



The Florida Bombing Case Study: Risk Analysis and Warning Exercise¹

This exercise includes three warning phases policymakers face before a terrorist attack. Phase One - a strategic phase, years or months ahead of an attack; Phase Two - an operational phase, weeks ahead when the threat level rises; and Phase Three - a tactical phase only a few days or hours ahead of the attack. The last part of the case study describes the aftermath of the attack.

Read the following account of a hypothetical future terrorist attack on a military base in Florida. For each chapter, think about the following questions from the perspective of your group.

- What organizations and roles does your group represent?
- What do you know about potential threats to the facility?
- Are you comfortable with your knowledge of these threats?
- If not, what else do you need to know?
- Is the facility secure enough given these threats?
- What opportunities are there for strategic, operational, and tactical assessments and warnings?
- If not, what other steps can you take?
- Against the threat?
- To enhance security?
- Is there anything else you should do??
- What resources do you need?
- How will you get them?

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The Florida Bombing Case Study²

(Part A) Setting the Stage

Around midnight on May 11, 2008 two unidentified men drove a tanker truck into a parking lot adjacent to the Rotational Housing Compound (RHC), an apartment complex on a US military base in Florida. The truck stopped briefly along the sidewalk in front of Building 13, which housed elements of a unit from Arkansas training to deploy to Iraq. The truck then moved slowly along the sidewalk toward a silver Honda Accord that was parked nearby, swung left into the center of the parking arm, and backed up into a position about 80 feet directly in front of the building as preparation for a mission of death and destruction.

I. Setting the Baseline

In the aftermath of the Cold War, the US Congress began to mandate the drawing down of military forces and the closure of military bases as part of an expected “peace dividend.” Residents of a small city in Florida negotiated with their Congressman and military officials to decrease the size of their facility, opening some land for development.

Small wars that broke out in the wake of the Soviet Union’s demise, however, created a greater need for the base than expected. The base maintained a training mission and over the years processed military units from elsewhere in the country as they prepared to deploy to these conflicts.

In 2002, the base was forced to process an unprecedented number of units for deployment to Iraq. Senior military officials were eager to continue their good relationship with the city and comply fully with their earlier promise to limit the impact of these deployments on the city’s infrastructure. Consequently, the base commander hired private contractors to provide security to the areas of the base’s newly re-opened area used by transiting personnel. These contractors served on temporary assignment, ranging from 15 to 179 days. Military units rotated through the facility every three to six months.

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II. Security at the Rotational Housing Compound

Building 13 was in a 14-block residential compound built in 1979 but mostly unoccupied since 1992. The buildings were a mix of eight-story and four-story apartments in an urban setting. The rotating troops were housed in a two-block section separated from sections used by permanent base personnel. A perimeter fence surrounded the blocks. The buildings were close together.

Responsibility for security inside the Rotational Housing Compound (RHC) was shared jointly between the base's military security police and the contract guards. Outside the perimeter fence, security responsibility lay entirely with the city's police force. Direct coordination between the contract security guards and the city police force was not authorized by CENTCOM; any coordination required the liaison efforts of the military security police.

Before late 2006, most observers agreed that the operational environment in the area was benign. There had been no serious threats to the base or its personnel, and city police reported no unusual activity. As a result, little attention was paid to the possible need to evacuate in an emergency.

The voice alarm system - originally intended as a warning for missile attacks around the time of the Cuban Missile Crisis - functioned in two modes: voice and siren. In its voice mode, the amplifier was often unclear, and normally drew personnel to the windows of their dormitory rooms in an effort to hear the nearly inaudible message. The siren mode had not been practiced since 2006, as it apparently disturbed local civilian residents. The absence of a modern fire alarm system in the buildings meant that there was no reliable means of mass notification except for knocking on doors.

Evacuation drills had never been practiced at the RHC. In the absence of timed and regular drills, Base leaders could neither assess the speed and efficacy of their evacuation methods nor ensure the familiarity of all of their personnel with those methods. They could not know whether the contract police would detect a potential stand-off bomb promptly, how they would react if they did, how long it would take them to alert those in danger, whether personnel once alerted would evacuate or take cover to avoid the danger, and how long it would take them to do so.

In late 2006, a number of events occurred to challenge this widely accepted perception of the environment. US intelligence agencies began to acquire hints that Hezbollah as well as al-Qa'ida were considering attacks in the area. Both were known to have a small presence there and a supportive local community. The volume and tone of reporting on potential terrorist threats became more ominous as rumors of potential war with Iran increased. Still, most observers agreed, the operational environment remained essentially benign.

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(Part B) Facing a Heightened Threat Environment

In July 2007, a new base commander arrived. The US Air Force Office of Special Investigations (OSI) was conducting a semi-annual vulnerability assessment of the facility, and forwarded the results of the assessment to the commander in September. While the commander was responding to the recommendations in the OSI assessment, an event occurred that challenged the prevailing view of the area.

In November 2007, a car bomb estimated at between 200 and 250 lbs exploded outside the Federal Building in Tampa, Florida. Seven were killed in the blast and 35 people were wounded.

The November bombing sharply focused attention on indicators of a growing threat. The volume of reporting on terrorist incidents grew markedly as did the pace and intensity of meetings, briefings, and other activities having to do with the emerging terrorist threat. Military commanders throughout the region issued warnings and directed various security enhancements; senior commanders raised the threat condition from THREATCON ALPHA - the second lowest rating - to THREATCON BRAVO.

While CENTCOM personnel became increasingly alert after the bombing, the event did not result in a change to the CENTCOM policy of using contract security personnel on temporary assignments. Tour lengths varied but rotations of 90 days remained the norm. The frequent rotation of these individuals to training and transiting units created a turnover of between 200 and 300 personnel each week, about 10 percent of the base's total population. Moreover, the commander described support to their housing area as a "bare-bones" operation lacking the infrastructure that a permanent organization would have had.

Immediately after the November 2007 attack the commander of the base's support group met with city officials to point out certain deficiencies in the perimeter fence and to assess the security situation generally. He drew attention to the closeness of the perimeter to the north parking lot, observing that the setback distance was only about 60 feet, plus another 20 feet to the curb of the parking lot, with thick vegetation in between. He asked the city for an additional setback of at least 10 to 15 feet, but they denied his request.

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A Councilman explained that increasing the stand-off distance was impossible because the parking lot served a popular recreational park and a church on the other side of the street. Moreover, city officials were planning to build a strip mall next to the lot, which would heighten demands for full usage of the space. There was no indication that military officials appealed this decision or sought intervention from higher headquarters to try to get it reversed.

The bombing of the Federal Building triggered another OSI vulnerability assessment, begun in late 2007 and delivered to the Base Commander in early January 2008. In this assessment, OSI personnel noted a total of 39 specific vulnerabilities, including vehicles that appeared to be abandoned located close to the fence; heavy growth of vegetation along the fence line which obstructed the view of security patrols; and Jersey barriers and other items located next to the fence effectively reducing its height, since prospective intruders could climb on top of these objects and get over the fence. Other than noting the problem of heavy vegetation, neither the January 2008 assessment nor the July 2007 assessment identified the north parking lot as a specific vulnerability, according to subsequent investigation.

Of the 39 OSI recommendations, the Base Commander accepted all but three for implementation. The three that he did not implement were:

- *Disperse personnel transiting to Iraq throughout the compound rather than concentrating them in one dormitory.* After conferring with his staff, he decided that the benefits of maintaining unit integrity outweighed the potential threat to personnel. This recommendation was denied, although a plan was generated for the dispersal of senior military personnel.
- *Install 4-m. shatter resistant window film [known as Mylar] on all perimeter glass ... If the cost of upgrading all windows is deemed too great, begin with perimeter faces of buildings 133 and 131 and work clockwise around through Building 117.* Due to the high cost of Mylar, funding for this recommendation was deferred and included in the base's long-term budget.
- *Install new fire alarms in all buildings occupied by military personnel.* The fire alarms had not been replaced in several years, and new models would be more reliable and audible. After conferring with his staff including his chief engineer, the Commander determined that since the buildings were constructed of fire resistant materials, this recommendation could be deferred. About \$300,000 was budgeted for a fire alarm system for the year 2012.

In early December 2007, a new commanding officer for the military police arrived. In an early meeting, he discussed the security posture of the RHC with the Base Commander, who asked how he would prevent a car bomb from entering the compound and destroying a building. From that point on, he stated later, the focus of

his efforts was to prevent a car bomb from getting onto the compound. In his end-of-tour report, dated 29 February 2008, he wrote:

The defense of RHC is [sic] to stop and eliminate any threat (human bomber or car bomber) from getting past 12th Street onto the compound. This plan is not designed to stop stand-off type weapons, like RPG, mortar fire, or sniper fire. Our intent is to make the base as hard a target as possible to force the enemy to go elsewhere.

In response to the heightened threat after the bombing of the Federal Building and the January 2007 vulnerability assessment, he and other senior officers continued with a series of counter-measures designed to address perceived deficiencies in the defense of the compound. In late December, he met with city officials to again review the security situation. He asked if the perimeter fence could be moved out 10 to 15 feet near Building 13 in order to increase the stand-off distance from the north parking lot. He asked also that the vegetation along the fence be trimmed back to allow better observation of the perimeter.

City officials disapproved both these requests, but did agree to move the Jersey barriers along the fence an additional five feet away, increasing the stand-off distance to a total of about 85 feet. The vegetation, they observed, served as an attractive "living fence," blocking views of the base and contributing to higher property values in the adjoining neighborhood. They said the military could trim the vegetation only on the inside of the compound. The local police did agree to increase the frequency of their patrols outside the perimeter, and for the first time initiated 24-hour undercover surveillance of the area.

In early February 2008, national intelligence agencies reported unconfirmed indications that a large amount of explosives would be smuggled into Florida. On 29 February, a boat was seized off the coast with 85 lbs of Semtex explosive expertly concealed in the engine compartment. Markings on the explosives indicated the material came from military stockpiles overseas. In addition, Coast Guard and ICE officials were capturing increasing numbers of people traveling with false passports and propaganda sympathetic to terrorist groups, according to the Fusion Cell in Tampa.

In the early spring, base personnel continued to implement 36 of the 39 recommendations of the January OSI vulnerability assessment. They placed additional concrete Jersey barriers around the perimeter and staggered barriers called "serpentes" along the main entrance; they posted guards on the roofs of the buildings; and they set up M-60 machine gun positions on either side of the entry road in reinforced bunkers to defeat a forced entry. Further, security personnel positioned two large trucks, continuously manned, on either side of the road just

behind a checkpoint to block the road or ram any vehicle attempting to run through the gate.

On 4 March 2008, the commander of the OSI Detachment sent a message that recounted the Commission threat situation at the RHC to OSI headquarters and specifically highlighted concern for the portion of the perimeter adjacent to the north parking lot in the vicinity of Buildings 13 and 15. In this message, the OSI detachment commander noted that:

Security measures here are outstanding, which in my view would lead a would-be terrorist to attempt an attack from a position outside the perimeter ... and ... if a truck parks close to the fence line, and the driver makes a quick getaway, I think the building should be cleared immediately.

Although he did not show this message to any member of the Base Security Group's chain of command, the OSI detachment commander stated that, over a period of time, he briefed the Base Commander and his senior staff on the contents of the message. Moreover, on 12 March 2008, the OSI detachment commander briefed the Commander and several of his selected key staff officers on the current threat, including reference to the large quantity of explosives that had been seized, with its potential for use in a terrorist attack. The Commission noted that "the base did not initiate any changes in the security posture of threat level of the command as a result of this briefing."

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(Part C) Troubling Indicators of an Attack

As previously mentioned in early February 2008, national intelligence agencies reported unconfirmed indications that a large amount of explosives would be smuggled into Florida. On 29 February, a boat was seized off the coast with 85 lbs of Semtex explosive expertly concealed in the engine compartment. Markings on the explosives indicated the material came from military stockpiles overseas. In addition, Coast Guard and ICE officials were capturing increasing numbers of people traveling with false passports and propaganda sympathetic to terrorist groups, according to the Fusion Cell in Tampa.

At around the same time, the contract guards noted a number of incidents suggesting that RHC was under surveillance. In early March, two men in a car circled the compound several times, stopping at various points to take photographs of the facility. Another unidentified male was observed taking photographs of the compound on 24 March. On 25 March, four men with cameras and binoculars were observed hiding in the bushes outside the perimeter. Security personnel reviewed these incidents with city officials who attributed them to the mere curiosity of local residents and did not consider them threatening.

In early April, intelligence officials reported that known terrorist operatives had begun arriving in the area, using passports issued in a country sympathetic to terrorists. On 20 April, a truck rammed the east perimeter fence and the Jersey Barriers in an apparent attempt to test the strength of these defenses and the US response.

The military police commander continued to focus his efforts on preventing a hostile vehicle or individual from getting inside the compound. According to later testimony, the prevalent view among officials – and regional police and military personnel in Commission - was that any prospective terrorist bomb would be roughly the same size as the device used in the bombing of the Federal Building. Instead, the device loaded on the tanker truck the night of 11 May 2008 was estimated at between 3,000 and 8,000 lbs. (A subsequent detailed study entitled "A Numerical Simulation

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of the RHC Bombing" by the US Defense Special Weapons Agency resulted in a significantly larger estimate of about 20,000 lbs.)

Around midnight on May 11, 2008 two unidentified men drove a tanker truck into a parking lot adjacent to an apartment complex on a US military base in Florida. The truck stopped briefly along the sidewalk in front of Building 13, which housed elements of a unit from Arkansas training to deploy to Iraq. At an observation post on the roof of the building, a Staff Sergeant - who had gone to the roof to check on two contract guards on duty there - watched as the truck then moved slowly along the sidewalk toward a silver Honda Accord that was parked nearby, swung left into the center of the parking arm, and backed up into a position about 80 feet directly in front of the building. Alerted by what he was observing, the Staff Sergeant radioed the police security desk to report.

The Staff Sergeant and the others observed as two men then jumped from the cab of the tanker truck and ran to the Accord, which sped away. Instantly aware that a terrorist attack was probably underway, the three Security Police did what they could to warn occupants of the building. Starting at the top floor and working their way down the three men ran from door to door shouting to their comrades to evacuate immediately. At the Security Police command center, duty personnel attempted- in accordance with unit policy- to get clearance from the Base Operations Center to activate the compound's only warning method - a large, amplified public address system - but were unsuccessful.

Six minutes later, a bomb loaded on the tanker truck exploded, ripping the front off Building 13 and sending shards of glass and chunks of concrete hurtling through the individual rooms and living areas. The Staff Sergeant and the two contract guards had been able to evacuate only the top three floors, and personnel living on those floors were now mostly in the building's interior stairwells. The blast - felt as far as 20 miles away - killed 19 of the unit's personnel and wounded more than 500 others. Numerous other base personnel and nearby residents were also wounded. According to subsequent investigation, the bomb left a crater about 55 feet wide and 16 feet deep.

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(Part D) The Aftermath (*usually distributed at end of exercise*)

The attack on the RHC led promptly to a number of official inquiries. The first of these was initiated within a few days of the bombing, when on 13 May the Secretary of Defense appointed a Commission to assess the event.

The Commission delivered its report to the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Homeland Security on 30 July. One of the findings concluded:

While intelligence did not provide the tactical details of date, time, place, and exact method of attack on the RHC, a considerable body of information was available that indicated terrorists had the capability and intention to target US interests in Florida and that the RHC was a potential target.

On 31 July 2009, the new Secretary of Defense issued a report entitled "Personal Accountability for Force Protection at the RHC." In this report, the Secretary briefly summarized the facts surrounding the terrorist attack and referenced several earlier reports. He acknowledged the Commander's efforts to respond to the two OSI vulnerability assessments, but stated that:

The Commander could and should have done more to prepare the unit to respond to a perimeter bomb. He and his staff recognized that there was a serious risk of a perimeter or "stand-off" bomb attack. Although they anticipated that such a bomb would likely be comparable in size to the one used at the Federal Building, they knew that they could not discount the possibility that terrorists could use a bigger bomb. Regardless of the anticipated size of the bomb, however, they had to take reasonable measures to protect their troops from harm if a stand-off bomb attack occurred. Their planned response to such an attack consisted of having roof-top sentries detect the threat and then seek promptly to evacuate affected personnel. It is evident that this plan could only work if an alarm could be sounded quickly, safe havens could be rapidly identified, and personnel could be moved swiftly to those safe havens.

Dismissing the voice alert system as "of little value in a terrorist attack," the Secretary's report focused on four specific flaws in the base's emergency planning:

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It was not clear whether in any given case the system – either in voice mode or in siren mode – was to be used as a “take cover” warning or an evacuation warning. There were no clear procedures identifying the emergencies for which the system could be activated, and no procedures governing when to use the voice mode and when to use the siren mode.

Knocking on doors and using word-of-mouth was an unsatisfactory method of alerting personnel to terrorist threats in the high threat environment that existed in Florida. This primitive method of alert simply could not provide a timely warning in response to a bomb attack or other emergency. It was not a substitute for an automated mass notification system.

The procedures and plans concerning where and how base personnel should seek safety once alerted to a danger were deficient... On the night of the bombing, base personnel did not know where to go to maximize their safety. It was only by good fortune that many personnel who were evacuating Building 11 were still in the interior stairwells when the bomb went off and therefore received some protection of the effects of the blast.

Evacuation drills had never been practiced at the RHC... In the absence of timed and regular drills, Base leaders could neither assess the speed and efficacy of their evacuation methods nor ensure the familiarity of all of their personnel with those methods. They could not know whether the contract police would detect a potential stand-off bomb promptly, how they would react if they did, how long it would take them to alert those in danger, whether personnel once alerted would evacuate or take cover to avoid the danger, and how long it would take them to do so.

After observing that the Base Commander could have requested additional assistance to implement force protection measures if he thought they were necessary, but did not do so, the Secretary concluded that these flaws in the base's preparedness:

“...were lapses with respect to force protection at the RHC for which the Commander must be held accountable... Accordingly, I have recommended to the President that his name be removed from the list of those to be appointed to the grade of Major General. I have also concluded that no adverse action should be taken against those senior to him in the chain of command.”