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Talking about Defense

Leathernecks In Lab Coats

By George C. Wilson

QUANTICO, Va. -- The sort of chaos that is ripping apart East Timor right now stands as the biggest challenge to the American military in the 21st century.

Groping for solutions in this fog of half-war, half-peace, which grips not only Indonesia but much of the world, is Col. Gary W. Anderson, a 51-year-old Marine who is chief of staff of the Marine Corps Warfighting Laboratory here. Anderson is not the typical bunker-charging, poster-boy Marine. An internationally known authority on new kinds of warfare, Anderson more resembles a militarized Thomas Edison, an experimenter in the science of war.

Vexing Anderson now is the East Timor question: How does a military force stop riots and ethnic slaughter while minimizing civilian and peacekeeper casualties?

Under Anderson's supervision, the Warfighting Laboratory conducted its biggest experiment to date, an exercise called Urban Warrior, last March in Oakland, Calif. I watched the experiment by tagging along with a Marine squad charged with bringing order out of chaos in a simulated square city block. The Marines wore sensors on their bodies that rang out whenever they were hit with laser beams simulating gunfire from paramilitaries. Referees decided whether a Marine was wounded or killed after each hit.

Gunmen in the houses were mixed in with women, children, and other civilians. Each house had to be searched room by room. Nearly every time a Marine from the squad raced for a front or rear door, he was shot in the back by an enemy sniper or by a machine gunner hidden in the bushes. A sniper could be hidden behind every window of every house.

Sgt. Rickey D. Daughtery, the squad leader, deployed his 16 Marines by the infantryman's book. He kept his men spread out as well as he could, but streets and doors acted as funnels, forcing them back together. Also, after Daughtery's men entered a house and began searching its various floors and rooms, they became nearly impossible to track. Civilians constantly moved into the Marines' line of fire. The fighting was tedious, slow, and dangerous.

Two hours of house-to-house combat produced grim results: Daughtery's platoon lost 13 of its 17 Marines--a casualty rate of 76 percent. The referees declared seven dead and six wounded, including squad leader Daughtery. Other squads suffered high casualties as well. Neither the American public nor any other democracy will tolerate such high casualties, especially when the fighting occurs in such remote places as Indonesia or Bosnia.

I had talked at length with Anderson during the Urban Warrior exercise, and I spoke with him again recently at the Warfighting Laboratory, a red-brick building located on the Quantico Marine Corps Base about 40 miles south of Washington. I wanted to find out what he had gleaned from the experiment and whether the information could help a peacekeeping

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force such as the one going into Indonesia.

Anderson told me that military officers from all over the world have journeyed here to ask him the same question, and the answers aren't easy. Australia, which is playing a major role in the international peacekeeping effort in Indonesia, has shown ``a tremendous amount of interest'' in what the Marines have learned about fighting in cities, Anderson said. Officers from Britain, France, and the Netherlands have also come to the lab for briefings.

In March, Anderson told me that he had high hopes that the scientists and engineers could devise ``silver bullets'' to make fighting in urban environments both easier and less lethal. His wish list included explosives that would knock down doors; invisible beams of energy that would keep rioting crowds at bay without injury; and weapons that would stun, but not kill, occupants of a barricaded house. In military parlance, these are ``vapor tactics.'' But, after sifting through the results of his experiment and querying the scientists, Anderson decided that no silver bullet is close at hand. Urban Warrior, however, showed the colonel promising new ways to bring the peacekeepers' casualty rate below 15 percent.

``We were asking the wrong question'' in devising and analyzing Urban Warrior, Anderson said. The laboratory kept asking how to make battalion and brigade commanders more effective in deploying Marines and using nonlethal weapons. The Oakland experiment showed that the problem was not at the top of the urban force but at the bottom--the captains, lieutenants, sergeants, and corporals.

Anderson also said that Marines are sometimes simply trained incorrectly for city fighting. Urban Warrior, he explained, demonstrated that junior leaders need more-intensive training in such basics as spreading out the attacking force and resisting the temptation to charge the objective at any cost. Sometimes it's better for troops to call for help, perhaps from tanks or engineers with explosives, or to seek assistance from an Air Force AC-130 gunship that can provide air reconnaissance and firepower. When Marines train junior officers here, he said, they intend to stress that this kind of reasoning is essential for managing dangerous situations in cities. `` `OK, I've got a building with 30 windows,' '' a young officer might say to himself, Anderson noted. `` `If a Marine crosses the street, every one of those windows needs to be covered or somebody is going to take a shot at him. I've only got 12 Marines. Maybe I'd better call for help.' ''

Technology--not necessarily sophisticated technology--can also help to reduce casualties for young Marines fighting in cities, Anderson said. Simple parts from Radio Shack can help them build devices such as the corps' remote-controlled ``Matilda,'' which can search a building room by room and send back pictures to troops waiting safely outside. Other automated help is on the drawing board, including flying robots the size of insects, whose camera eyes can scan the enemy while buzzing from room to room in a suspect building.

Urban Warrior experiments were championed by Marine Corps Commandant Charles C. Krulak, who retired in July. In a recent conversation, Krulak told me why he felt he had no choice but to prepare the corps for the ugly city battles he saw staring it in the face.

``In the battles I see being fought for at least the next 20 years,'' Krulak said, ``chaos will reign. Set-piece battles e la Desert Storm will probably be not what you see.'' The fighting will be in ``the cities and slums, places that the Marine Corps, the Army, and the Air Force''

have avoided in devising their tactics. ``Our present doctrine is not to go into the cities," Krulak continued. ``Why? Because it's so deadly. All you have to do is look at Leningrad, Hue city, Grozny.

``What we're trying to do is say: `OK, 70 percent of the world's population in the year 2010 will live in either cities or urban slums within 300 miles of the coastline,' `` Krulak said. ``Obviously, then, the Marine Corps doctrine of avoiding cities is not going to work. The enemy is not going to allow it. Their center of gravity is going to be in cities." If Iraqi troops had made Kuwait city their center of gravity during the Gulf War ``instead of sitting out in the desert where they were vulnerable to our technology, it would have been a very bloody experience. So what we're trying to do is come up with tactics, procedures, training, education, and equipment that will allow us to fight in that environment."

One tactic the Marines have learned is that before a peacekeeping force gets into position, commanders have to let potential troublemakers know who is in charge, and then respond if they're challenged. ``We're not going to treat it lightly if somebody comes after us," Anderson said. ``Be clear and unambiguous in message. Talk when talking is the smart thing to do. But you've got to know what you'll stand for and what you won't allow."

Anderson reminded me how quickly the paramilitaries holstered their weapons in Haiti after Marines shot and killed 10 challengers who had reached for their weapons during a standoff early in the 1994 peacekeeping operation. ``It's important to win without killing a lot of your guys, because it's public perception."

The trick in peacekeeping is to do enough but not too much, said Anderson. What peacekeepers don't want to do in East Timor ``is contribute to the breakup of the core of Indonesia," he said. In many ways, said the veteran Marine, a Cold War in which the crazies were frozen in place by the fear of a nuclear Armageddon was easier to handle than today's chaos. ``Peace enforcement is a hard job," said Anderson, in a nice understatement.

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*George C. Wilson's column appears in the **National Journal** biweekly*