that, while on the live firing and CTTC week, the squadrons lived in the field in deployed operating bases (DOB). Usually units take a "Scuba Holiday" approach, in that they arrive at the centre, suit up and conduct their training, then shower and return to their hotel rooms. For realism, the Regiment decided against this, allowing for a far more realistic training environment, especially as all soldiers taking part wore the Tactical Engagement Simulation (TES) gear at all times while they were outside the CTTC mock facilities. During the CBRN training, squadrons experienced drive by shootings on bio-detectors that they were collecting from, and had to rendezvous with the CTTC exercise staff as though they were local force protection from a supported battle group. Night time did not stop the serials either, as the squadrons had to have sentries posted to foil local "thieves", and deter terrorist activity.



"Gotcha" – Rogue scientist arrested, day saved – all in day's work says regiment ©JCBNR

The week itself was designed around a steady progression from ITD 4 (the basic NBC knowledge of all soldiers) for all personnel, through to much more sophisticated training scenarios for the different capabilities: biological detection, Fuchs recce, recon and Light Role.

The "Chem/Bio 101", as it was called, took place at the main BATUS camp, and was for as many of the Regiment as could attend. Personnel were lectured on the different disciplines by Canadian Scientific personnel, and were given the opportunity to see the types of glassware and associated infrastructure that are necessary to produce CBW devices. The scientists also briefed personnel on the correct places to take samples from when confronted with a wall of oddly shaped glass apparatus, so as to sample the agent and not the harmless sludge evaporating from the equipment.

The biological phase went into the detail of what equipment a bio-lab would need to grow an agent, and so what it would look like, also covering the best equipment to sample from, and how this was best attempted to avoid spilling or destroying a potential sample.

The Radiac phase followed a similar pattern, with the emphasis placed on the importance of protection of the individual, over and above that which IPE could give. Time, distance and shielding were demonstrated on a table-top, with the promise that the lesson would be re-enforced with something a little

more realistic later in the week. EOD also lectured the Regiment on their capability, especially the use of MONICA, a device which allows safe sampling from suspect munitions and which the Regiment's Telic LRT has already had experience with.

The EOD aspects of the training were very important to our force-development, as we would expect to operate alongside them on operations. Currently our structure does not include EOD with the Regiment so, for operations, we tie in with EOD whenever necessary. The exercise scenarios allowed the EOD operative and the recce team to tackle a complicated task simultaneously, with EOD clearing the location for the team, and the team providing additional CBRN cover to the EOD operative if a CBRN(E) device was encountered. This is the model that the Regiment and Joint Force EOD would like to take forward, and a CBRN EOD awareness course is being developed to enable Regimental personnel to better assess the environment they are investigating, for their own safety and to cue EOD if they are not already present.

The next phase of the training saw a move from the BATUS camp to facilities in the EPG, and the focus switched to specialist capabilities within the Regiment – Fuchs, Decon and the LRTs. To add greater depth to the scenarios, our intelligence cell develop a scenario over several days, so that the squadrons could make deductions about likely

threats, and in one case realise that they were not at the target chem lab, but in an adjacent bio lab. This therefore allowed squadron headquarters to practise the sort of flexibility that CBRN operations would require, including short notice mission planning, and basic on-site intelligence assessment.

The Fuchs, decon and IBDS vehicles were also exercised more realistically, with the new MLI Fuchs proving to be a highly capable vehicle. It demonstrated the ability to sample from a vehicle surface while the crew remained under armour, which will prove useful for tasks in areas where there is an artillery threat, or in non-permissive PSO environments. IBDS was used outside the UK for the first time, with simulants being released upwind to allow the sensor suite to "see" realistic attack profiles, and the crews to react accordingly.

As the exercises increased in sophistication, radiac serials began to occur, using sources that the teams would not have seen before, including a liquid source. Teams practiced locating devices in both indoor and outdoor locations, using different pieces of equipment to locate and then quantify the source. This gave the LRTs far greater depth of knowledge about the radiac part of their mission, and so greater confidence in their techniques and equipment. On the down side it also immediately demonstrated those with good co-ordination and those who required a little practice at "kit shuffling".

The final exercise was unfortunately only three days in duration, but within that period all of the skills from the previous weeks were practised again, with added elements such as an active enemy, and multiple event scenarios. The squadrons had to deal with CW IEDs on a crowded civilian vehicle, with contaminated casualties, and practise the use of SIBCRA and liaison with "host nation" authorities. Bio was also exercised, with the IBDS being cut between squadrons, and RHQ having to deal with "positive" alarms and facilitate subsequent SIBCRA taskings.

Overall, Exercise Prairie Cobra was the most realistic CBRN exercise the Regiment has undertaken, and the facilities available in BATUS allowed for a testing experience. The Regiment now has more trained specialist CBRN personnel than the US Marine Corps, and has developed closer working relationships with both EOD and SF. Most importantly, the exercise has proved that the flexible approach and variety of equipment used by the Regiment is ideally suited to expeditionary, early entry and UK operations.