

83d Chemical Battalion on a Cutting Edge Deployment



A soldier stands guard at Camp Ranger Russell.

By MajorMark Pomeroy and Second Lieutenant Eric Samaritoni

During April 2001, the 83d Chemical Battalion—commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Raymond Van Pelt—with attachments from the 519th Military Police (MP) Battalion, the 115th Field Hospital, and the U.S. Marine Corps deployed to Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, (via a C5) for Operation “Neon Falcon.” This joint exercise, sponsored by the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, involved the 83d Chemical Battalion; the U.S. Navy; the United Kingdom’s joint nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) defense regiment; and Bahrain military forces. For the exercise, the 83d deployed a battalion command-and-control element and a representative chemical company team comprised of 53 personnel, one Fox NBC reconnaissance vehicle, two biological integrated detection systems (BIDS), and a Coyote smoke vehicle. The exercise, as well as the deployment of a chemical company team, was on the cutting edge of Army, joint, and coalition doctrine.

The 83d began its deployment on 6 April by building pallets and conducting a predeployment inspection by its battalion’s maintenance section and a maintenance support team from the 142d Corps Support Battalion. Upon completion of the inspection, the 83d convoyed the deploying vehicles to the Alexandria, Louisiana, airport of embarkation. On 7 April, the battalion returned to Alexandria for the Air Force joint inspection and the load out of vehicles and equipment on the C5. After the last vehicle was tied down on the C5, the Air Force loadmaster was quoted as saying that the aircraft load out was “one of the best I’ve seen.”

On 8 April at 0300, the chemical company team commanded by Captain Carlos Gonzalez and First Sergeant Ronald Hilaire (dubbed “Team Gonzalez”) conducted its final manifest call and boarded buses for the hour-long trip along Highway 28 to Alexandria. Upon arrival, Team Gonzalez loaded the C5 and took off for the 2 1/2-week exercise. After stops in Gander, Canada, and Rota, Spain, the 83d arrived in Bahrain. On 10 April, the C5 touched down at Muharraq International Airport in Bahrain where all the soldiers disembarked. After a quick refuel, the C5 then flew to Shaikh Isa Airbase on the other end of Bahrain where the 83d soldiers linked up with the aircraft and assisted with a combat offload of its equipment.



A Fox is driven into the C5.

As one group of soldiers downloaded the vehicles and equipment, a second group, charged with force protection for the deployment, secured Camp Ranger Russell—a small base camp on the outer perimeter of Shaikh Isa Airbase. The camp was named in honor of the battalion's Command Sergeant Major Dan "Ranger" Russell.

Over the next several days, the soldiers of the 83d adjusted to the hot, arid weather of the host nation; prepared vehicles and equipment for operations and training; and continued making improvements to the camp's force protection plan. Sergeant First Class Southern and Staff Sergeant Jefferson from the 519th MP Battalion provided expertise to the 83d's three force protection teams. Each team maintained a three-soldier gate guard, a roving patrol, and an observation post on the top of the headquarters building. Throughout the exercise, the force protection teams worked long and tedious hours to deter and react to a potential terrorist threat. While improvements were made to the camp's security and vehicles were prepared for the exercise, key leaders from the battalion were busy coordinating training events and conducting leaders' reconnaissance of sites to deploy the NBC reconnaissance, biological surveillance, smoke, and decontamination assets.

The first major joint and coalition part of the exercise occurred on 18 April. The Bahraini NBC defense company, the Bahraini air force, the Naval support activity's emergency reaction team (ERT), and the 83d joined forces to participate in an exercise to demonstrate their combined NBC defense capabilities. The exercise was commanded and controlled by a combined joint task force (CJTF) headquarters situated on the opposite end of Bahrain. The exercise began with a Bahraini F5 flying low over a mock airfield to simulate a chemical attack. The Bahraini explosive ordnance disposal unit provided realism to the attack by exploding a device with heat waves felt by the spectators.



The Fox confirms the presence of a chemical agent.



A "Coyote" vehicle blows smoke to cover the Fox.

Immediately following the attack, the CJTF headquarters requested that Team Gonzalez from the 83d provide an NBC route and area reconnaissance to locate, identify, and mark potential chemical agents on the airfield. Within minutes, soldiers from the 101st Chemical Company, one of 83d's war-traced companies, blew a graphite smoke haze to protect the Fox NBC reconnaissance vehicle from enemy observation as it approached the attack site. As the smoke haze thickened, soldiers from 2/51st Chemical Company (Recon) expertly maneuvered their Fox to the attack area and began a zig-zig reconnaissance pattern in search of the chemical contamination. As the MM1 mass spectrometer alerted to a possible chemical agent, the Fox lowered its probe to verify the agent. Within minutes, the Fox dropped a contamination marker and resumed its reconnaissance.

Immediately following the demonstration, soldiers from 2/101st Chemical Company conducted an operational decontamination of the Fox. The exercise finished with an NBC mass-casualty exercise by the Navy's ERT and the Bahrain defense force's NBC defense company. After the exercise, the 83d set up static displays for the Bahraini military, the UK's joint NBC regiment, and U.S. Navy personnel. The most noteworthy dignitary was General Al Zianni, J3, Bahraini defense force. Commander Willis (U.S. Navy), the primary Navy Component, Central Command (NAVCENT) action officer for Neon Falcon, was quoted as saying the demonstration was "a 10.0—Perfect!" After the training was complete, all participants joined the 83d for lunch at Camp Ranger Russell.

On the evening of 18 April, Captain Gonzalez deployed the team to the landing area of Shaikh Isa Airbase for the first phase of a 3-day field training exercise. The BIDS provided biological surveillance, while the Fox provided chemical reconnaissance and surveillance of the

surrounding area. The 2/101st established a decontamination point and provided smoke support for several missions. On 20 April, Captain Gonzalez issued a fragmentary order and deployed the team to a seaport of debarkation—Mina Salman Port, 40 miles north. The six-vehicle convoy performed the road march at 0300 local time, moving with Bahraini police escort through the streets of Manama. Once on-site, the Fox and BIDS platoon leaders selected the best sites for the BIDS and Fox to conduct biological surveillance and NBC reconnaissance at the port. The BIDS was established on the pier between two naval ships, while the Fox crew set up their M21 “Rascal” alarm near the southern part of the pier. For the remainder of the exercise, the crews worked through the night to protect the port and identify potential biological and chemical agents and attacks.

At 0930 on 21 April, a small vessel in the port area simulated a biological attack. The BIDS crew reacted expertly and positively identified the biological agent. As the scenario progressed, the CJTF headquarters struggled with the numerous issues involved with a biological attack on a port in a populated area. At the conclusion of the exercise, the crew from the 7th Chemical Company (BIDS) conducted a biological-sample transfer to the Army’s technical escort unit who then evacuated the sample to the theater Army medical laboratory. This was of special significance, as it was the first time that joint and coalition NBC defense units played out a possible biological attack from start to finish. The event concluded with a static display of all vehicles for U.S. and Bahraini Navy personnel in the port.

Throughout the exercise, members of the 83d and XVIII Airborne Corps NBC staff worked in the CJTF NBC cell. The cell was comprised of NBC experts from the U.S. Army, Navy, and Marine Corps and augmented with officers from the United Kingdom and Bahraini defense forces. The staff conducted NBC planning and operations that included the use of the Joint Warning and Reporting Network (JWARN). During the exercise, the cell conducted the first-ever “ship-to-shore” use of JWARN.

The last few days of the deployment focused on preparing vehicles and equipment for movement to Fort Polk, Louisiana. Just minutes before the C5 took off from Bahrain, the 83d got a special surprise—Vice Admiral Moore, Commander of the 5th Fleet (NAVCENT), awarded it the



A BIDS conducts biological surveillance.

Fifth Fleet Commander’s plaque. The admiral expressed his appreciation to the soldiers of the 83d and extended them an invitation to train together in the future. Afterwards, the 83d loaded the C5 for redeployment. Like the deployment, the redeployment also went flawlessly. When the last soldier stepped off the bus at Fort Polk and all weapons and sensitive items were accounted for, the mission was deemed an overwhelming success.

The benefits that the 83d gained from this exercise are many. Operation Neon Falcon enabled the battalion to validate its readiness standing operating procedures and deployment operations. It validated the battalion’s role as an “early deployer” to provide NBC defense at critical nodes (aerial and seaports of debarkation) within a theater of operations. It forced the battalion’s leaders and soldiers to plan and execute force protection and to apply the rules of engagement under real-world conditions. Perhaps most important of all, the exercise enabled the battalion’s leaders to demonstrate the 83d’s capabilities and roles as a force multiplier in a joint and coalition environment where weapons of mass destruction can be delivered by conventional or unconventional means.

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Second Lieutenant Samaritoni is the first platoon leader, 7th Chemical Company (BIDS). He attended the Virginia Military Institute to pursue a career in the military. He continued a family tradition of service by choosing the Army.