

# Benghazi Consulate Attack

The acid test for 2015's SPMAGTF-CR-AF?

by Mike Bailey & Capt Dan Yurkovich

The 2012 Benghazi Consulate attack led to the deaths of four Americans, including the American Ambassador to Libya. This event contributed greatly to our government adopting the “new normal” force posture in the U.S. Africa Command (USAFRICOM) area of responsibility, including the establishment and growth of the Special Purpose MAGTF-Crisis Response-Africa (SPMAGTF-CR-AF). In this article, we’ll take a look at the current force posture of SPMAGTF-CR-AF and how it operates today. We’ll use the Benghazi Consulate attack scenario to see how the current SPMAGTF-CR-AF would have affected events. We’ll draw conclusions from this for force posture, training, equipment, and operations. Finally, we’ll discuss how the SPMAGTF GCE has developed a tactical decision game (TDG) based on the scenario and the training value they derive from game play.

We propose to selectively combine the events of 2012 in Africa with the U.S. force posture of 2015 and ask the “What if?” questions. This type of analysis is known by historians as *counterfactual scenario analysis*. Examples of counterfactuals include cases where the South won the civil war, Napoleon evades capture after the Battle of Waterloo, the black plague doesn’t spread, or the 1944 assassination attempt on Hitler is successful. A collection of counterfactual scenarios found in Bunzel<sup>1</sup> provides a usable overview. First, we present a skeleton of the events of the 2012 Benghazi Consulate attack.<sup>2</sup> This is not meant as an authoritative recount of this tragic moment in history, just enough detail and accuracy to drive our analysis. Then

>Dr. Bailey is the Technical Director, Operations Analysis Division, MCCDC. He was the first deployed analyst to be assigned to SPMAGTF-CR-AF.

>>Capt Yurkovich is the CO, L Company, 3d Bn, 8th Marines (L 3/8), and the GCE CO, SPMAGTF-CR-AF rotation 15.2.



Marines conducted training before deployment and potential tasking as SPMAGTF-CR-Africa. (Photo by Sgt David L. Proffitt.)

we will describe the current SPMAGTF-CR-AF posture and the way it operates. Finally, we’ll thread through one sequence of possible events, and examine the response.

The 2012 scenario starts<sup>3</sup> with growing violence in western Libya as various powers compete for control in the post-Gadhafi power vacuum. By mid-2012, security becomes so uncertain that the International Red Cross suspends operations and withdraws its staff and contributing implementers from greater Benghazi. On 16 August the American Embassy (AMEMB) in Tripoli seeks help from USAFRICOM in improving the security situation in Benghazi. AFRICOM’s recommended solution included adding a task-organized special operations element to the Beng-

hazi Consulate security staff. The State Department determined this solution to be too visible and too kinetically-oriented, and thus refuses the help. The tension around Benghazi continues to grow.

A few weeks before, in mid-July, a short trailer for the film entitled *The Innocence of Muslims* was released from an unknown source onto YouTube. It was originally released in English, believed to be of American origin, and presents an unflattering depiction of the Prophet Muhammad. It gets no real attention until, in September, it is re-released in Arabic and causes a frenzy of anti-American protests and sentiment across the Arab world. On 9 September, the film is part of an Egyptian television documentary on American attitudes toward

Islam. Embassy protests, many violent, explode across the hemisphere through September.

Against this backdrop, leaders of An-sar-al-Shiria post a speech on YouTube at 0300, 11 September 2012, denouncing the film, the American government, and call for attacks on American interests across Northern Africa. We know now that the terrorist organization intended to exploit the rise in tensions to execute a deliberate attack on the American Consulate in Benghazi, part of a long-term plan to attack American interests in the area. The pressure grew all day on 11 September, and security concerns built in a multitude of diplomatic facilities, including Cairo, Tripoli, and Benghazi. At 1700, the outer perimeter of the AMEMB Cairo was breached and an angry crowd entered and occupied the grounds. In the Benghazi Consulate neighborhood, the scene was different—quiet but tense. The American Ambassador, Christopher Stephens, was holding evening meetings with Benghazi-based Turkish diplomats in the Consulate, with only a few security personnel and his director of public affairs on the grounds.

At 2100, without warning, an angry crowd of about 150 men came roaring up the approach to the Consulate. They apparently had unobserved road blocks up for more than an hour prior, and had been quietly organizing and getting motivated nearby. With grenades and small arms, they set on the handful of guards, chased the ambassador and two others into an adjacent building, set that building on fire with fuel left out by the grounds staff, and killed Ambassador Stevens and information management specialist Sean Smith. The whole sequence took less than 40 minutes.

The remaining staff fled to a local compound where the Consulate's CIA team was housed. After a lull overnight, the mob located the CIA annex and brought it under fire at about 0510, adding mortar fire to the grenades and automatic weapons. The CIA annex had been reinforced with security personnel from Tripoli, and the attack was temporarily held at bay at the cost of two more lives. By 0600, everything was set at Benina airport for an evacuation. A

***The SPMAGTF's incident response force (IRF) is a detachment of its GCE and attached enablers, lifted by a combination of MV-22s and KC-130Js. Within the IRF is the ground combat component, known as the alert force.***

***N+x alert status is a force alert posture requiring the SPMAGTF to launch the IRF no later than x hours after receiving a mission. The SPMAGTF is prepared to be on N+6, N+3, N+1, and N+0:15, and does so regularly as world events dictate.***

***Alert is the order given to the SPMAGTF to start the countdown to launching the IRF.***

***The SPMAGTF occupies its aviation hub in Moron, Spain, but often sends an IRF detachment to occupy a spoke location closer to likely missions. This is known as "spoking." The SPMAGTF has pre-arranged spoke locations in western Africa and southern Europe.***

convoy of diplomatic, technical, and security personnel moved from the CIA Annex to the airport and departed by chartered air. No further casualties were sustained.

#### **Fast Forward to 2015**

The perception in Washington, DC was that there were scant options for reacting to the attack in Benghazi. While there were (and are) forces poised to respond to a scenario like this one, none combined the organic air mobility, alert status, training, and location to respond adequately. The U.S. Government has thus adopted a force posture in AFRICOM known as the new normal. Part of this posture includes the establishment of SPMAGTF-CR-AF. With organic MV-22 and KC-130J aircraft, its N+ alert status (see above Sidebar), and its basing in Moron, Spain, SPMAGTF-CR-AF is 2015's force of choice for responding to crises at diplomatic facilities in northern and western Africa.

When world events dictate, the MAGTF can be ordered to change its alert status, either by reducing the time allowed between alert and launch (the N+ status), or repositioning that por-

tion of the force that is planned as the incident response force (IRF). If this alteration includes relocation, the new location of the IRF is called a spoke.

#### **Counterfactual Analysis**

To analyze this scenario in the new normal Africa, we can look at combinations of events in Egypt, Libya, and Washington, and ask ...

- Which events would change the SPMAGTF N+ status?
- Which would cause the SPMAGTF to reposition by using a spoke?
- Which would trigger an alert, and what would the SPMAGTF mission be when the alert started?
- When would the IRF arrive in Benghazi?

We did an exhaustive look at all of the combinations of spoke triggers, events that change alert status, and alert initiators. Many of these cause the IRF to arrive in Benghazi too late to affect events on 11 and 12 September. However, we found many compelling cases where a forward leaning SPMAGTF would set conditions for a significant response. Looking at Figure 1 (next page), we can easily compare the alert and flight times of the IRF from differ-

ent starting points, and how that lines up with the events of the scenario.

In particular, the building tensions in Cairo on the morning and afternoon of 11 September could start the N+6 alert timeline in Moron for a relocation to somewhere in the Mediterranean. We explore one very plausible scenario thread.

At 1200, with crowds building in Cairo and knowledge of the building security situation across Northern Africa, Marine Forces Africa commands the SPMAGTF to alert and start the six-hour preparation to move an IRF to Naval Air Station Sigonella. The SPMAGTF command element (CE) and the IRF plan for potential USEMB Cairo reinforcement, but carefully examine branch plans in anticipation of other contingencies. (One should note that Cairo is outside of the SPMAGTF area of responsibility, but it must be recognized that in this part of the world, force options are sometimes not ideal, and all options must be considered.) At 1700, the SPMAGTF moves to N+1 and executes final preparations, loads aircraft, and launches for Naval Air Station Sigonella one hour later.

At 2100, the Consulate is attacked. Some time after 2200, soon after the first two deaths occur in Benghazi, the IRF lands in Naval Air Station Sigonella. The forces have been aware of events taking place in Benghazi and is ordered to remain with the aircraft on a self-imposed N+0:15, knowing that redirection is forthcoming. By 2300, the re-launch toward Libya has taken place. The IRF is headed to the CIA annex in Benghazi with the mission of military assisted departure of all diplomatic and security personnel from Benghazi. Using KILSWITCH,<sup>4</sup> the platoon commander and the SPMAGTF command element are able to develop a quick landing zone plan and scheme of reinforcement and extraction from the CIA annex.

By 0130, 12 September, the IRF touches down in the vicinity of the CIA Annex, adding 38 Marines to the defense of the annex. At 0315, the personnel and vehicles required are organized to move all personnel to Benina airport and depart. The confrontation with

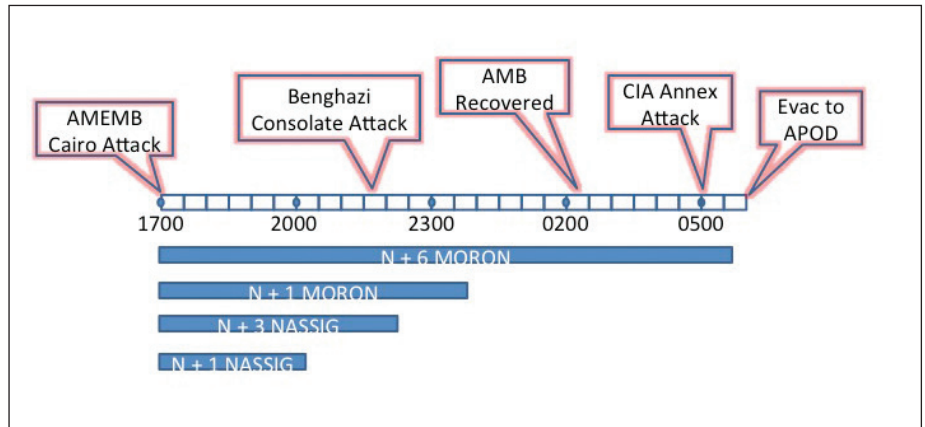


Figure 1. Timeline of the Benghazi Consulate attack compared to response times from various SPMAGTF-CR-AF force postures.

the attackers at the annex is avoided, and personnel are safely evacuated to Tripoli.

Placing SPMAGTF-CR-AF in Moron, Spain, on an N+6 alert status could not have stopped a no-notice attack in Benghazi, Libya, or saved the American lives lost in the first hour of that event. However, the force as postured today would have responded to the circumstances of 11 September 2012 by increasing its alert status, probably relocating the IRF, and ultimately responding to the Benghazi crisis, possibly as early as midnight. In our plausible counterfactual scenario analysis, some loss of life would have been avoided and the militarily assisted evacuation of the Consulate would have been safer and quicker. The perceptions of America's ability to respond in Africa would be very different. This analysis highlights how critical early force repositioning decisions are as the SPMAGTF strug-

gles to overcome the *tyranny of distance* that comes with missions on the African continent.

### The TDG

Upon briefing these results and conclusions to the SPMAGTF, the commander of the MAGTF GCE, L/3/8 worked with the analyst to isolate potential lessons learned and important capabilities that come from the scenario. Foremost, the possibility that the alert force might be required to re-plan missions while enroute from one spoke or hub to another became an obvious concern.

The MAGTF, starting with rotation 15.1, has been equipped with a new capability to communicate between the crisis response operations center (CROC), the KC-130J, and the MV-22's, in a configuration shown in Figure 2. In addition to the HMSAS-based (hatch mounted satellite antenna systems) network sup-

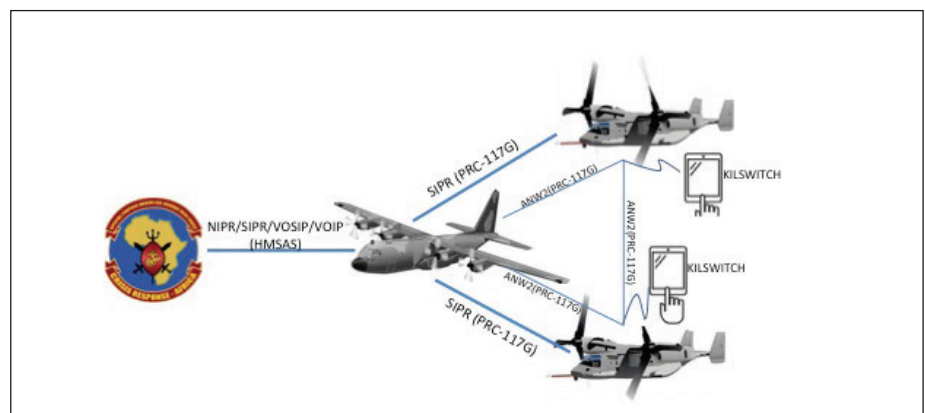


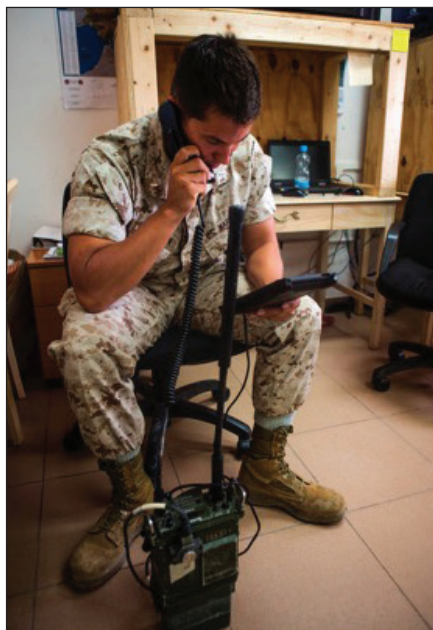
Figure 2. Network between the CROC, the KC-130J Refueler, and the Alert Force aboard MV-22's.

porting the SIPRNET (secure Internet Protocol Router network), a second network, ANW2 (adaptive, networking wideband waveform), is established as a private airborne data channel, providing the GCE user the opportunity to network Android tablets running the application KILSWITCH.<sup>5</sup> KILSWITCH allows manipulation and sharing imagery, overlays, and notes between the two MV-22s and the KC-130J. While 15.1 did training with the HMSAS portion of the system on a regular basis, the Benghazi scenario gave context and purpose to training at the user end, developing mission plans KILSWITCH-to-KILSWITCH while enroute.

Thus the leadership of L 3/8 developed a TDG based on the Benghazi scenario. The goal of the game was to subject platoon-level leadership to the challenges of re-planning an alert force mission while enroute. Facility with the KILSWITCH/AMW-2 part of the system, SOPs, and identified training and material shortfalls would all be captured and documented as the alert force leaders worked their way through the Benghazi attack timeline.

Each platoon's commander and platoon sergeant would be presented with the timeline of events as they unfolded from 8 to 11 September. The game play starts at 1200, as the leaders are given the task of preparing an embassy reinforcement plan for Cairo. A landing zone (LZ), conditions at the USEMB Cairo, and compound layout are all provided. The team developed plans to insert, enter the compound, and integrate with the USEMB security team.

After one hour's time, the team is separated as they would across the two MV-22s of the IRF. Once separated, the team is told that the mission has changed, and the new target is the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi. Conditions on the ground are given as those similar to our scenario at approximately 0000 12 September 2015. The team must scrap their Cairo planning, reorient their systems and their thinking to Benghazi and the conditions there, and create a new mission plan using only KILSWITCH/ANW-2 to communicate. After one hour, their plans



**Figure 3. 1stLt Joseph T. Ahonen (Plt. Cmdr, 4th Plt) works KILSWITCH and Voice over his PRC-117G. Platoon Commanders in the TDG were adept at manipulating the KILSWITCH imagery and graphics, but challenged with information overload.**

must be complete, and they outbrief the L, 3/8 commander.

Highlights from the consolidated TDG results include:

- Platoon leadership *can* conduct effective rapid re-planning of crisis response missions while in the air using the ANW2/KILSWITCH system, and can effectively convey plans between KILSWITCH systems.
- Given the potential to be re-directed, and the size of the area of responsibility, paper map and imagery products are of marginal value. Digital imagery stored on secure data cards for KILSWITCH is ideal. The alert force commanding officer should train on digital-only maps and imagery during pre-deployment training.
- Graphics on KILSWITCH are not yet standardized USMC-wide. The alert force company has developed a set of internal standards.

Alert force commanding officers are challenged to handle the information load imposed by the re-planning effort, communicating with their Marines in the aircraft, communicating with the opposite aircraft, and dealing with information requirement of higher.

## Conclusion

The Benghazi attack is not a *could-have-happened* event. It *did* happen. The counterfactual scenario treatment is very useful in lending focus on big-picture issues such as SPMAGTF force posture. In addition, it provides challenging tactical conditions unique to the SPMAGTF-CR-AF mission. SPMAGTF GCE leaders immediately spun the scenario into a planning exercise reflecting the mission in northern Africa. The requirement for re-direction of the IRF while airborne introduces many new challenges to the small unit leader, and the HMSAS/ANW2/KILSWITCH C<sup>2</sup> capability provides tools to overcome some of these challenges. At SPMAGTF-CR-AF, counterfactual analysis has been proven to create compelling scenarios for training and an acid test for the capabilities the SPMAGTF brings to the African theater.

## Notes

1. Martin Bunzl, "Counterfactual History: A User's Guide," *American Historical Review*, (Washington, DC: 2004), 845-858.
2. *Benghazi: The Complete Inside Report on the Terrorist Attacks*, (Providence, RI: Providence Research, 2014), Kindle Edition.
3. Ibid.
4. Travis Barksdale, "CAS: KILSWITCH and the Way Ahead," *Marine Corps Gazette*, (Quantico VA: July 2014), 34-37.
5. Ibid.

*>Authors' Note: The authors would like to thank LtCol David Becker for his guidance and advice as we developed this article for the Marine Corps Gazette.*

