

RESPONDING TO MASCAL TERRORISM AT THE COMPANY LEVEL: LESSONS IN CONSEQUENCE MANAGEMENT FROM OIF

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On 20 June 2009, the quiet atmosphere of a rural town in northern Iraq called Taza was shattered by a devastating terrorist attack. Located 10 kilometers south of Kirkuk, the majority Turkomen town of 5,000 thrived amongst the ethnic fault lines between competing Arab, Kurdish, and Turkomen enclaves. Seeking to inflame territorial tensions and undermine coalition authority, an al Qaeda splinter group drove a vehicle laden with almost 2,000 pounds of explosives into Taza and detonated the device in a residential district near its Shia mosque. The resulting explosion obliterated the entire neighborhood, damaged half of the town, killed 87 people, wounded another 400, and displaced hundreds more.¹

The Taza district at this time shared political, economic, and security partnership with C Troop of the 4th Squadron, 9th Cavalry Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, which was assigned to Multi-National Division-North and headquartered out of Kirkuk.² With a platoon conducting a key leader engagement (KLE) at a village several kilometers away at the time of attack, the troop immediately moved to assist the stricken town. In the hours that followed, as coalition elements converged at Taza, junior officers and mid-grade NCOs grappled with a scope of disaster response they could not have previously imagined. As they assisted with an unexpected plethora of consequence management tasks, ranging from mass casualty (MASCAL) evacuation to establishing a hasty refugee camp, the Soldiers involved learned valuable lessons concerning the myriad challenges of asymmetric terrorism.

Five years after the Taza bombing, as the U.S. Army engages in a new strategy of brigade regional alignment with execution of foreign partnerships often at the company level, the final years of Operation Iraqi Freedom have gained new relevancy.³ Similar to the partnered conditions defined by the 2009 Security Agreement between America and Iraq, Army units will advise and assist host-nation armies with a great diversity of military operations.⁴ Among scenarios that pertain to potential engagement with enemy forces, response to extremist terrorism or other humanitarian disasters are far more likely than maneuver combat.

C Troop's response to the crisis at Taza, in the context

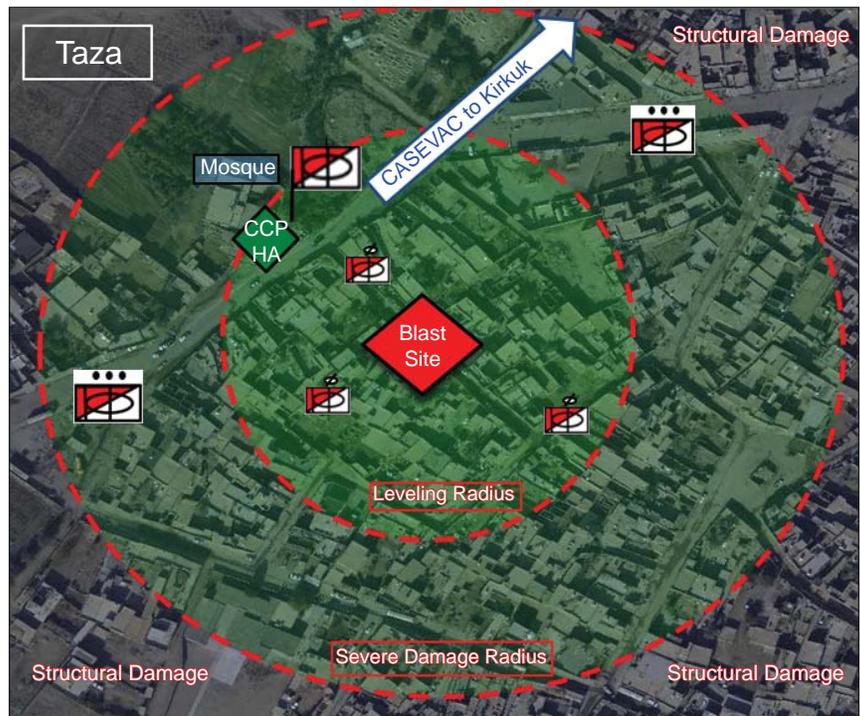


Figure 1 — C/4-9 CAV Initial Response to Taza Attack

of Soldiers conducting consequence management as first responders, thus offers pertinent lessons concerning company-level preparation for MASCAL events. Since partnered deployments will often be executed at lower echelons, this article addresses, through the lens of the disaster response in Taza, potential aspects of anticipatory preparation. Specifically, it argues that leaders should invest in practical preparedness that complements comprehensive assessment of external environmental factors with internally focused planning and training. Like all tactical vignettes, these experiences are not absolute but rather offer considerations for junior leaders as they engage foreign partnerships.

Before delving into the consequence management lessons learned at Taza, it is necessary to outline a progression of events. In a larger operational context, C Troop's mission at the time focused on mediation between opposing Arab and Kurd parties; economic stimulus programs; formal partnership with the Taza, Laylan, and Daquq political councils, four Iraqi Police (IP) stations, and one Iraqi Army (IA) battalion; and informal relations with one Peshmerga battalion. From this support posture, the unit did not control the Taza response, but rather worked in support

of the Iraqi effort with non-governmental agencies and under the direction of higher echelons, revealing the importance of multi-organizational synergy. Beginning with the moment of attack, the following is an encapsulation of the troop's intervention:⁵

- 20 June 2009 at approximately 1320: Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI)-affiliated terrorists detonate a utility truck laden with homemade explosives near the Taza Shia mosque; the blast successfully targets an intersecting movement of worshipers exiting the mosque and women and children congregating in the adjacent neighborhood following the release of primary school. It leaves a blast hole that is 40 feet wide and 20 feet deep while obliterating 90 buildings and structurally damaging hundreds more.

- A+15M (1335): 1st Platoon, C/4-9 CAV, arrives to investigate. Upon arrival they encounter chaos as thousands rush to the blast site; dust makes visibility near impossible and wounded and dead are immersed in the rubble. The mayor and police are overwhelmed; the Turkish aid organization Red Crescent has begun to load ambulances for transport to Azadi Hospital in Kirkuk.

- A+40M (1400): The C Troop commander and 2nd Platoon arrive; 1st Platoon has secured the blast site while medics assist with triage and first aid; 2nd Platoon establishes an outer perimeter with vehicular traffic control points (TCPs) while personnel provide medical support; the commander establishes a forward command post (CP) near the mosque, coordinates a casualty collection point (CCP), and stands down 3rd Platoon at Kirkuk to rest for anticipated reverse-cycle duty; a scout weapons team (SWT) soon patrols against potential secondary attacks.

- A+1.5H (1500): The 4-9 CAV commander arrives to assess while escorting a tactical psychological operations team; Delta Forward Support Company (DFSC), 4-9 CAV, arrives with class I humanitarian aid (HA) while escorting a military working dog team (explosive) and an explosive ordnance

disposal team (EOD); higher echelons have initiated high altitude surveillance; the Taza cemetery is hastily expanded to accommodate the dead.

- A+6H (1930): 3rd Platoon arrives with Public Affairs and a water pallet to relieve 2nd Platoon on south TCPs; darkness falls, complicating the search while bulldozers and backhoes continue to excavate.

- A+8.5H (2100): DFSC and element of the 15th Brigade Support Battalion (BSB) arrive with a larger HA shipment (16 water pallets, 100 blankets, 100 food bags, four electric generators for light); 3rd Platoon assumes security and reporting duty overnight as all other elements return to base. Iraqis continue to search for victims while ambulances shuttle casualties to Kirkuk.

- 21-26 June 2009: C Troop provides continuous assistance at Taza with a three-platoon rotation; Red Crescent establishes a hasty camp for refugees comprised of tents, a cooking facility, and latrines; IP and IA assume security while the district council supervises food distribution, burial ceremonies, and population displacement; a working group of representatives from 2/1 BCT, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the United Nations, and Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) plan rebuilding strategies. Numerous visits from officials and dignitaries follow throughout the coming weeks.

- July-December 2009: C Troop resumes steady-state operations with broader regional partnerships while supporting the Taza recovery with a focused micro-grant program; 4-9 CAV conducts a series of raids against suspected instigators of the attack in southern Kirkuk

A Soldier stands in solidarity with his Iraqi Police partner in the aftermath of the June 2009 Taza bombing.

Photos courtesy of author



Province; within weeks coalition forces capture the AQI planners and they are sentenced to death.⁶

C Troop's involvement in the Taza crisis proved to be a highly developmental experience. At the company and platoon levels, the execution of layered consequence management demanded application of doctrinal skills to new paradigms. While most of the troop leadership had conducted stability operations prior to the bombing, none had been trained institutionally or prepared personally to grapple with the material and psychological trauma of a large-scale MASCAL attack. The leadership's professional education (both officers and NCOs) had primarily focused on a range of high-intensity combat training and decentralized counterinsurgency operations, all dwarfed by the scale of the Taza recovery.

Despite the dearth of expertise in disaster management, the troop managed to negotiate the unfamiliar problems posed by massive casualties, population displacement, economic and political disruption, and security neglect by focusing on universally applicable fundamentals trained by all tactical companies. While the specifics of the environment in Taza remain unique due to particular ethnic tensions, the dynamics of the American-Iraqi military partnership in 2009, and resources available in that time and space, there are generalized lessons that can be extrapolated for future deployments under brigade regional alignment and other partnerships abroad. These learning points, which for sake of brevity move past prevention and center on anticipatory preparation, emphasize the critical convergence of junior leader crisis response with larger support networks of multi-echelon and multinational teams.

Preparation — External Focus

The first lessons of the Taza recovery, focusing on company-level preparation for rapid response, emerge in the area of assessment and coordination with external elements. As units deploy, they should seek to understand historical tensions and oppositional dynamics in their host locale. This analysis includes not just appreciation of their intended role and parameters as supporters, but also a calculated assessment of the record, capabilities, and interests of their partnered organizations. In this regard, leaders should utilize sources such as Army intelligence, the Central Intelligence Agency's World Fact Book, State Department documents, and the U.S. Military Academy's Center for Language, Culture, and Regional Studies to investigate the potential for terrorism across the political and social landscape.⁷ In environments destabilized by a history or imminent possibility of attack, this analysis is more easily focused.

Another key factor in the troop leadership's assessment of the human terrain can be assessing interested non-governmental entities. While these parties often arrive with partisan or ulterior agendas, they frequently have the ability to provide critical materials in communities where governments are unable or unwilling to rapidly mobilize. At Taza in particular, the Turkish Red Crescent moved with amazing alacrity as

they used helicopters to transport and construct a working refugee camp within days of the attack. USAID and State Department personnel likewise proved impactful, providing expertise to the American military command. Given the unique capacity of organizations like these to deploy support with rapidity, partnered leaders should educate themselves on the potential non-governmental, tribal, and religious actors that could assist in any humanitarian disaster.⁸

Once leaders have assessed their host-nation partners, surrounding elements, and threat probabilities, they should pursue multi-organization contingency plans for potential terror strikes. This manner of preparation could range from detailed conversations with partnered security forces to much larger rehearsals amongst first responders. This collaboration could include identification of hospitals in relation to probable targets, templating potential casualty collection points and adjacent helo platforms, involvement of interested NGOs, and clarification of how American forces are legally allowed to contribute. Additionally, leaders should assess the possibility and inherent tensions of sharing security responsibility between police and military or encouraging rapid response agreements between adjacent communities. In Kirkuk Province, for example, this kind of support plan would require nuanced understanding of the strategic consequences of hastily moving IA or Peshmurga battalions across the "Red Line" dividing Arab-Iraq and Kurdistan for any reason.

This concept of contingency planning with partners and interested parties is again validated by C Troop's experience at Taza. While the unit maintained excellent partnerships with its assigned partners and had by that time conducted numerous combined training events, patrols, and raids, there had been no specific coordination for reaction to a spectacular attack across the assigned districts. In the Taza case, prior planning could have allowed a swifter security response with IA guarding entry points against secondary strikes while IP from other towns assisted with the search. As it happened, C Troop assumed protection of the operation for the first 48 hours while the provincial government and NGOs came together haphazardly for the initial recovery.

A second aspect of external preparation pertains to the company's relationship with its higher headquarters. As in all combat operations, the communication between the forward elements and the battalion tactical operations center (TOC) will experience strain during an intense response to a large-scale terror event. Company-level leaders therefore need to ensure they understand the battalion commander's intent for rate of situational development and expectations of reporting metrics for spectacular attacks. On the battalion level, it may be important to allow key staff to visit the recovery operation to gain contextual appreciation for the mission they are supporting, but it is equally important to limit "sightseeing" by unhelpful parties. On the company end, junior officers and NCOs need to be continually reminded of the vast apparatus working endless hours to support forward operations and attempt to maintain patience accordingly.

Ultimately, as C Troop learned at Taza, the successful



Taza residents search and excavate for missing victims after the 20 June 2009 bombing.

cooperation between higher and lower echelons will have profound and multiplying impacts on mission success. In that scenario, the squadron commander provided clear intent and orders and visited the recovery site daily to maintain contextual understanding, but did not “camp out” in what he designated as a company-level operation. On the squadron staff, the operations officer and his team likewise enhanced the response by forecasting critical enablers, synchronizing logistical and maneuver elements, and maintaining constant dialogue with their counterparts in the troop command post.

Preparation — Internal Focus

A second and perhaps more important aspect of company preparation for a potential terrorist attack is internal training of subordinate platoons and sections. In this internally controlled domain, as opposed to the world of host nations and NGOs, the habitual administrative and tactical systems of the U.S. Army are already ideally suited to quickly implement crisis management. While maneuver tasks are indeed very different than the execution of humanitarian exercises, the fundamental values of mission command, lateral and horizontal coordination and cooperation, tactical discipline, network-centric enhancement, and operational flexibility at the company level remain the universal ingredients for success in all environments.

Taken to specifics, U.S. Army companies deployed in partnership roles abroad should seek advance preparation for a catastrophic event, terrorist inspired or purely environmental, by training personnel and developing versatile systems for contingencies. Similar to assessing host-nation factors, the leadership should survey the assets and capabilities of all available American units, agencies, and organizations in relation to their specific mission. This could include tactical support from manned and unmanned aerial platforms, military working dogs, explosive ordinance

disposal, and quick reaction forces in addition to support from Civil Affairs, Special Operations Forces, federal agencies, and joint service elements. At Taza, for example, the brigade Civil Affairs team provided more than 100 food bags, six boxes of clothing, and consignments of rice and cooking oil for immediate support.

Once educated on available resources, commanders should supervise contingency rehearsals in response to a MASCAL event by the headquarters section and subordinate platoons. In this exercise the performance of the troop command post in particular is crucial, as it needs

to understand its primary and alternate lines of communication (higher and lower) as well as specific reporting and asset request procedures. This proficiency is combined with the necessity for the commander to plan for varied operational cycles that allow the company to “surge” maximum combat power for a short duration or maintain continuous platoon coverage for an extended period. Additional critical assessments may include the company’s ability to project a forward command post, capability to communicate via secure transmission over various distances, and the maintenance of reserve emergency HA packages in concert with partnered elements.

The challenge of responding to a MASCAL incident requires additional tasks that can be addressed, at least in general terms, while establishing unit procedures. First, leaders should be prepared to survey and catalog the crime scene (if appropriate and in the absence of host-nation efforts) to gain fleeting but valuable information about the scene leading to the strike. As in all sensitive site exploitation, personnel should be tasked to photograph the scene and chronicle the event in writing as practicable. Second, leaders should assess the capacity of company medics for massive triage and first aid and create potential emergency medical packages. All Soldiers should likewise be trained on appropriateness of assisting with corpse removal and protective measures to be taken if in contact with injured and dead victims. Personnel should also be educated in cultural norms concerning gender restrictions and burial traditions for assigned regions.

The vital importance of internal unit preparation at all echelons within the company structure was again proven in the Taza bombing. In contrast with the unfamiliar challenges of managing massive casualties and widespread destruction, C Troop found the actions of projecting and coordinating its platoons to be merely an implementation of the administrative

and tactical mechanisms developed over the previous months of patrols and raids. Much of this success can be accredited to the Soldiers of the command post section. With the executive officer and acting first sergeant leading in their doctrinal roles, the headquarters section acted as a critical conduit between the squadron TOC and the platoons rotating through Taza. They also proved highly adept in passing through and requesting key enabling assets needed by the forward elements, as evidenced by the unmanned aerial systems (UAS) and SWTs that immediately enhanced security after the blast.⁹ This competency, earned through exhaustive shift work, ultimately allowed the commander to maintain his attention forward at the operational decisive point.

In addition to planning for actions during crisis response, company leadership must prepare to implement a concerted effort to cope with residual post-traumatic stress (PTS) among Soldiers who are exposed to mass carnage. This contingency program, usually led by the battalion chaplain and senior NCO leadership, becomes particularly important when officer leadership is compelled to rapidly focus the company on new priorities amidst a demanding operational tempo. In the months following the Taza event, C Troop personnel who were parents seemed to experience the highest rates of PTS after observing dozens of Iraqi fathers claiming their dead families from the rubble.

The final lesson of company-level preparation learned at Taza, encompassing leader initiative and decision making, finds greatest relevance at the actionable echelons. While the command post performed well in its functions, it was the maneuver platoon, section, and squad leaders who adapted habitual tactical functions to an unfamiliar problem set that required constant improvisation. Throughout the entire Taza operation, the lieutenants and NCOs repeatedly made critical decisions as they provided purpose and direction to fatigued, and sometimes emotionally traumatized, personnel. The first 24 hours in particular — when dismayed Soldiers provided security while distributing HA and medical support in the midst of tumultuous crowds, constant vehicle traffic, and horrendous visuals and odors — revealed the value of previous emphasis on tactical discipline and fundamentals. In sum, because C Troop arrived at Taza on 20 June 2009 as a communicative, synchronized, and versatile organization, it was able to rapidly implement adaptable recovery solutions in the face of unprecedented chaos.

Conclusion

Despite its occurrence in a different time and conflict, C/4-9 CAV's response and recovery effort at Taza stands as an informative event for U.S. Army units deploying in accordance with brigade regional alignment. As these companies face the prospect of terrorist attacks (however remote and ranging from disruptive to spectacular), there are lessons that can be drawn from the partnership mission of the latter years of OIF. Along with understanding their intended and legal role as partners, deploying companies should seek to prepare themselves for the possibility of supporting their host community in the event of a humanitarian crisis. This

includes educating leaders about partnered organizations and interested NGO capabilities, learning which enabling assets are available in specific locales, understanding higher echelon requirements, and conducting rigorous contingency rehearsals at the company level.

Ultimately, as with all military operations, the final and most important dimension of this preparation lies in training junior leaders and Soldiers in fundamental tasks that will translate into a range of versatile action when needed. In events such as the Taza bombing, these platoons and sections will likely arrive first and develop the tactical situation in the absence of higher supervision. They will seek to augment varying degrees of host-nation competency and response capacity, and if necessary will provide security and medical aid in order to save lives. In the final assessment, the fight will be won or lost at the company level. To win this endeavor, junior officers and mid-grade NCOs must be prepared and empowered so that when disaster strikes they will act decisively the face of calamity.

Notes

¹ Casualty estimates in this article are based upon reports received from the author directly from the Taza mayor and district council members.

² See FM 3-20.971, *Reconnaissance and Cavalry Troop*, for the doctrinal composition and capabilities of an armored brigade combat team reconnaissance troop.

³ See "AFRICOM: Regionally Aligned Forces Find Their Anti-Terror Mission," *Defense News*, 20 October 2013, for an example of how the brigade regional alignment strategy intersects with counterterrorism (<http://www.defensenews.com/article/20131020/SHOWSCOUT04/310200014/AFRICOM-Regionally-Aligned-Forces-Find-Their-Anti-terror-Mission>).

⁴ See Security Agreement document at <http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/122074.pdf>.

⁵ Timeline and details derived from report, 4-9 CAV, dated 22 June 2009; additional information gained from interviews with the involved leadership of C/4-9 CAV.

⁶ See "U.S. Army: Micro-grants assist growing economy," *Satellite Spotlight*, 16 July 2009, for a relevant media example of coalition force's small business stimulus program in Kirkuk, Iraq, during 2009.

⁷ See MAJ Adam Brady, MAJ Dustin Mehart, MAJ Russell Thomas, "A Tool for Achieving Regional Understanding at the Company/Platoon Level," *Armor*, October-December 2013, for instruction on using the PMESII-PT concept to conduct region-specific training (http://www.benning.army.mil/armor/eARMOR/content/issues/2013/OCT_DEC/Brady.html).

⁸ See "Iraq: Taza bombing situation report," ReliefWeb, 13 July 2009.

⁹ See comment by GEN David Rodriguez, in "AFRICOM," *Defense News*, emphasizing importance of "command post exercises, where we train the leadership."

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