
The Los Angeles Riots

A Battalion Commander's Perspective

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On 29 April 1992, the first night of the Los Angeles riots, I watched as the occupants of the car directly in front of me shot two people. It was shortly before midnight, and the shooting took place only eight blocks from my battalion headquarters armory. Being unarmed at the time, all I could do was follow the small sedan carrying six gang members. I was soon joined by several police cars that quickly surrounded the shooters and arrested them.

Continuing toward the armory, I again stopped, this time at a group of three police vehicles, and was told that officers were arresting two youths who had just shot at them. I identified myself and my unit's mission and reported what I had seen. (One police officer said he was glad

our National Guard unit had been called in.)

As I drove the last few blocks to the armory, the night was filled with sirens, sporadic gunfire, the smell of smoke, and the other sights and sounds of a city in turmoil. This was the tragic scene near the Inglewood, California, headquarters of my battalion, the 3d Battalion, 160th Infantry, 40th Infantry Division, California Army National Guard. The battalion was the first tactical battalion to be mobilized and the first to deploy in the streets of Los Angeles. And it would be the last to re-deploy.

Much was written immediately after the riots about the alleged delay in getting the National Guard into action. Without dwelling on the larger con-

trovery, I would like to present the facts on the mobilization of the 3d Battalion:

At 2230 on 29 April, I received orders to mobilize the battalion. In half an hour, the tactical operations center became operational, security was established, vehicles and communications systems were up, and soldiers were arriving at the armory and preparing to deploy.

At 0300 on 30 April, two companies, more than 200 soldiers, were ready to deploy. By noon, 70 percent of the battalion was equipped, refresher trained, and ready to go. Between 1600 and 1700, the order to deploy arrived at the armory, along with ammunition for our weapons. By midnight, all of the companies moved to the streets. At 2345, Company C was fully deployed in Lynwood. By 0900 on 1 May, 2,000 National Guard soldiers were deployed on the streets of Los Angeles—34.5 hours after the mobilization order arrived. (The first soldiers of the 670th Military Police Company were actually on the streets conducting security patrols within 17 hours of mobilization.)

The Los Angeles riots of 1992 were unquestionably the most costly civil disturbance in 20th century U.S. history, with 58 deaths and property damage estimated in excess of \$800 million. The operating procedures followed by the 3d Battalion, 160th Infantry and other units, both National Guard and Active Army, were not riot control. The techniques used were actually those of combat operations or—more precisely—military



National Guardsmen deploy to the streets of Los Angeles.

operations on urbanized terrain (MOUT).

South Central L.A. is a war zone, even under normal conditions. In 1991 there were 771 gang-related murders in the area. The gangs had large weapon caches, including many automatic weapons, and they showed little reluctance to use their firepower.

The units of the battalion had diverse responsibilities: Company B patrolled East Los Angeles, while Company C patrolled blacked-out malls and streets, including an area where two snipers were killed by police on 29 April.

Company C, along with the battalion scouts and the mortar section, were the first of the battalion's tactical elements to deploy, and they soon found themselves busy. An occasional vehicle would speed out of the darkness, with the occupants sometimes firing at the soldiers. The company commander and his driver were fired on from a freeway overpass by a sniper using an automatic weapon.

Two companies were sent to a prison 40 miles northeast of L.A. where 1,500 prisoners had rioted on 29 April, nearly tearing down the double-fenced compound and threatening to invade the nearby community.

Company D reported to the Hall of Justice downtown to protect the jail, as well as the city and government buildings where disturbances and demonstrations took place during the first five days.

The soldiers in Lynwood, downtown, and later in the Los Feliz area and the Crenshaw Mall came under fire on several occasions. Without exception, they reacted to the snipers and drive-by shootings with cool professionalism. In several instances, they apprehended the shooters, disarmed them, and turned them over to the appropriate authorities. Adding to the stress to which the soldiers were subjected were frequent taunts and threats by gang members.

The Guardsmen's remarkable restraint in the use of deadly force, given the occasional extreme provocation, reflected their high level of professionalism and their expert noncommissioned officer leadership. In all, 9,588 citizen soldiers were deployed, with 325,000 rounds of 5.56mm ball ammunition, 36,000 rounds of .45 caliber pistol ammunition, and

3,750 CS riot grenades.

Fire discipline has long been recognized as a mark of the professional soldier, and the restraint and fire discipline shown by the California National Guard units during the riots were clearly exemplary. Only 20 rounds of 5.56mm were fired by soldiers, resulting in one civilian killed and one wounded.

In fact, this may have been the only civil disturbance in recent U.S. history in which all of the rounds fired by soldiers could be accounted for:

- Fourteen of the 20 rounds were fired at an individual who tried to run down Guardsmen on patrol; 11 of these were used trying to stop his speeding automobile. When he still failed to stop, three more rounds were fired, killing him instantly.

- Two Guardsmen fired one round each, striking a gang member who was trying to run down some policemen.

- The other four rounds were fired near an armed robber to detain him until the police arrived to arrest him.

Lessons Learned

As an old Italian proverb says, "After the ship has sunk, everyone knows how she might have been saved." In the wake of these riots, many high-level officials—civilian and military alike—and the soldiers and policemen on the ground wished they had done some things differently.

Here are a few thoughts, from a battalion commander's perspective:

Training. Units at all levels need more training to prepare to meet future

challenges such as those we faced in Los Angeles—specifically, the requirement to complement law enforcement efforts.

Although training in riot control is still useful, MOUT training is essential for soldiers operating in this potentially deadly environment. Likewise, civilian officials who are to be integrated with military forces need training to maintain their knowledge of the procedures for requesting military support. They must also fully understand the capabilities and restrictions of both law enforcement agencies and the National Guard under both state control and the more restrictive federal control. They should use every opportunity to integrate civil disturbance planning and training with other emergency action exercises. Such scenarios might include earthquakes, floods, and both urban fires and wildfires, and even tie in with the Key Asset Protection Plan (KAPP).

Communications. Military FM communications are totally inadequate for urban operations. There are simply too many obstructions, and too many complications to providing fast, reliable retransmission capabilities. When police AM radios became available five days or so into the riots, they were a tremendous help. Initially, personal cellular phones or pagers were a primary means of communication.

In planning for future contingencies of this kind, a readily available supply of cellular phones and pagers would significantly improve communications. At one time, all headquarters armories in California were linked by a common



National Guardsmen supporting local police.

single-sideband radio system that has since fallen into disrepair. This system would be invaluable in coordinating civil affairs operations, and it should be repaired and used at every opportunity.

Plans should also be made for a rapid expansion of the number of dedicated telephone lines at each armory. Our local telephone company installed a bank of mobile pay phones in all the battalion's armories so that soldiers could make personal calls to families and employers, freeing the limited number of armory phones for military traffic.

Finally, every opportunity should be used to test and evaluate an integrated emergency communications network involving the National Guard, law enforcement, civil officials, and the Office of Emergency Services.

Ammunition. Ammunition of the necessary types and quantities should be stocked either in armories or in central ammunition supply points, readily available to units in major cities. This recommendation is not meant to imply that operations in Los Angeles were in any way hampered by lack of ammunition, as some reports led people to believe. In fact, my battalion's basic load of ammunition arrived within an hour of the orders to deploy; the units deployed on time and with the ammunition necessary to perform their missions. But some units in the future may not have ammunition as readily available.

Maps. There are few adequate military maps of U.S. cities. Maps with standard military grid coordinates should be requested for selected cities in both 1:50,000 and 1:100,000 scales. During the L.A. riots, units operated using automobile club maps and maps by a local cartographer.

Equipment. Such equipment as the batons, fire shields, and flak vests used by Guardsmen during the riots was not entirely adequate for MOUT missions. Since much of it was 20 years old or more, it did not offer the advantages of current state-of-the-art riot control equipment. The body armor now on the market is lighter and more comfortable, and it offers better protection. This armor should be evaluated and procured for National Guard use.

Night vision devices are also critically needed in dealing with civil disturbances. Many of the areas in which the battalion was deployed were without power for several days, and were consequently pitch-black at night. In any such situation in the future, night observation devices would give soldiers a decided edge.

Deployment of Small Units. Small units need carefully thought-out and practiced standing operating procedures (SOPs) if they are to carry out their missions successfully. For example, the squads and platoons whose SOPs called for pre-packed squad boxes were best able to perform their missions without having to worry about immediate resupply of expendable items and key items of equipment.

The squad boxes contained such items as radio batteries, TA-312 field telephones, extra communication wire, light sticks, engineer tape, and flashlights. This type of planning allowed the units to load quickly for deployment and still have most of the equipment they needed for operations. Given the often chaotic nature of civil disturbances, it is important that units leave nothing to chance in their planning.

Soldiers' Rights. State laws need to be revised and strengthened to protect the livelihood of citizen soldiers. (The civilian jobs of mobilized soldiers are protected by Federal law but not by state law.) Judge Advocate General officers of the 40th Infantry Division did an excellent job of advising our deploying soldiers; more training and contingency planning in this area would further expedite the future processing of units deploying in response to similar crises.

Intelligence. Executive Order Number 12036, February 1968, restricted the gathering of intelligence on U.S. citizens. Nevertheless, timely, accurate intelligence is essential to the conduct of MOUT operations, and units need to be trained on what they are permitted to do in the way of intelligence gathering and how they can best do it. Guard units, for example, need the most up-to-date information on the composition, location, and operating methods of street gangs. The training of National Guard personnel

should include methods of gathering and disseminating information quickly in the urban environment.

Rules of Engagement and Arming Orders. The special orders for civil disturbance operations were not appropriate in the situation in which Guardsmen found themselves. Commanders often had to use their own judgment to ensure that they kept the necessary level of control, while also ensuring that their soldiers were not placed in unnecessary danger.

Both the 40th Infantry Division and Task Force Los Angeles commanders went to extraordinary lengths to ensure that units maintained an appropriate level of armed response. Commanders had been given the authority to modify the arming order level if the situation warranted, and this was done many times at company level on the basis of the commanders' assessments of the situation and the recommendations of local police. (*See also "Security of the Force: A Commander's Call," by Captain Bruce H. Irwin, INFANTRY, January-February 1993, pages 41-43.*)

This flexibility was particularly critical in light of the sophisticated weapons in the hands of the street gangs. The soldiers soon learned that gang members could tell whether an M16 rifle or a .45 caliber pistol was a threat by noticing whether it had a magazine in it. The disciplined actions of the soldiers on the streets of Los Angeles showed that they were quite competent to decide when force was appropriate, up to and including deadly force.

These issues were discussed with National Guard leaders during and after the riots, and this doctrine will be examined carefully before we are again called upon to deal with similar situations.

Class I Supply. Current policies do not permit stocking an emergency resupply of meals, ready to eat (MREs) at each armory. During the riots, resupply from state sources took 48 hours. We need to look at this again and consider establishing local resupply points. An alternative may be to coordinate cross-leveling from the stocks on hand at local active posts and bases.

Billeting and Staging at Armories.

Billeting and staging soon became a problem for armories near the action during the riots. At one point, my headquarters armory—which was never built to house troops—held more than 600 soldiers, and this was a real challenge for a building with seven toilets and five showers. One solution to this problem would be to pre-position portable toilets and showers, or at least to include them in contingency planning.

Another issue is the security of the armories themselves. Consideration must be given to upgrading fencing and security systems, pre-stocking barrier materials, and installing exterior lighting.

As part of contingency planning, additional civilian facilities such as schools, sports complexes, and similar structures should be identified and evaluated for possible future use, with particular attention to cooking, latrine, and shower facilities, as well as any special security

considerations. Given the problems with telephone facilities during the riots, the telephone capability of each location needs to be assessed and plans for emergency augmentation coordinated with the telephone companies involved.

In the recent past, California has experienced many natural and man-made disasters, and the need for detailed, integrated planning exercises and readiness tests is self-evident. In such disasters as the riots, the greatest threat is complacency; careful preparedness is the only way to prevent such a devastating loss of life and property in the future—not just in California but anywhere in the country.

The California Army National Guard and its 3d Battalion, 160th Infantry, can be justly proud of their rapid, professional response during the riots. But there is always room for improvement. On the basis of lessons learned during those trying days, much has already been im-

proved, and planning is under way to provide for even more efficient responses. Some improvements, such as communications, equipment, and integrated training will take even more time. But we have begun, and we must continue our efforts and rely upon constant re-assessment to ensure that we are ready to respond swiftly and decisively to any crisis that threatens the lives and property of our fellow citizens.

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The Combat S-1 In a Heavy Task Force

CAPTAIN BRADLEY T. GERICKE

A battalion S-1 in garrison faces a daily mountain of administrative requirements—paperwork to be processed, correspondence for the commander, evaluations nearing the suspense date, and innumerable strength reports. But these administrative tasks are only part of his job. He also plays a vital role as a staff officer in the field—in preparation for combat. Unfortunately, this role is largely ignored in unit training programs. Keeping the training focus on tactical training and deploying the S-1 section to

the field requires considerable forethought.

A brief examination of the S-1's responsibilities reveals several techniques he might adopt, techniques that have proved successful at the Combat Maneuver Training Center (CMTC) in Germany.

The S-1 carries out his duties on the battlefield from the combat trains command post (CTCP). Although the S-4 doctrinally commands the CTCP, the S-1 is second-in-command and, in the S-4's

absence, often oversees the minute-to-minute operation of the combat trains. He must aggressively sustain the unit in terms of his doctrinally specified critical military functions as well as his implied overall logistics responsibilities.

According to Training Circular (TC) 12-17, *Adjutant's Call*, the S-1 has overall responsibility for the efficient execution of seven critical military personnel functions. From his forward location on the battlefield at the combat trains, however, he immediately influences only