

Units assigned to CCMRF gain insights for new response mission

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FORT STEWART, Ga. – The exercise scenario was a sobering one: a 10-kiloton nuclear device detonated in America's heartland, quickly overwhelming civilian responders.

Military leaders who recently trained for this response say they are now thinking differently about how to move equipment, extract the injured and take care of people following this type of attack.

Their insights came from Vibrant Response, a week-long command post exercise designed to train the commanders and staff of the nation's dedicated force for responding to chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear and high-yield explosive, or CBRNE, incidents.

The units completed the exercise Sept. 18 at Fort Stewart, Ga., just two weeks before their force, the CBRNE Consequence Management Response Force, or CCMRF, will be assigned to U.S. Northern Command to begin its mission.

U.S. Army North conducted the exercise while its subordinate, Joint Task Force Civil Support, provided command and control for the CCMRF.

Joint Task Force Civil Support, based at Fort Monroe, Va., plans, trains, develops policy and determines the way ahead for Department of Defense CBRNE response, said the force's commander, Army Maj. Gen. Daniel "Chip" Long.

Commanders and staff in the three task forces – Operations, Medical and Aviation – say that the academics and command post exercise offered valuable new perspectives for the Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines assuming this important mission.

Task Force Operations

Responding to a catastrophic chemical, nuclear or biological attack is challenging because there is no notice and it requires a fast response, Long said.

Developing the capability to deploy rapidly was a priority for the infantry unit assigned to the force, according to Army Maj. Marc Cloutier, planner for the 1st Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division. The unit forms the core of Task Force Operations, one of the three functional task forces within CCMRF.

The plans officer said that one challenge for the brigade might seem to be turning an infantryman into a truck driver or a first responder. However, Cloutier said, the Soldiers and NCOs in the brigade are smart and adaptable and can easily learn to drive a truck or use a chain saw given a little instruction.

"When I got to the unit in July, I looked at the mission and realized the biggest challenge was going to be organizing to become rapidly deployable," he said. "I knew we would have to preposition containers and equipment to deploy ourselves on very short notice."

The brigade also began working with the division and the garrison at Fort Stewart to ensure there were mechanisms in place to support a short-notice deployment, Cloutier said.

Once the exercise started, the brigade planners looked at how to reorganize their habitual formations from an infantry or armor battalion to accomplish the mission.

"Do we want to take our internal assets and develop functional task forces like engineering, decontamination, heavy movement, and search and rescue, or do we want to develop multifaceted task forces and assign them by region?" he asked.

Their conclusion? That configurations would likely change based on the type of catastrophe or the size of the geographical area. "We're developing something of a playbook from everything we do here," Cloutier said. "We'll capture everything and keep it on the shelf so if we see a similar situation down the road, we're starting that much further along."

Technical Support

Air Force Lt. Col. Kevin Martilla was especially impressed with the brigade's planning efforts, which structured the forces and established processes to efficiently execute any mission that comes down.



Soldiers at Great Lakes Naval Station, Ill., practice skills they will use when their units assume a consequence management response mission Oct. 1.

As chief of the Air Force Radiation Assessment Team, Brooks City-Base, Texas, Martilla leads a unit responsible for supporting health protection efforts for the force, to help commanders understand and manage radiation risks so they can complete their missions.

The team has existed since 1968 to respond to Broken Arrow incidents, or those involving military nuclear weapons damaged during transport.

"We've always been involved in planning to respond to Broken Arrow incidents, so it made sense that (the services) included us when developing CCMRF," Martilla said.

The team provides technical advice and the capability to measure radiation levels, collect and analyze samples, and measure and track radiological exposure to the force.

Being assigned to Task Force Operations allowed the team to work closely with the brigade planners and staff, Martilla said.

"Our team gained an understanding we wouldn't get if exercising with units on paper," he said. "This exercise has been a great step forward toward accomplishing this mission in case it ever does happen."

Also assigned to CCMRF within Task Force Operations is a Marine Corps technical support force called the Chemical, Biological Incident Response Force based at Indian Head, Md.

The force, known as CBIRF, was created in the mid 1990s as a domestic response force following the sarin attacks on the Tokyo subway.

The biggest misconception, said the unit's operations officer, is that the force is a nuclear, biological and chemical unit.

"We are a life-saving organization," said Marine Corps Maj. Stan Bacon. "Although we can identify hazards and decontaminate personnel, those actions are all geared toward allowing our force to conduct search and extraction."

Every one of the 500 Marines and Sailors in the battalion is trained to perform search and extraction, Bacon said. In addition, all members have received additional training to perform specialized technical rescues, including confined space, advanced rope, trench, collapsed structure, and vehicle and heavy machinery extraction.

The battalion is able to "grab and drag" people from within the hazardous area. However, the force also developed procedures to stabilize casualties when moving them would cause more injury, Bacon said.

"Very few military or civilian agencies plan to have medical personnel in the hot zone, in suits, treating and extracting casualties," he said.

Bacon said the Marine Corps unit benefited from training with the forces that will provide its logistics, decontamination, aviation and command and control during a disaster.

"We know we won't have to reach back to Indian Head for logistics support or work on mitigating the hazard," Bacon said. "We'll be able to focus our entire effort on saving lives."

'The main effort'

Civil support missions also are logistics intensive, as Army Lt. Col. Johnney Matthews found out.

Matthews, a support battalion commander, knows what it takes to move the fuel, food and water for a brigade headquarters and four maneuver battalions for combat.

However, the support battalion soon found they had gone from being the "unsung heroes" of the brigade to being the main effort, he said.

As the exercise scenario unfolded, Matthews learned the importance of quickly building a supply base to keep their own forces sustained so he could focus on moving food and water to affected civilians.

The battalion designed "speed balls," bundles of daily rations that feed up to 1,500 people and can be rapidly rolled on and off a military flatbed truck.

"This exercise has been a good experience for us," Matthews said. "We've been able to shake out our staff and put some systems in place for future missions. And we've learned a lot about civil support – we've been given a picture of some of the things we might face."

Task Force Medical

The consequence management response force is able to deploy with robust medical capability, including patient treatment and evacuation, blood storage and distribution, environmental assessment, epidemiology, and even stress management.

They were all coordinated by 1st Medical Brigade from Fort Hood, Texas.

As with a number of units attending the week of academics before the exercise, the 1st Medical Brigade was on alert and planning for possible response to Hurricane Ike, which was barreling toward the coast of Texas.

During every break, the medical brigade's executive officer was returning phone calls.

"We knew that if Ike hit hard enough to trigger a federal response, we had to be ready to respond," Army Maj. Tim Walsh said. "We have a lot of ongoing requirements, but we know we have to be prepared to deal with the alligator that is in our room."

Walsh said the exercise gave them an opportunity to look at mission requirements and the brigade's capabilities, then identify shortfalls and try to mitigate them.

Although they may not be able to mitigate all the shortfalls, just knowing what they are is beneficial too, Walsh said.

"States and local responders go through the same process," he said. "Our goal is to fill their shortfalls until they are able to handle the incident with just their capabilities, then we leave."

As combat operations continue in Iraq and Afghanistan, military medical capability remains in high demand. Walsh said those deployments give the unit the credibility to do their mission within the United States.

"We are proud and honored to do our mission anywhere, but to do it in the United States – that's extra motivation," he said. "We treat everyone with dignity and respect, whether it's a captured suicide attacker or one of our own Soldiers – we give them the same level of care we'd give our own parents."

Task Force Aviation

Speed is essential for this type of response, and rapidly moving people and equipment is nothing new for the 82nd Combat Aviation Brigade, according to Col. Paul Bricker.

"We're not encumbered by roads or terrain, and we move vertically around obstacles that restrict vehicular movement," Bricker said. "If a bridge is out, we can move people or large equipment rapidly."

The commander of the Fort Bragg, N.C., based aviation brigade said each of the unit's CH-47 Chinook heavy lift helicopters can move 30 people and large pieces of equipment – ideal for medical evacuation, patient transfer, logistical resupply and personnel movement.

Each of the UH-60 Black Hawk utility helicopters can transport 11 people or 8,000 pounds of cargo – perfect for transporting search teams, dogs, high-priority equipment and radiological survey teams, Bricker said.

The exercise allowed the brigade's staff to both come together as a team and to work with a joint task force headquarters.

"Working with the joint task force and the civilian sector exposes our folks to a whole different set of coordination requirements," he said.

'What if'

Long, the Joint Task Force Civil Support commander, agreed that having a dedicated response force assigned to Northern Command can only improve DOD's ability to help save lives, prevent injury and provide temporary critical life support.

"We've got to train like we've got to execute," he said. "There will be catastrophic deaths. Hospitals will be affected, first responders will be affected, and you've got to integrate all the response capabilities when citizens are trying to get away or trying to pull their lives together."

Since the joint task force was created in 1999, the nation has made tremendous progress on 'what if,' Long said.

"This exercise has been a great effort to prepare for a catastrophic CBRNE event," he said. "The nation needs to know we have this capability."