

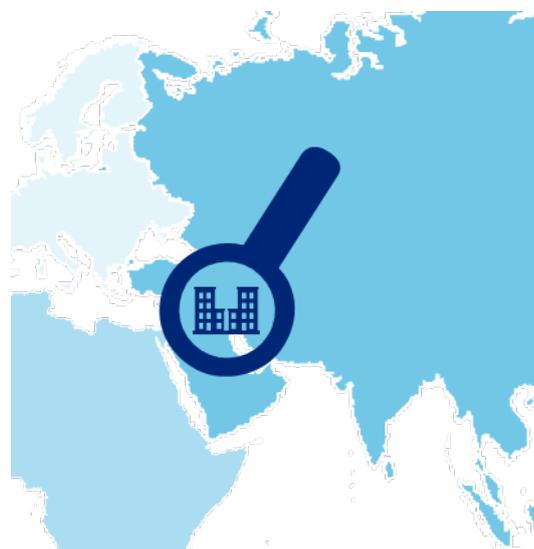
Case study

Lieutenant General Tom Metz, United States Army (Retired)

In August 2004, the Marine Expeditionary Unit (MEU) on the ground in Najaf, a moderately sized city in south central Iraq, was replaced through a normal rotation of forces. Although the challenges posed by both the enemy and the environmental factor of being located in one of the holiest cities in Shi'a Islam were expected, the new MEU found itself in an escalating battle which required additional combat power. The actions that followed in the resulting crisis situation were handled by leaders of the Multi-National Coalition (MNC) and required Lieutenant General Tom Metz to consider the national, cultural, and tactical implications of his unit's actions.

The fundamentals of war gaming were instrumental in informing the crisis management efforts to achieve and maintain dominance over the enemy. For example, because of the sensitivity of Coalition forces fighting near one of the most holy mosques in Iraq (the Imam Ali Shrine), multiple rehearsals, analyses, and assessments of the plan before the attack were imperative. The practice, vetting, and stress-testing of the tactics, techniques, and procedures for the final assault gave the Iraqi leaders confidence and placed them in a position of relative strength when negotiating the final outcome of this crisis situation.

One block from the Imam Ali Shrine, two hotels dominated the central part of Najaf. Enemy snipers in these hotels were growing more and more successful from their perches. Moving the best Coalition counter-snipers to Najaf balanced the sniper fight; but to achieve superiority, the advantages of the hotel's height had to be overcome. To demonstrate to the citizens of Najaf that the hotels could be targeted and struck with precision that would still allow safe evacuation of surrounding buildings and neighborhoods, a parking garage between the two hotels was targeted with precision-penetrating bombs. Suspecting the enemy was storing munitions in the parking garage, the group was proven right when secondary explosions occurred after attacks from close air support. By this point in the battle for Najaf, the enemy only occupied the holy Mosque in the center of the city and the two hotels in close proximity. U.S. Marines and Soldiers occupied the remainder of the city, but the enemy sniper's advantage still had to be removed.



Fortunately, these hotels were in a part of Najaf which was under the control of the MNC targeting team comprised of field grade officers across multiple services and partner nation militaries. This team designed attacks of 2,000-pound precision-penetrating bombs to destroy the hotels without damage to the Imam Ali Shrine. The bombs struck the designated targets within the hotels near the holy Mosque: the first hotel struck collapsed and the second soon followed suit, falling on top of the first and away from the mosque. The progression of this attack closely resembling the well-planned and rehearsed peacetime demolition one might see on the Vegas strip retiring a well-worn casino. This success was a direct result of the amount of time the multi-national leaders dedicated to war gaming, analysis, and preparation prior to execution.

With the hotels removed, about 300 remaining enemy combatants occupied the Mosque. With snipers from across the Coalition trained on the building, they were pinned inside. No insurgent could enter or depart the shrine without being in the crosshairs of a coalition sniper. Even with these **tactical** successes, the international pressure via Iran's successful information campaign left the **strategic** situation still largely in doubt, as clamor for lifting pressure on the mosque arose.

To remove those who remained in the mosque, the MNC targeting team needed a simple plan, war gamed with detailed and disciplined preparation. The commander of one of the lead elements of the MNC was invited to the rehearsal for two reasons: first, he possessed extensive experience fighting in Iraq; second, he represented a variety of important stakeholders and it was critical to ensure these voices were heard. The intangible internal communication aspect of having two 3-star generals working

together from the U.S. Army and U.S. Marine Corps was not lost on the younger Soldiers and Marines; more importantly, it was also not lost on the members of the Iraqi 36th Commandos and other Iraqi officials involved in the planning for the assault. Iraqi Ministers of Defense and Interior were additionally invited to observe and learn the basics of war gaming. Although the first rehearsal was a good effort, senior MNC Commanders agreed that it was not up to the established standard (to the surprise of the Iraqi leaders) and thus more assessments and rehearsals were required. Defeating 300 insurgents in one of Shia Islam's holiest shrines required a simple plan executed superbly. War gaming helped ensure the plan had taken into account as many contingencies and potential unknowns as possible, had vetted all key assumptions, and confirmed risk identification and prioritization was completed. But time was running out...

"Few organizational cultures allow for sincere, candid, and accurate feedback while training. The American military is almost unique with its simulations (live, virtual, and constructive) and the after action review process—the more open, honest, and explicit in describing both successes *and* failures the war game is, the more agility, cohesion, and sophistication of analysis are enhanced."

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demonstrate the validity and efficacy of the recommended course of action. Upon seeing the evidence, the Prime Minister engaged the enemy combatants entrenched in the mosque, offering no other options except immediate surrender and evacuation. The combatants chose that option shortly after. A focus on thorough preparation and risk-informed decision-making due to continuous and rigorous war gaming positioned the Prime Minister to win his first significant challenge.

Relation to war gaming

Leadership and decision-making in the midst of a crisis does not always allow time to stop and conduct war games; thus, leaders must allocate time **before** the crisis develops to educate and train their staff on the steps and processes of war gaming. Immersing the team in plausible experiential learning scenarios supported by simulations builds confidence in making and supporting decisions. This investment pays handsome dividends. Few militaries allow for free-thinking adversaries in war gaming because admitting the enemy might actually prevail is unacceptable ideologically and culturally. A non-constrained enemy unbounded by culture or fear or repercussions will significantly help the leader uncover faulty assumptions and identify biases that otherwise would go unnoticed. Once the culture of good war gaming is ingrained in an organization, it will benefit from the analysis of innovative and risk-reducing strategies without actual consequences or expenditure of resources. Those organizations that prepare for crises via war gaming and simulation best manage the "fog of war" in a crisis situation. The time or resources of a crisis might not allow for detailed war gaming, but personnel who are skilled in the methodology will have a cognitive advantage that is most visibly measured in the "won-loss" column. The Operation Iraqi Freedom Coalition was blessed with Soldiers and Marines who were well educated and trained in war gaming. The crisis in Najaf did not allow for additional time spent war gaming, but the challenges **during** this crisis were met because of preparations made by the U.S. Army and Marine Corps months and years **before** the crisis.

The preparations and rehearsals for removing the enemy fighters from the shrine were complete, and the Coalition force was very confident of its future success. However, the probability of significant damage to the mosque was still high, as was the risk of "friendly fire". From a strategic communication standpoint, one of the most important considerations was the optics of tanks outside the shrine combined with American Special Forces fighting inside it, and how these scenes could be manipulated and then propagated by the enemy. It was also necessary to plan for the fallout associated with any American killed or wounded inside this holy site. The series of war games identified all of these variables and led to the eventual determination that the ideal conclusion to this standoff would be the voluntary exit of the occupants of the mosque.

Clearly communicating these factors to then-Prime Minister Allawi was based heavily upon the amount of study, analysis, and war gaming that had been done to test and