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THE REAL COST OF "ENGAGEMENT"

By

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Maritime Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

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This paper analyzes the terrorist bombings in Beirut, Lebanon in 1983 and Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in 1996, and draws some universal lessons learned on how the chain-of-command.

Lessons learned include:

(1) Tactical warning on where, when and how big a bomb was going strike was not available in either of the bombings. Given the complex nature of terrorist organizations a warning order this specific will most likely never be available; therefore, the chain-of-command must figure out how to protect their forces without it.

(2) Particular attention must be paid to where forces are bedded-down initially. In both bombings United States forces were located in urban areas which are much more vulnerable to terrorist attack. Given the disruption to the mission and the cost of moving forces it is much wiser to place forces in more isolated locations that are less susceptible to standoff bombs even if the security environment at the time seems benign.

(3) The chain-of-command must be ever vigilant if the security environment in their theatre declines because this is when their forces will be most vulnerable to terrorist attack. As the security situation declines, the chain-of-command must err on the side of asking for too much rather than too little.

While it is the responsibility of the chain-of-command to ensure United States forces are protected while forward deployed, it simply is not possible to eliminate the terrorist threat. The military and civilian leadership in the United States must understand that its forward deployed forces will always face an asymmetric threats like terrorism and when these threats are acted upon, some will be successful, despite the best efforts of the chain-of-command.

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Introduction

On any given day over 290,000 United States military members are deployed or forward based around the world in support of numerous and diverse national security objectives. This "engagement" of forces is not a risk-free venture for the United States. Because the United States military is the most capable in the world, most adversaries will not directly take on the United States military. Rather, adversaries will look for indirect means such as terrorism to further their political agendas. Two tragic examples of this type of warfare waged against United States forces have occurred in the Middle East within the past several years. The first was in Beirut, Lebanon in 1983, and the second was in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia in 1996. In both incidents a massive vehicle bomb was used and significant loss of life and property to United States and coalition combatants, civilians, and facilities resulted from the bombing. So, despite the superior ability of the United States military, its forces are still vulnerable to indirect threats.

This paper seeks to analyze these two terrorist acts and draw some universal lessons learned on how the chain-of-command can better protect their forces and facilities as the United States continues to be "engaged" around the world. The analysis will start with a brief synopsis of what happened in Beirut and Dhahran. This will be followed by an analysis of the two events that will seek to identify common threads in each. From these common threads prescriptive lessons learned will be postulated.

Beirut International Airport Terrorist Act

United States, French, and Italian military forces were initially inserted in Beirut on 25 August 1982 to provide an international stabilizing presence while the Palestine Liberation Organization and Syrian troops withdrew from the city. Under the auspices of

the Multinational Force 15,000-armed personnel were evacuated from Beirut. By 10 September 1982 the mission was accomplished and all Multinational forces were withdrawn.

The assassination of President-Elect Bashir Gemayel just four days after the withdrawal of the Multinational Force and the Phalangist slaughter of Palestinian refugees soon thereafter again plunged Beirut into turmoil. On 20 September 1982, President Reagan announced that in consultation with the French and Italian governments, agreement had been reached to form a new Multinational force to reenter Beirut with the mission of enabling the Lebanese government to resume full authority over its capital. Twelve hundred United States Marines reentered Beirut on 29 September 1982 as part of the Multinational force composed of United States, French, Italian, and much later British forces. The mission of this contingent was to establish an environment that would facilitate the withdrawal of foreign military forces (Israeli and Syrian) from Lebanon and to assist the Lebanese Government and the Lebanese Armed Forces in establishing sovereignty and authority over the Beirut area.[1]

The security environment in which the Multinational force operated was described as non-hostile. The Multinational force was warmly welcomed and the majority of Lebanese people appeared to appreciate their presence. However, by mid-march 1983, the security environment began to change and became progressively more hostile as the months passed. The destruction of the United States embassy in Beirut on April 18th was indicative of the extent of the deterioration of the political/military situation in Lebanon by the spring of 1983. By the end of September 1983, the security

environment in Lebanon was hostile and could no longer be described as peaceful, despite the fact that the Multinational force was engaged in peacekeeping operations.

The culmination of this hostile environment occurred on 23 October 1983, when a truck laden with the equivalent of over 12,000 pounds of TNT crashed through the perimeter of the compound of the United States contingent of the Multinational Force at Beirut International Airport. The truck penetrated the Battalion Landing Team Headquarters building and detonated. The force of the explosion destroyed the building resulting in the deaths of 241 United States military personnel. Almost simultaneously with the attack on the United States Marine compound, a similar truck bomb exploded at the French Multinational force headquarters.

Khobar Towers Terrorist Attack

Joint Task Force - Southwest Asia (JTF - SWA) was activated in August 1992 to enforce United Nations Security Council Resolutions 687, 688, and 949. These resolutions resulted in the adoption by the coalition of first a "no-fly" zone and later a "no-drive" zone in southern Iraq. JTF - SWA's mission became known as Operation SOUTHERN WATCH. When the JTF stood up it assumed tactical control of the 4404th Wing (Provisional) which was located at Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Operational control of the Wing remained with the Air Force Component Commander (USCENTAF/CC). In 1996, the Wing consisted of six provisional groups and had over 5,000 personnel assigned at eleven locations in four countries and was the only United States Air Force combatant unit in the Southwest Asia Area of Operations. The Wing also assumed tactical control of air expeditionary forces (AEF) when they were deployed in theater. A typical AEF would include approximately 1,000 - 2,000 people. The mission of the

4404th Wing (Provisional) was and still is to "...serve as the front line defense against possible Iraqi aggression."[2] In the year the bombing took place, the Wing routinely flew about 100 sorties a day, involving up to 15 different types of aircraft, operating from several air bases throughout the area of operations.

Until the fall of 1995, force protection was not a major consideration within the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. The country was viewed as secure and stable with the government in firm control. This was a common view held by both the State Department and the Department of Defense.[3] Tens of thousands of Americans, both military and civilian, and other Westerners had lived safely in Saudi Arabia for decades. This sense of security and stability was shattered on 13 November 1995 when a terrorist bomb exploded in the parking lot of the building housing the Office of the Program Manager, Saudi Arabian National Guard (OPM - SANG). The explosion was sufficient to bow the outer concrete walls of the building. Five Americans and two Saudi's were killed. Although Saudi Arabian officials viewed this incident as an isolated aberration, CINCCENT and all his subordinate commanders in the area of operations viewed it as a wake-up call. The threat level was upgraded to "high" and security assessments were mandated for all facilities in theatre.

Just seven months later a sewage truck pulled into the public parking lot abutting the northern perimeter of the Khobar Towers complex. The truck backed into the hedges on the perimeter and parked. Two men got out of the truck and sped away in an adjacent car. About four minutes later the truck exploded. The blast ripped off the entire front façade of the building in the compound nearest to the truck (building 131), and damaged five adjacent buildings. Nineteen American service members were killed, and over 500

more were injured. The size of the bomb was estimated to be the equivalent of 20,000 tons of TNT, which is bigger than the bomb used in the Oklahoma City bombing. The bomb blew out windows throughout the compound, and left a crater 60 feet wide and 16 feet deep. The blast was heard in Bahrain 20 miles away.

Comparison of the two terrorist acts

Immediately after the Beirut and Khobar towers bombings the respective Secretaries of Defense chartered a commission to investigate the facts and circumstances surrounding the terrorist acts and to make recommendations for improving force protection measures. In both cases the commission was chaired by a retired four-star general officer: Admiral Long, a former CINCPAC, conducted the investigation of the Beirut Airport bombing and General Downing, a former CINCSOCOM, conducted the investigation of the Khobar towers bombing. About one-third of the action officers that participated in the Beirut investigation also participated in the Khobar towers investigation.[4] In addition, the United Air Force supplemented the Downing Report with two additional reports to further clarify issues raised in the Downing report. These reports and the reports from congressional hearings were the primary sources used to analyze lessons learned from each bombing incident.

In comparing the two terrorists incidents the first thing that strikes the analyst is how dissimilar the military operations were and yet comparable conditions manifested themselves which made United States forces vulnerable to a terrorist attack. The Marines in Beirut were engaged in a peacekeeping operation and had been there a relatively short period of time (less than a year). Lebanon had a very weak central government and one of the tasks of the United States military forces was to help train the Lebanese Armed

Forces. In contrast, the military operation in Dhahran was an extension of the Gulf War and had been in operation for over five years when the bombing took place. In addition, Saudi Arabia had a strong central government in contrast to the weak Lebanese government.

Yet in both cases the security environment in the area of operations changed over the course of about a year and in neither case was the chain-of-command effectively able to counter the increased threat. One overarching reason for this failure was lack of specific intelligence indicating exactly what the threats were, and where and when they would manifest themselves. Both after action reports indicated that there was not adequate human intelligence to protect United States forces against the terrorist threat. A second factor which made it significantly more difficult for the on-scene commander to protect his forces was the location of his troops. As the security environment deteriorated in both Beirut and Saudi Arabia, United States forces were bedded down in densely populated urban areas with limited ability to increase standoff distances. Finally, both incidents demonstrated the inability of the chain-of-command to implement effective measures against a rapidly degrading security environment. In Beirut, this failure was caused more by a conflict between how to fulfill the presence mission and still protect United States forces. While in Saudi Arabia, despite over 130 security enhancements completed in just over 7 months, the Wing was still vulnerable to a massive standoff bomb.

Lack of Tactical Intelligence on the Threat

The Long commission stated, "In summary, the United States did not have the specific intelligence, force disposition or institutional capabilities sufficient to thwart the

attack on the BLT headquarters building. The USMNF commander received volumes of intelligence information, but none specific enough to have enabled the prevention of the attack or provide him other than general warnings."[5] At the time of the attack, the Marine Amphibious Unit (MAU) commander understood the major threat to be the numerous artillery, mortar and rocket rounds impacting in the MAU area. Therefore, the battalion landing team building was an excellent choice to house Marines because it was very well constructed and as a result was effective in protecting the Marines from injury and/or death from the primary perceived threat at the time. In addition, the building was so well constructed that it was also perceived that a car bomb would not be able to destroy the building.[6] The bomb that was used in the attack had six times more explosive power than the bomb that struck the United States Embassy earlier in the year. Threat experts and the chain-of-command simply could not envision a bomb that big. Tragically, in placing his forces in one building to better protect them from sniper fire, the commander made his forces much more vulnerable to a suicide bombing. This clearly demonstrates just how difficult it can be for commanders to protect their forces, especially if they cannot get specific intelligence on the threat.

A lack of intelligence was also a key factor in the Khobar towers bombing. The Downing report stated that, "There was no intelligence from any source which warned specifically of the nature, timing, and magnitude of the 25 June 1996 attack on Khobar Towers."[7] While United States intelligence agencies recognized the likelihood of another terrorist attack in the area of operations, Mr. David Winn, the Consul General, Dhahran, summed up the perceived threat accordingly, "'Everyone assumed...there would be another bombing,' and, the 'Focus was Riyadh. No one really thought anything was going

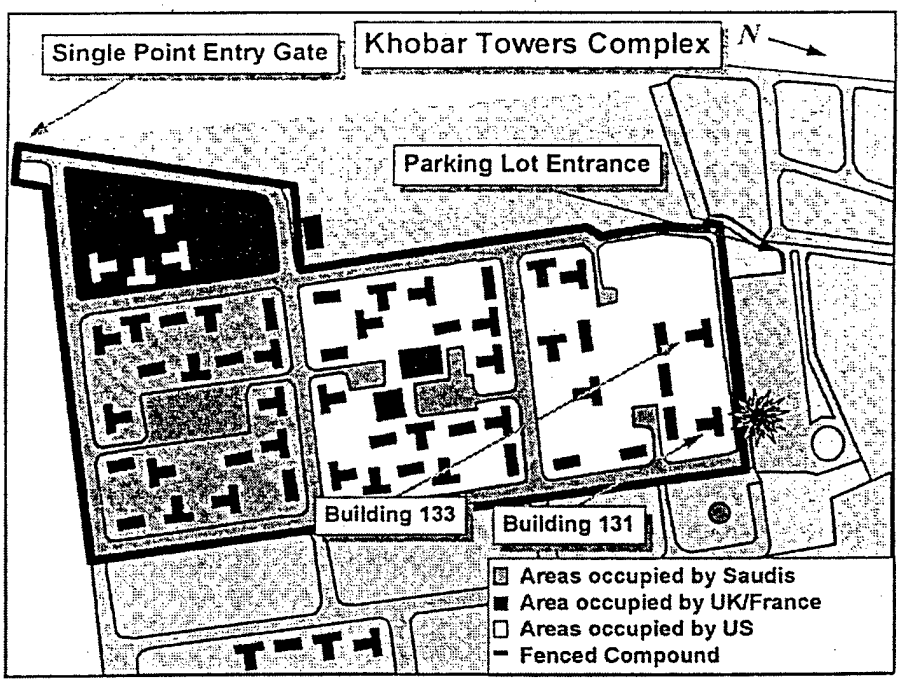
to happen in Dhahran.'"[8] Nonetheless, intelligence estimates recognized Khobar Towers as one of the more likely points of attack. However, the general belief was that the size of the terrorist bomb would be similar to that employed in the OPM - SANG bombing (250 TNT equivalent). Again, the Consul General in Dhahran stated, "the thought of a 20,000 or even a 5,000 pound bomb driving up was pretty inconceivable."[9] If the bomb had in fact been the size predicted by intelligence experts, the standoff distance between the bomb and the barracks would have been more than enough to prevent injuries from the blast. However, as in the case in Beirut, the magnitude of the bomb and the details on how it would be employed were not known ahead of time by intelligence experts or the chain-of-command.

Location of the United States Forces

When the United States Marines (32nd MAU) reentered Beirut on 29 September 1982, military leaders and diplomats agreed that the Marines would be bedded down at the international airport. Brigadier General Mead, the commander of the 32nd MAU, stated that, "the selection of his unit's position was not a simple military decision; rather it involved several diplomatic and political considerations."[10] He further stated that, "we did not want to accept the position but, because of the low order of threat and the diplomatic requirements, it was acceptable and we felt that we could ensure the safety of the Marines and, therefore, were down onto the low ground as defined by the railroad to the east of the airport."[11] So, the Marines operated out of the center of an operating airport. They were in the middle of a triangle with buildings used by the airport on two sides; only the third side was clear. The airport access highway ran down one side of their compound, just 100 feet from the side of the BLT building. Another road through

the north end of their encampment was needed by employees of one firm to reach their hangars and offices. Colonel Geraghty, the MAU commander when the bombing took place, stated it would be "virtually impossible" to isolate his unit in its current location.[12]

Geography was also a factor in the Khobar Towers bombing. Khobar Towers is a large 14 city-block residential section located in a suburb of Dhahran call Al-Khobar. The buildings are primarily eight story apartment complexes interspersed with four story apartment buildings, underground garages and other multi-purpose buildings. The United States controlled portion of Khobar Towers encompassed approximately two city-blocks, oriented on a north-south line, located in the northwest corner of the overall Khobar Towers section. It contained approximately 40 buildings. The compound is located in an urban environment, separated from Saudi civilian occupied portions and the Saudi military occupied portion by city streets.



Options to provide separation between the United States compound and other sections were limited by its proximity to other apartment buildings, city streets, private

homes, mosques, and a city park. The northern perimeter abuts a parking lot serving a mosque and a city park. The western side of the compound overlooks primarily open space with a small number of Saudi houses near the northwest corner. To the east, the complex is separated from the civilian housing by parallel city streets separated by an earthen median approximately 250 feet wide. On the southern edge of the compound, a street separates the United States and Saudi military housing areas with a fence precluding access.

Security of the Khobar Towers compound was shared. Security outside the compound's perimeter was solely the responsibility of the Saudi civil police. The responsibility for security within the Khobar Towers compound was shared jointly between the Saudi military police and the United States Air Force security police. The relatively close proximity (80 feet) between building 131 and the northern perimeter was identified as a security risk. As a result, the Security Policy Squadron Commander, the Support Group Commander, and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations Commander asked their Saudi counterparts to extend the perimeter another 20 feet. However, this request was denied most likely because it would encroach on a parking lot used to support an adjacent park and Mosque. In fact, two years prior to the bombing, the fence was moved closer to the compound to provide more space for the parking lot. In response to the Wing's concerns, the Saudi police did increase security patrols of the northern perimeter and used under cover police to monitor the northern perimeter. And again, it was believed that if a car bomb were used it would be the size of the one used in the OPM - SANG bombing and the current standoff distance would be adequate for force protection. Hindsight tells us these were false assumptions. Given the size of the bomb,

even moving the perimeter 20 feet would not have prevented the loss of life that resulted from the bombing. Interestingly, after the bombing the Saudi's moved the fence out 400 feet. More significantly, United States airmen were moved from Dhahran to Prince Sultan Air Base, an isolated desert location, at a cost of $150 million.

Effectively Dealing with a Changing Security Environment

In the thirteen months the Marines spent in Beirut prior to the bombing, the security environment got progressively worse, and yet the "peacekeeping" mission of the United States Military forces in the area of operations was growing. In fact, the after action report indicated that mission creep significantly contributed to the increased security threat to the Marine forces. As the United States military became more involved in aiding the Christian led Lebanese Armed Forces the perception of the Marines neutrality waned and as a result they became the targets of anti-government forces. Despite the changed security environment, the Marine commander in the field, Colonel Geraghty, did not upgrade his security posture because he felt he needed to be visible to successfully fulfill the mission. In Colonel Geraghty's own words when asked why he did not put up berms or take other major security precautions he stated, "It was a balance really in judgement on what we could do, what we should do, and at the same time not giving the appearance of being an occupation force."[13] While others up the chain-of-command did not believe such visibility was necessary to fulfill the presence mission, Brigadier General Mead and Colonel Geraghty both believed visibility was key to mission accomplishment. However, as the security posture in Beirut changed the safety of the Beirut International Airport became very suspect. In fact, the congressional committee investigating the bombing believed Colonel Geraghty showed poor judgement

in choosing visibility over the security of his troops. This again demonstrates the dilemma commanders may face when trying to balance the needs of the mission against the needs of their force. In hindsight, it is always easier to say what should have been done.

The situation in Dhahran was quite different. A vulnerability assessment was completed and recommendations were in the process of being implemented when the OPM - SANG bombing occurred. Soon after this bombing, another vulnerability assessment was accomplished, and all but three recommendations from that assessment were implemented prior to the Khobar towers bombing (133 of 136 suggested actions). One of the three remaining recommendations was rejected outright as unnecessary at that time. The other two: installing Mylar on the windows of all perimeter building and installing fire alarms in all buildings were included in the 5-year facilities plan. The cost to install the Mylar alone was estimated at $4 million and the effectiveness of the measure was questionable. The Wing commander was criticized in the Downing report for not pressing ahead with the Mylar installation and the alarm system. However, there is no Department of Defense standard for installing Mylar. Weapons experts caution that if the Mylar is installed without reinforcing the window frame the entire window frame will blow out. So, the risk of flying glass injury is reduced but the risk of blunt force trauma is increased. It should also be noted that it is against Department of Defense policy to use fire alarms for anything but fire warnings (i.e. for bomb threat warning). So despite conducting two vulnerability assessments and implementing almost all of the recommendations, the Wing was not invulnerable to terrorist attack. This again

demonstrates the difficulty in protecting United States military forces that are forward deployed. There are no foolproof measures.

Operational Lessons Learned

So, how does this comparison help future operational commanders? First, the chain-of-command was not able to get precise tactical intelligence in 1983, and they were still not able to get it in 1996. Information this specific will most likely never be available. In fact, Admiral Crowe stated in the press briefing on the accountability review of the embassy bombings in Nairobi and Dar es Salaam that a lack of tactical warning was "not a matter of intelligence failure. I don't like that term. The fact is that in the state of intelligence today, and in the state of how complex these organizations are and the difficulty deriving what they are doing, that it is just not within our reach to have tactical warning. We may have it sometimes, but that's a bonus, not something we can depend on. We've got to assume that we will be without tactical warning and proceed on other bases."[14] The chain-of-command must figure out how to protect their forces without specific knowledge of an imminent attack.

There is an ever-expanding list of Department of Defense, Joint, and Service specific publications available to assist commanders in assessing their force protection shortfalls. However, most are fairly generic in nature. Although many are being revised as a result of recommendations made by the Downing Commission, force protection will still predominantly rely on the chain-of-command's best judgement. Vulnerability assessments are and will continue to be important tools in the commander's kit bag for assessing the vulnerability of their forces. However, given the gross underestimation of what the terrorists were capable of in both the Beirut and Khobar Towers bombings,

operational commanders need to take the threats and multiply their deadliness by at least a factor of five and then determine appropriate force protection measures. The nature of terrorism is that it strikes where it is least expected. The chain-of-command must account for the terrorist's ability to master the element of surprise when taking measures to protect their forces.

In addition, particular attention must be paid to where forces are placed when initially deployed. Especially given the potential significant cost, time, and negative impact on the mission that result from re-positioning forces should the security threat change. To the maximum extent possible forces should not be placed in urban environments. Both these bombings and the recent American embassy bombings in Africa show that it is much harder to protect our forces in an urban environment. Even if the security environment is initially benign that security posture could change. Getting the forces bedded down safely for the worst-case security environment is much more efficient in the long term. If this is not possible, the chain-of-command must understand and accept the increased risk to our forces of terrorist acts of aggression. The chain-of-command, both military and civilian, cannot have it both ways.

Finally, the chain-of-command must be ever vigilant if the security environment in their theater becomes more threatening. This period of change is when their forces are most vulnerable to terrorist attack. It is difficult for the chain-of-command to react quickly enough to a changing security environment. As the security environment becomes more dangerous, all commanders should err on the side of asking for too much rather than too little. Military leaders have become so accustomed to operating in a constrained environment, that they may have the tendency not to pursue costly options

for force protection. A Department of Defense Combating Terrorism Readiness Initiatives Fund has been established to provide a means for CINCs to react to unanticipated force protection requirements (CJCSI 5261.01A). Commanders at all levels need to know that this fund exists should they need funds quickly for force protection enhancements.

Conclusion

United States military forces will continue to be deployed in support of the National Security Strategy of "engagement" for the foreseeable future. This "engagement" brings with it the potential for the use of asymmetric threats like terrorism against United States forces by adversaries who cannot take on the United States military directly. It is the responsibility of the chain-of-command--from the National Command Authorities down to the tactical commander in the field--to ensure United States forces are protected to the best of this country's ability. Given the complex nature of terrorist organizations, identifying exactly when and where United States forces will be targeted and how they will be targeted is not possible. This makes it difficult to protect forward based and deployed forces; especially in congested urban environments. While there are many measures the chain-of-command will take to protect their forces, it will never be fool-proof. The Khobar Towers bombing clearly demonstrates this: 133 of the 136 recommended actions were completed prior to the bombing and yet the facility was still vulnerable to a massive terrorist bomb. This is in fact the cost of being "engaged" around the world and if this country is not willing to take that risk then perhaps it needs to re-think its national security strategy.

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