Dealing with crises
Stories from the front lines

Case study

Lieutenant General John F. Sattler, United States Marine Corps (Retired)

On September 11th, 2001, then-Major General John Sattler was commanding the 16,000 Marines and Sailors of the Second Marine Division. The global order changed dramatically that day. Upon hearing President Bush speak about the event, the General recognized the Nation would soon shift to a wartime footing. The mission of his Division was to "seek out, close with, and destroy the enemy through fire and maneuver." As Marines and Sailors moved into Afghanistan with the initial surge of forces, each member of the Division took training a little more seriously; each man and woman was convinced that training for their impending mission was paramount.

One year later, as the president started to move forces forward in preparation of the invasion of Iraq, the Second Marine Division was primed to be part of the invasion force. Knowing they would face an unfamiliar battlefield with untested technology, the Division joined together with other units to conduct a highly complex, challenging war game. In addition to the myriad pieces of data pertaining to geography, enemy order of battle, weather patterns, and other factors, the collective brainpower of leadership and division personnel injected an element of subjectivity into the war game: personal opinions and assumptions. These included thoughts on where forces would be located, where and when known regional actors would participate, how many and what types of "unknowns" would exist, and how the Division's activity would fit into the larger master plan for Iraq.

After two iterations of war games, and having lived in austere conditions for several months with a degree of sleep deprivation settling in, the combined group acknowledged they would benefit from additional, perhaps external, review to help give their plan more refinement. General Sattler was in the process of sifting through the after action report from this war game when a messenger arrived with a note to call Washington. On that call, he learned that even after all the previous weeks of planning, the Second Marine Division had been tasked to form a Combined Joint Task Force over the next 60 days and transition out of Afghanistan to the Horn of Africa.

General Sattler was adamant that the Division was to be part of the larger Marine force going to Iraq, but the decision to deploy his forces to the Horn of Africa was not open for debate. The group ceased their Iraq war game and immediately returned from the field. They commenced planning their new mission, but with the rigor of impending field engagement removed from the planning, the team had lost the enthusiasm they previously had when conducting the "going to combat" war game. This diminished the group's ability to engage in the lively debate, discourse, and creative input that typically precedes an operation. Deciding that the purpose of the group heading to Africa and what was expected of them was already clear, General Sattler cancelled the war game that would have analyzed the mission and designed the force to be taken forward based on preexisting training and assumptions. The division command transitioned to execution mode.

As a result of this decision, the Division formed a force structure geared toward operations in one theater, but sailed to the horn of Africa for a different mission with different threats and challenges. Over the course of the following 90 days, the division staff found that while their troops were motivated, they were not adequately prepared to encounter the mission they actually faced on the ground. This mission was vastly different from the previous one they had trained to and rehearsed over several months in their war game. With the benefit of hindsight, the planning team performed a thorough mission analysis (with General Sattler providing constructive guidance and intent) and restructured their forces. General Sattler took away one primary lesson from the experience: there is a time when a leader must be decisive and rely on his or her prior knowledge, but that leader should also strive to find time for thorough planning and a well-constructed war game. This appetite for the "Best Collective" decision saved lives later in his career in Iraq...and again during his time as Director for Strategic Plans and Policy for the Joint Chiefs.

Relation to war gaming

An experienced strategic planner, General Sattler understood the value of war gaming in exploring risks and anticipating threats. Given his initial deployment orders, he used war games as the foundation for a structured approach to understand the signals and threat indicators his team would face on the ground. After the change in course, however, a renewed war game would have tested General Sattler's assumptions, exposed gaps and seams in the plan, and clearly highlighted the disconnect between the force trained and equipped for combat operations, and one more suited for the range of lower intensity operations expected in the Horn of Africa. Had he provided constructive guidance and intent and empowered his team, the group would have "gotten it right" from the start.

War gaming provides a methodology for probing and assessing crisis response capabilities. By immersing a diverse group of stakeholders in a realistic crisis scenario, biases and assumptions can be challenged; existing plans and capabilities can be explored for gaps and vulnerabilities; and new and innovative ideas can be stress-tested without the expenditure of real-world capital. The completeness and flexibility of existing plans, policies, and procedures to take into account the range of potential disruptive events the organization is trying to prevent can be evaluated. These and other aspects are just some of the many questions war games can answer in order to streamline crisis response and recovery. A properly designed and thought-through war game could have enhanced everyone's knowledge of the geographic area they were heading to and the complexities of the joint, interagency, and multinational environment.