

Mission Essential:

A Perspective in the Development of the Iraqi CDC

By First Lieutenant Michael Lee

The mission was (supposedly) simple: Train the Iraqi Chemical Defense Company (CDC) on weapons of mass destruction–elimination operations and produce a well-organized, “full operating capability” element. But because of the many obstacles we faced, we were skeptical about the chances of our success.

As a signatory to the Convention on the Prohibition of the Development, Production, Stockpiling, and Use of Chemical Weapons and on Their Destruction (commonly known as the Chemical Weapons Convention), Iraq must now be able to identify, transport, and destroy chemical weapons located within its jurisdiction. The CDC was formed to comply with the Chemical Weapons Convention, other international treaties related to weapons of mass destruction, and United Nations Security Council resolutions by conducting chemical weapons recovery and elimination operations in support of the Iraqi army and the government of Iraq. As part of Task Force Troy, Chemical, Biological, Radiological, Nuclear, and High-Yield Explosives Response Team (CRT) 1, Company A, 110th Chemical Battalion—and later, CRT 2, Company B, 22d Chemical Battalion—assisted in the development of the CDC and the partnering of disposal capabilities until equipment arrived and the CDC could be properly trained.

CRT 1 received the initial CDC assistance mission. Within six months of starting from scratch, the team had trained the CDC on basic technical escort procedures and they were teaching basic chemical operations at the Chemical Defense School. As CRT 2, our job was to fine-tune the skills of the CDC in an operational environment. We needed quality intelligence to understand the complexity of chemical defense training for a foreign military force; this intelligence was obtained through relief in place. Constant contact with representatives of CRT 1 ensured our proper situational awareness before we arrived in the country.

For those of us who had been in Iraq during the first few years of the war, the sense of change was pervasive. The Iraqis were eager to take charge of their country and nurture their feeble new democracy. We found the soldiers to be proud and firmly committed to the task before them.

Following initial introductions, we went right to work. It usually takes about two years for a new U.S. Army unit to become operational; new equipment must be fielded, training must be conducted, and the unit must be certified before it is considered “combat ready.” But we did not have this luxury with the CDC, which was to be operational only months before our departure from Iraq. With such a short time available, we quickly established the following attainable objectives to achieve mission success:

- **Objective 1: Assess the strengths and weaknesses of the CDC, and concentrate efforts on the weaknesses.** To accomplish this, we had each CDC platoon execute several different scenarios. We then conducted formal after action reviews, which included the analysis of photographs and videos. This approach allowed CDC members to simultaneously see and acknowledge their mistakes. This process continued for three months before the first CDC mission.
- **Objective 2: Receive and inventory equipment, and conduct new-equipment training.** Chemical equipment included the Lightweight Chemical Detector 3, M22 Automatic Chemical Agent Detector Alarm, Improved Chemical Agent Monitor, AN/UDR-13 Military Pocket Radiac, and AN/PDR-75 Radiac Set. Training on some of the equipment had been provided by CRT 1; however, because most of the equipment had not been received by the time CRT 1 concluded their portion of the training, CRT 2 conducted its training on the remaining equipment—including equipment not organic to technical escort units, such as the Karcher Multipurpose Decontamination System. This required that we first become familiar with the equipment ourselves.
- **Objective 3: Conduct a company field training exercise.** We established two scenarios that could be used to evaluate the reporting and dissemination of information systems. One of the scenarios involved a few chemical rounds lying in an open field and area residents showing signs of exposure to chemical agents. The other scenario involved children playing around an abandoned house that contained several munitions and protective masks. Simulated chemicals were used in both instances, and booby traps were set at both sites. The CDC performed better than expected, successfully processing both sites without incident.
- **Objective 4: Direct each CDC platoon to execute a real-world mission.** With the help of the Task Force Troy commander and the U.S. Forces–Iraq chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) cell, we had the 2d Platoon, CDC, complete their first real-world mission, which consisted of performing leak, seal, and pack operations and disposing of 391 suspected chemical rounds located at a possible chemical remnant-of-war

cache discovered by the Iraqi army. The CDC considered the obstacles that they would need to overcome—ranging from the heat, to the disposal of protective gear. They asked for our help, but we provided little assistance the first day. We wanted to observe and evaluate their reaction to an actual situation. Eventually, though, we interjected some advice. For example, some of the CDC mission-oriented protective posture gear had no hoods. Because we were afraid that CDC members might become contaminated, we asked the CDC platoon sergeant to explain the plans for addressing this problem in advance of the operation. The solution was for those who would be downrange to suit up with hoods, leaving the decontamination and rescue teams without hoods until Tyvek suits could be delivered by their commander. This approach signified that the CDC was actually thinking “outside the box.” Although it was necessary for the platoon leader to adjust his timeline due to the heat, the platoon was still able to execute the mission in about three days. We were so confident in their abilities that we processed through their decontamination line upon our return from downrange.

The 1st Platoon, CDC, had a different mission—one that was simple enough that even the CDC commander acknowledged that the presence of coalition forces was unnecessary. This is just what we had been waiting for—the day that the Iraqis would say, “Relax—we’ve got this.” The 1st Platoon conducted a site survey of a mass grave site, where Iraqis suspected that chemical weapons had been used. The results were negative. This mission helped the 1st Platoon (who, unlike the 2d Platoon, lacked drive) to gain confidence in their abilities, the trust of their commander, and respect from the 2d Platoon.

The CDC has subsequently performed several other real-world missions with no assistance from CRT 2. A chemical defense capability has been added to the Iraqi army and the government of Iraq within one year of CDC existence.

- **Objective 5: Establish a training, supply, and maintenance program.** Although we managed to get the CDC to begin planning their training at least two weeks out, the platoon leaders still did not understand the evaluation process or the need to focus their training on areas of weakness. The CDC lacked the manpower and the supply system needed to sustain supply and maintenance programs. However, we knew that we must provide them with the necessary tools and allow them to develop their own methods.

Ultimately, the work of the CDC was key to the lifting of United Nations sanctions. Through the development of the CDC, the manufacturing industry began to thrive and simple things that we take for granted—like baby formula—could be produced, allowing for some semblance of normalcy to be restored to the country.

The future is very bright for the CDC. The Iraqi army and the government of Iraq have already begun expanding the CDC by adding another company and a regimental headquarters so that the 1st CDC is now part of the Iraqi Chemical Defense Regiment. CRT 2 has provided the 1st CDC with train-the-trainer instruction, and members of the 1st CDC are now serving as primary trainers for the 2d CDC. The ultimate goal is to have three chemical companies responsible for chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, and high-yield explosives response in the northern, central, and southern portions of Iraq. Plans to have some of the Iraqi officers attend the CBRN Basic Officer Leader’s Course and CBRN Captain’s Career Course at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, are also underway. Our continued partnership with the chemical corps of the Iraqi army will continue to enhance their capabilities and present the prospect of a pleasant future for the people of Iraq. 

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