

Integration, Training and the Hybrid Threat: A Case Study of the Battle of Majar al-Kabir

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Background

On 17 Sep 20, Mr Daren Jay presented the seventh lecture in the Ken Bullman OAM Lecture Series, a component of the 1st Military Police Battalion's monthly PME program. In his lecture, Mr Jay's described his involvement in, and the broader context of, the Battle of Majar al-Kabir in Iraq in June 2003. This event was notorious due to the killing of six Royal Military Police (RMP) personnel within the town's police station, which was the largest loss of life of British forces since the Falklands War.

The sacrifice of the six RMP killed during this battle demands respect and gratitude but it also invites discussion so that we might learn from their circumstances. This essay cannot presume to arrive at more incisive conclusions about the battle's outcomes than extant inquests and inquiries already have. Instead, its aim is to explore the role of threat assessment in the events of the Battle of Majar al-Kabir in order to consider ways that such losses of life may be avoided in the future.

As such, this essay is intended to show how the events of the Battle of Majar al-Kabir inform aspects of the contemporary operating environment and the nature of hybrid threat. The essay will then conclude with recommendations on how training may be employed to generate forces that are highly responsive to rapidly deteriorating environments posed by hybrid threats.

Hybrid Threat

A hybrid threat is comprised of 'the diverse and dynamic combination of regular forces, irregular forces, and/or criminal elements all unified to achieve mutually benefitting effects' (Headquarters Department of the Army, 2010). There is a risk of being tokenistic in naming forces as hybrid threats out of novelty. Nonetheless, the threat in Majar al-Kabir achieved an identity of hybridity through its rapid and unexpected ability to mobilise the civilian populace in support of its offensive activities. Attempts to categorise the town's populace into separate militia and civilian groups invites functional dislocation to the planner through disregard of the ability of the former to recruit and exploit the latter. In this case, a traditional 'REDFOR'/'GREENFOR' approach fails to encapsulate the two groups' shared capacity and willingness for offensive action.

The nature of the threat situation within Majar al-Kabir was one of the most significant points of contention during the inquest that followed the killing of the six RMP (Kelbie, 2006). Colonel Beckett, the commanding officer of the 1st Battalion Parachute Regiment Battlegroup (1 Para BG), referred to the environment as benign prior to the onset of the unrest at the battle's commencement (Kelbie, 2006). During his presentation, Mr Jay

provided evidence of the broader context within Iraq by displaying media that showed the positive environment within Basrah shortly prior to the Battle.

This benign environment reflected the broader coalition interactions with the Iraqi populace, though violent opposition towards American forces within Iraq had commenced sporadically throughout May of 2003 and had coalesced to resemble guerrilla warfare by June (Metz, 2007, p. 3). Despite this, Colonel Beckett had indicated that the Maysan Province, in which Majar al-Kabir is located, was perceived as presenting the lowest threat in Iraq (Kelbie, 2006). While this assessment did not anticipate the potential for violence within Majar al-Kabir it is worth noting that hypervigilance may dislocate friendly forces from the civilian populace and deny highly valuable opportunities for cooperation and capacity building.

Consequently, employment of the RMP in support to the rule of law activities, such as police capacity building, was appropriate if considered with regard to a traditional reading of doctrine such as 'The Range of Tactical Activities Related to Operation Themes'. The Range of Tactical Activities Related to Operation Themes is a graphic common to the employment series of doctrine publications and helps to illustrate the balance of offensive, defensive, stability and enabling activities as they relate to a spectrum of environments. This spectrum runs from peacetime military engagement through peace support and COIN to major combat. Peacetime military engagement is surmounted on a green background, which gradually transitions to yellow, amber and finally red by major combat, suggesting a gradual progression between these operational themes. The advent of hybrid threats significantly disrupts such a gradual progression.

Instead, hybrid threats thrive on the generation of non-contiguous battlespaces with different operational themes. These threats undermine the validity of perceiving fronts or zones, and may suggest why Colonel Beckett's assessment of the province as benign eventuated as false. Majar al-Kabir is a strong example of this phenomenon, as civilian unrest coexisted with the cooperation of the local Iraqi Police. This is not to discredit the value of doctrinal tools for measuring the expected weight of effort in different operational environments, but illustrates that forces conducting stability activities may be required to undertake defensive activities with little to no warning. In the case of military police, the law enforcement function may rapidly give way to combat survivability.

In this unpredictable environment, effective communications between disparate force elements are paramount so that they may be responsive to rapid changes in the situation. There were vulnerabilities in such communication as shortfalls in booking out procedures in the 1 Para BG CP meant that the presence of the RMP within the police station was not known to 1 Para BG personnel until the deaths of three British personnel were reported to them. Such an outcome points to a significant requirement for better integration and situational awareness between friendly force elements.

Despite Colonel Beckett's assessment of Majar al-Kabir as benign, there is evidence of a disparity in the stance of 1 Para BG and RMP personnel. Chin (2008, p. 129) has assigned responsibility for violence against British forces to their increased attempts to establish the

rule of law, such as through weapons and explosives confiscation. Chin's assessment of escalating operations is curious considering the reduction of the RMP Platoon's ammunition holdings to 50 rounds per person from 150. This reduction, along with the absence of an Iridium satellite phone, harmed the ability of the RMP to reorient from a law enforcement to a combat survivability focus. Furthermore, the 1 Para BG elements commenced their patrol with 150 rounds of ammunition each with VHF, HF communications and an Iridium satellite phone (British Army, 2004, p. 27). This may form evidence of significant disconnection between the RMP Platoon and the 1 Para BG patrols. If such a disconnection existed, this compounds the potential for a lack of effective integration between the manoeuvre and military police forces.

There may have been an overmatch of as many as 100 armed Iraqis for each RMP soldier (Kelbie, 2006). For this reason, the difference between 50 and 150 rounds is unlikely to have significantly affected the outcome of the battle. Nonetheless, the reduction of ammunition provides a signal of an assessment of reduced threat. This assessment may have been crucial, as a reduced threat posture could suggest less rigorous or rehearsed control measures and withdrawal triggers which may have been instrumental in supporting the RMP in extricating themselves from the town. Such a perception may also have contributed to the lack of situational awareness about the location of the RMP during the 1 Para BG patrol.

It is reasonable to assess that the apparently low threat environment within Majar al-Kabir is likely to have contributed to 1 Para BG and 156 Provost Company personnel's acceptance of the risks associated with poor communications, reduced ammunition and reduced situational awareness. Indeed, the Army board of inquiry found that the practice of conducting radio checks prior to departure on missions was discontinued (British Army, 2004, p.31). The Battle of Majar al-Kabir is a crucial event in demonstrating that violence is not guaranteed to escalate gradually, and that non-combatants may rapidly achieve combatant status in a hybrid environment.

Training to Address the Hybrid Threat

I fully concur with CO/CI ASLO, Lieutenant Colonel Robinson's (2017), assertion that the most important implication for the onset of hybrid war is understanding how we will train and modernise in response to it. The Decisive Action Training Environment (DATE) provides an unprecedented opportunity to prepare our personnel to respond to the contemporary operating environment. DATE may provide this effect by creating an environment that demands strong integration with other force elements and where military police may train against sophisticated threat forces.

The variety of threats posed by DATE may provide opportunities to generate a new range of unique task-organised groups, formed to defeat unfamiliar threats. The increased prominence of criminal and guerrilla threat forces within training environments places military police at a premium for host nation capacity building and law enforcement functions. These capabilities increase the value of military police within task-organised force elements. This may provide opportunities to practice crucial battlefield integration, which may alleviate failures in

battlefield tracking and communication such as those between 1 Para BG and the RMP force element.

Such training should practice the exercise of command relationships, booking out or battle tracking systems and communications procedures, which all featured within the summary of recommendations by the board of inquiry into the circumstances leading up to the deaths of the RMP (British Army, 2004, p. A-1). The presence of BMS provides an excellent opportunity to support the maintenance of situational awareness and the rehearsal of analogue tracking SOPs as a redundancy.

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, the DATE provides military police with a complex, adaptive and unpredictable foe. Facing a threat of this kind may reduce the tendency of personnel undergoing training to attempt to template or categorise their adversaries. The false dichotomy of training for ‘a war’ versus ‘the war’ is an unfortunately persistent artefact of a training attitude that overly distanced conventional from non-conventional threats. This is a crucial reminder that military police must be ready to defend themselves and their teams, even in seemingly peaceful environments. This should come as no surprise, as expertise in close combat is a salient aspect of our contract with Australia.

Conclusion

The Battle of Majar al-Kabir provides a multitude of lessons learnt and the requirement for specific and responsive threat assessments is primary among them. The Battle affirms the value of training against a hybrid threat so that military police may inoculate themselves against combat with adaptable and unpredictable foes.

To this end, DATE should be maximised as a tool to encourage commanders to consider hybrid threats within the battlespace. DATE may provide a challenging adversary which reinforces the requirement for orchestration and integration between task-organised force elements. Through this training, commanders may be shown the importance of maintaining situational awareness and communications with dispersed forces. DATE may then be used to demonstrate the vulnerabilities that arise as a result of failures to maintain these in training, so that we may be ready now and future ready.

Further Reading

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