

SAUDI ARABIA— TERROR AT THEIR DOORSTEP

By LtCol Thomas "Tom" W. Williams, USMC (Ret)



It has now been a week since the terrorist attack on our Vinnell-Arabia company compound here in the outskirts of Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. This is my recollection of that event. In reading this, one should be aware that as a contract trainer, I was participating in a night training exercise 40 kilometers in the desert east of Riyadh when this attack occurred.

At approximately 2324, 12 May 2003 I was preparing to give a warning order over the Control radio Net in the Exercise Control Group (ECG), when I heard a single loud explosion. Remember, at this time I am 40 Ks east of Riyadh on a high desert plateau. The initial explosion was then followed by several more explosions over the next few minutes. We in the ECG noted these concussions and I distinctly remarked to one of my counterparts “Saudi Arabian National Guard (SANG) artillery units must also be conducting night field training.”

At exactly 2345, I monitored the senior U. S. Army Advisor make a radio call for accountability of his subordinate unit advisors. By the emotionally charged tone of this transmission, the ECG personnel began to suspect trouble was in the wind. Nevertheless, we continued to work the deliberate night attack through the early morning hours with an occasional update of the terrorist attack from those personnel with us who were in contact by cell phones to Camp Vinnell. At daybreak, we were then given the unvarnished verbal description of the utter devastation we were to see when we 65 trainers returned to camp.

No building within our six square block compound escaped damage. For example, the roof to my living quarters was completely collapsed, my windows were blown out and my front door was on top of my bed. Immediately after arriving back at camp, I volunteered to be part of a 23-man Emergency Operations Center (EOC) being organized. All other personnel (approx. 300 +) were evacuated to a larger more secure compound.

Later in the day, as I walked down to “Ground Zero” to see for myself, the damage only increased in magnitude as I got closer to ground zero. Most roofs in the six square blocks of the compound were peeled back and most rooms looked like rubbish bins filled with dirt, roofing tiles, insulation, overturned furniture, and structural timbers. My office, which stood one block from the epicenter of the explosion, was completely gutted and caved in. Ground zero was directly at the front entrance to the major American billeting area, High Rise Building No. 1. This obviously was the focus of main effort for the terrorists.

Later we learned that this attack was one of three simultaneous attacks on separate Western compounds throughout the Riyadh area, which included Al-Hamra, Vinnell Corp. and Jadawel compounds. Two were virtually identical in nature. Attacks at Vinnell and Al-Hamra contained the following similarities:

- Two attack vehicles were used in each location.
- The first vehicle contained shooters armed with automatic weapons and grenades. Their mission was to breach the compound gates and clear the path for the second vehicle.
- The second vehicle, packed with explosives, followed.

At least 65 of us were very lucky to be in the field conducting 24-hour operational training with the Saudi Arabian National Guard when this attack occurred. Most of that number lived in the building that was targeted. Fortunately, all that I have personally lost is lots of sleep, which will be a daily routine until the company (Vinnell-Arabia) finds a new permanent home. We are in the assessment phase of this operation now. We must determine how many employees will remain with the company, where will we operate from and as a result of these issues what training missions can be conducted and how soon can we get back to training. The compound is a total loss. There is no salvaging it within a reasonable amount of time or expense. Therefore, we are looking for a more secure environment where we can live and work from. Our options are to remain on the U. S. Army, Eskan Compound, lease a new more secure compound or build a suitably secure compound. Camp Vinnell now has the stench of death everywhere, especially since we continue to find human body parts from the three suicide terrorist bombers hanging in the trees and on the rooftops. Needless to say, the camp is a mess, but we cannot let this attack go unanswered else there will be more of the same.

A debrief of the eyewitnesses on camp, clearly shows how well trained, organized and informed the terrorists were. A sedan (similar in color and make to one of our division managers) with five terrorist occupants inconspicuously negotiated the cement barriers (Jersey blocks), dismounted at the left front gate and immediately killed the Saudi soldier

manning the Cal. 50 machinegun and wounded two others. The vehicle and windshield of the 50-cal. Pinzgaur vehicle clearly took 50 or more AK47 rounds. Once the 50 Cal machinegun was neutralized, one terrorist entered the gate control booth, turned the gate key to open the heavy rollback security gate and pushed the button to drop the retractable barrier. A pickup truck loaded with the bomb (750lbs of explosives) soon arrived at the now opened right front gate. Two of the initial five terrorists then mounted the truck to provide for local security, while it quickly drove at high speed to High Rise Building No. 1 and immediately without hesitation detonated themselves and the bomb. The remaining three terrorists then fired, maneuvered, and threw grenades through the camp to the opposite side of the compound and escaped over the compound wall.

After the attack, the terrorist sedan, which remained at the front gate, was examined and was found to contain many more grenades and many double tapped AK47 magazines. In my opinion, their intent was to kill as many personnel as possible in the streets after the main explosion at High Rise Building No. 1. That part of the plan obviously came apart when the sedan support vehicle could not get through the left security gate.

It takes no gigantic leap of logic to arrive at the obvious conclusion that the SANG security plan for the Vinnell Compound was woefully inadequate. The immediate local security provided by the Saudi Arabian National Guard was ridiculously lacking, as was the late arrival of the reaction force.

As a matter of fact, the SANG guard officer was either a coward or he was a party to the terrorist plot, since he refused to respond with reinforcements, when requested by the Vinnell security force employee until an hour after the event and until all automatic firing had ceased. Every effort by the Vinnell security personnel to influence corrective action before and during the attack was rejected by the SANG guard force. This lack of SANG preparedness at a time of a heightened terrorist threat demands a through joint United States and Saudi Arabian investigation.

In view of the increased threat to Vinnell Corp personnel lives here in Saudi Arabia, a complete rethinking of the security precautions needs immediate attention. For example, the Saudi guard posts need to be pushed further out from the walls of the new camp, when identified. A reaction force needs to be rehearsed frequently to ensure response times and procedures are adequate to blunt such an attack and a small group of personnel inside the camp should be organized and trained to act as an immediate reaction force. We may not be able to eliminate the threat, but we certainly should be able to limit the success of a similar terrorist attack.

There can be no doubt that this terrorist group was well trained and equipped, well informed and had rehearsed their plan to near perfection. There is also much evidence to indicate that there was inside information and assistance provided. The terrorists knew which key to turn and what button to push in order to open the front right security gate and lower the barrier. They knew which building to hit in order to inflict the maximum number of American casualties. Finally, the terrorist's exit point from the camp was inconspicuously prepared from the inside with a 55-gallon drum and bricks in order to facilitate their escape over the wall from the inside.

The resulting casualties sustained by Vinnell were 7 Americans killed, two Filipinos killed and 100 or more wounded, 13 of which remain in hospital. Recovery and identification of the casualties was the most immediate action as soon as the terrorists were out of the area. Of course, this was a most emotionally gut-wrenching action to be undertaken by fellow Vinnellies. The responsiveness of the nearest men to the bombing scene was not only commendable it was a heroic effort by fellow work mates of those trapped in the resulting rubble.

Over thirty years ago now, I served as a First Lieutenant Platoon Commander in First Reconnaissance Battalion with the current Deputy Chief of Staff for Manpower at Headquarters Marine Corps (HQMC), LtGen Garry Parks. Soon after the bombing, he informed me by email that one of our Platoon Sergeants of that time, MSgt Herman Diaz, USMC (Ret) was one of the unfortunate victims in High Rise Building No. 1. Having only recently returned to work with Vinnell 10 days prior, I was not aware that Herman Diaz was also here. Three weeks prior to returning to contract with Vinnell, I specifically requested my sponsor, Ron Hindmand, not to billet me in HR # 1, for obvious reasons.

As if this horrific destruction was not enough, the shamal (wind and sandstorms) have been miserable lately. The shamal was at its worst during SecState Colin Powell's visit. Honestly, you could hardly see your hand before your face while he was at Camp Vinnell. In addition to the great quantity of dirt and dust generated by the blast, the shamal has further added to the misery of reclaiming personnel items from the shambles of individual living quarters and offices alike such as clothing, photos, documents, books, computers, and printers. The brown talcum powder-like Arabian dust penetrates not only every orifice of the human anatomy, it is also an excellent destroyer of modern technological equipment. This condition is making recovery of personal items that much more difficult.

Postscript, Our Saudi counterparts are extremely embarrassed and ashamed by this attack. Many Islamic personnel are among the wounded. Many of which are my friends and close-training associates. Two in particular are former Egyptian Generals and are very professional trainers. For centuries, it has been a tribal belief that in the Islamic world, you are safe if you are under a Muslim's tent, even if you are considered the enemy. This attack represents an attack on the Saudi Royal Family as well. Time will tell if Saudi Arabia is willing to get serious about finding, fixing and destroying such terrorist groups. Turning a blind eye to terrorist activities as long as they don't affect Saudi Arabia may now be a bad dream at their very own doorstep.

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