

Toxic DAGGER

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David Oliver reviews the UK military's counter-CBRN capabilities

The UK CBRN Corps trained extensively for the threat of chemical warfare in both Gulf wars which, thankfully, were not used by Saddam Hussein's forces against British troops in either conflict. Almost two decades later, the conflict in Syria has shown that some nations not only possess weapons of mass destruction, but are prepared to use them



Above: A Royal Marine gets ready to take over a suspect chemical factory during the chemical warfare Exercise Toxic Dagger.

Left: A Falcon Squadron 6x6 Fuchs TPz CBRN reconnaissance vehicle and Husky support vehicle conduct an exercise in Jordan.



In the interim, the UK's CBRN capabilities have been largely neglected with responsibilities being passed from the British Army to the Royal Air Force (RAF) and back to the Army.

Operation Morlop

This all changed in March 2018 – when the military was deployed in response to an incident which saw former Russian agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter poisoned by a nerve agent in Salisbury, Wiltshire. Military personnel from the Army and the RAF were brought in to work in support of DEFRA (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs)

and the civil authorities conducting the recovery operation in Salisbury in the aftermath of the attack during Operation Morlop.

Personnel from Suffolk-based 20 Wing RAF Regiment and the Wiltshire-based 22 Engineer Regiment worked in the surrounding area to remove material in accordance with direction by DEFRA.

Around 190 military personnel in total assisted in the recovery operation providing key skills, equipment and capability.

Thirty-two personnel from the Falcon Area Survey & Reconnaissance Squadron were deployed to Operation Morlop. Falcon Squadron is the

British Army's only mounted counter-CBRN unit and is a sub-unit of 22 Engineer Regiment. Manned by the Royal Tank Regiment (RTR), it is equipped with two troops of four German Rheinmetall Landsystems 6x6 Fuchs TPz vehicles. Crewed by four CBRN specialists who are able to operate in CBRN hazard areas, these vehicles are capable of chemical and radiological hazard detection.

The Falcon Squadron also has seven BAE Systems 4x4 Panther command and liaison vehicles and six Navistar Husky tactical support vehicles on strength. However, the unit has only 70 personnel, and the Fuchs are approaching obsoles- ➤

Right: Members of the Falcon Squadron, Royal Tank Regiment, conduct final preparation training before deploying in support of the civil authorities during Operation Morlop.

Bottom: Members of Zulu Company 45 Commando check a vehicle at Imber on Salisbury Plain during Exercise Toxic Dagger.

cence and will need replacing with more CBRN-capable reconnaissance vehicles.

Toxic Dagger

Only two months after the Salisbury attack, the largest annual chemical warfare exercise in the UK – Exercise Toxic Dagger – took place. It involved 40 Commando Royal Marines and personnel from the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (Dstl) and was supported by Public Health England (PHE) and the Atomic Weapons Establishment (AWE).

Formed in 2001, Dstl is an Executive Agency of the UK Ministry of Defence (MoD). It works to deliver high-impact science and technology for the benefit of the UK's defence, security and prosperity. It provides sensitive and specialist science and technology (S&T) research and advice and analysis to the MoD and wider Government. In delivering specialist S&T support to military operations, Dstl provides specialist technical advice to support counter-terrorism; offers impartial advice and



analysis to the UK's Air, Land, Maritime, and Joint Forces areas (The Commands) and Defence Equipment and Support; and supports the delivery of intelligence capability within the MoD and wider Government. While the commandos have kept up with the latest developments and tactics on the battlefield, the scientists have monitored CBRN progress and how to defeat them.

During Exercise Toxic Dagger, specialists in CBRN from Dstl and AWE were able to create realistic exercise scenarios based on the latest threat information. Completing the training and exercising against these scenarios provided a challenging programme for the Royal Marines to demonstrate their proficiency in methods to detect, assess and mitigate a CBRN threat.

The three-week programme included Company-level attacks and scenarios

concerning typical CBRN features, concluding with a full-scale exercise involving government and industry scientists and more than 300 military personnel. The exercise climaxed with a full-scale casualty treatment exercise involving government and industry scientists and more than 300 military personnel, including the RAF Regiment. A chemical decontamination area was set up not merely to treat 'polluted' commandos, but also any wounded prisoners they may have brought in. Once cleansed, the casualties could be moved to local hospitals.

Preparing for the next attack

The Royal Marines have also set up a unit specialising in chemical warfare skills to prepare for a repeat of the Novichok attack on Salisbury. Zulu Company from 45 Commando, based in Arbroath, Scotland, will be the first marines to respond to a CBRN incident commandos were given the training in response to the heightened threat following the Salisbury nerve agent attack.

Due to the heightened threat following last year's incident in Salisbury, the

commandos refreshed their skills at the UK's specialist training centre preparing troops for such forms of chemical warfare. Military and civilian specialists from the Defence Chemical Biological Radiological Nuclear Centre at Westdown Camp on Salisbury Plain, just 15 miles from the site of the fatal Novichok attack, helped the Scottish-based marines to perfect their skills.

This involved a week of classroom learning before a week of practical training in a simulated attack on Imber, a deserted village used for military training. The final assault incorporated pyrotechnic and electronic battle simulators to make the experience as real as possible, allowing Zulu Company wearing protective masks to gain a huge amount of training benefit and vital CBRN experience.

...Or pandemic

Toxic Dagger 2019 was the second major CBRN warfare exercise for the Royal Marines inside 12 months. Not only is Zulu Company now the Corps' experts in CBRN warfare and the first to be called upon in the event of an incident



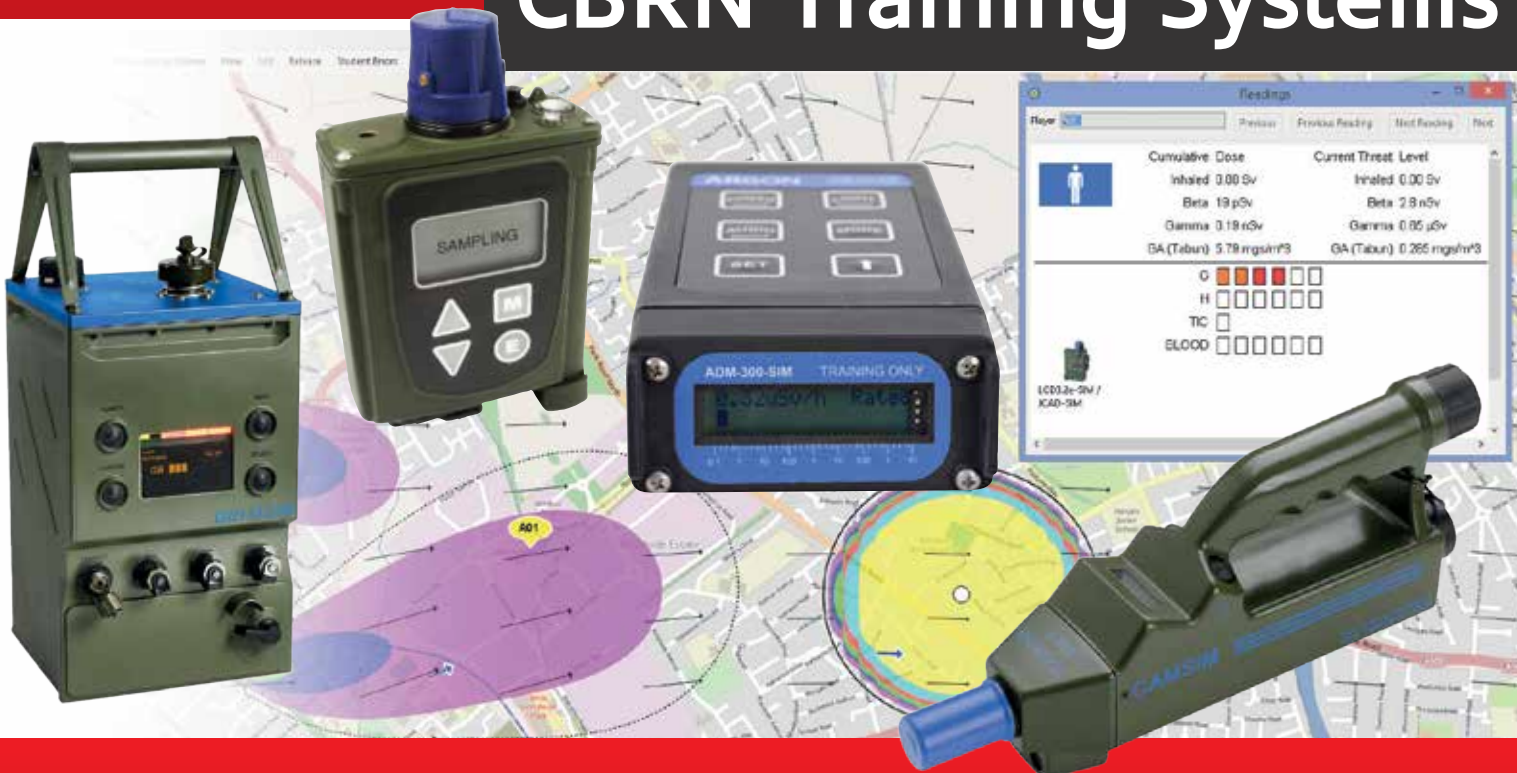
Military personnel worked in support of the civil authorities with the recovery operation in Salisbury after the nerve agent attack in March 2018.

or attack, but they will share their knowledge across the rest of 3 Commando Brigade to enhance the Royal Marines' ability to deal with these particular forms of warfare.

From March 2020 scientists from Dstl began supporting Public Health England's effort to understand COVID-19 and tackle the spread of the coronavirus pandemic in the UK. ■

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