

NEWS FROM THE FRONT

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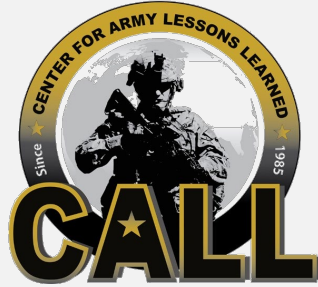


Operation Sentinel French Homeland Security Operation



**Insights from
Colonel Pierre-Olivier Marchand, French Army
Commander, Task Force East**

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News From The Front:

Operation Sentinel
French Homeland Security Operation: Insights from
Colonel Pierre-Olivier Marchand

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Background

Operation Sentinel began in January 2015 after Islamic extremist groups conducted attacks on the weekly satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and a kosher supermarket.

The French President, François Hollande, declared a state of emergency and ordered 10,000 troops to assist the civilian authorities with defending the French homeland.

The soldiers were responsible for patrolling areas, protecting key infrastructures, and assisting police forces when responding to terrorist attacks. The patrols also served to deter future terrorist threats and to reassure the population.

This interview, conducted by the Center for Army Lessons Learned, captures the insights from Colonel Pierre-Olivier Marchand, French Army, who was commander of an artillery regiment in the 11th Airborne Brigade when tasked with leading one of the task forces responsible for conducting Operation Sentinel.

Colonel Pierre-Olivier Marchand

Q. What was your unit mission?

Colonel Marchand: My unit was called Task Force (TF) East (Groupement Est) and was deployed April through June 2017 east of Paris. At the time, I was commanding a Regiment in the 11th Airborne Brigade.

The TF East mission was to “support the homeland security forces engaged in the fight against terrorism”. For that we had to “protect, deter, and reassure” the whole area of responsibility (AOR) which was three departments (77, 93, 94), and included 500 sites to monitor. Among them the two Parisian airports, the Stadium of France (Stade de France), and the EuroDisney surroundings.

The TF East was constituted with the headquarters of my regiment and consisted of 30 personnel organized in the standard staff sections of S1, S2, S3, S4, S5, and S6. Within the task force were thirteen companies (coys). Two of the companies were from my regiment, and six were from other regiments within the brigade. The remaining five companies were from other brigades.

Q. What guidance did you receive from your higher headquarters that you used for planning?

Colonel Marchand: I think it is useful to keep in mind that this Operation Sentinelle was launched just after the terrorist attacks against Charlie Hebdo (a satirical weekly newspaper) and a kosher supermarket in January 2015. Sentinelle is a military operation nested in the interagency counter-terrorism plan called Vigipirate.

Since the mission began in January 2015, the situation has evolved and new Operational Planning Orders (OPOs) have been issued periodically as the operation is in a permanent evolution. We received Operational Planning Order (OPO) 8 from our

higher headquarters as a “requisition” in which the civilian authority requests the support of the armed forces.

We did the planning at the regimental level before being deployed, then we had a back brief to the Ile de France (IdF) headquarters. We delivered a mission brief to the units assigned to the task force, and we issued our own OPO (OPO GPT Est, T20). The Task Force also issued our administrative rules (Règlement de Service Intérieur), which covered administrative aspects of the mission such as days off, daily life, etc.

Q. What were the rules of engagement (ROE)?

Colonel Marchand: The ROEs, or as we called them, the rules of the use of force (REF), were based on the principle of legitimate defense extended to a third person. There is a good example of that in Valence, on 1st January 2016, when Sentinel soldiers opened fire on a driver that deliberately sped his vehicle against troops and the mosque they were protecting.

These rules were updated in 2016, as a lesson learned from the attacks in November 2015, and in accordance with the new homeland security law (loi de sécurité intérieure). Thanks to them, we are able to act in a larger spectrum, adapted to the operational situation. The weapons were “loaded, not ready,” and the soldiers were patrolling as if they were deployed in an overseas operation. To my mind, it makes total sense, because whether the same soldier is deployed to Mali or Paris, he is facing the same enemy. My motto about opening fire was “neither inhibited, neither a gunslinger.”

Q. How did you interact and coordinate your operations with other elements (civilian agencies, police, adjacent army units, etc.)?

Colonel Marchand: At a military level, the three task forces in Ile de France (IdF) region were reporting to the IdF headquarters (HQ), which is the headquarters of the Paris military governor (the Gouverneur Militaire de Paris), which existed before the terrorist attacks in January 2015 and was not created for Sentinelle. These three task forces had clear boundaries, and the S2s and S3s were constantly exchanging information.

We coordinated our operations with the police through a liaison officer in each departmental headquarters (Direction Territoriale de la Sécurité de Proximité, DTSP 93 and DTSP 94) and, of course, directly on the ground.

We were working closely with the Firefighters in Paris (Brigade des Sapeurs Pompiers de Paris, BSPP), and had a liaison officer at their operational headquarters. This is a key place to be, in order to enhance the situational awareness when it gets confusing on the ground. The Paris Firefighters are military, and that helps a lot from a cultural perspective.

One point, which is key with the civilian authorities (préfets), is to help them understand and implement our “effect-based approach” to employing military forces. The civilian authorities need to ask for an effect on the ground, not a specific task or a given number

of personnel, and we, as military professionals, will propose the adequate course of action to reach the desired effect.



Photo: Cellule Communication 35e Régiment d'Artillerie Parachutiste

A key challenge when the Operation Sentinelle began in January 2015 was to explain to the non-military people that a mobile course of action (patrols), which increases the commander's freedom of action, is better than static guard posts, which increases vulnerability of the soldiers. We often used this example to make them understand: in the military, when you are tasked to control the bridge, very often you are not standing on the bridge.

Q. What were the most significant challenges you faced and how did you overcome them?

Colonel Marchand: In a nutshell, the main idea is that you have to act as if you were deployed in an overseas operation while you are in your own country, sometimes only a one-hour train ride from your family. So the most significant challenges were as follows:

- Create a relationship of trust with the subordinate units, which are not coming from your regiment. Share information and prepare the operation as soon as possible before being deployed. Then conduct an interactive mission brief, have them attend dedicated back briefs in their own AORs, pay visits, send weekly information reports, and use command and control with a wide autonomy given to the subordinate units.

- Avoid monotony, keep the motivation regarding the mission, which could be a bit boring for soldiers, and maintain the level of branch training: some companies had been deployed several times since January 2015, sometimes in the same areas.
- As soon as possible, have an accurate representation of the environment thanks to the support of the local departmental military representative (a Délégué Militaire Départemental), posted in each French department.
- Deal with logistics matters: identify some decent places to rest after a day of patrol, provide a roof, a bed, a shower, and one hot meal for each soldier every day (my TF was disseminated in 8 different locations, which were former forts and fortifications from the second half of the 19th century surrounding Paris), organize welfare activities during the days off, and maintain the 200+ commercial vehicles of the TF (partly through agreements with local garages).



Photo: Armée de Terre

- Submit legal complaints (by individuals and units) in cases of insult or offensive behavior with legal support provided by the Sentinelle Force legal advisor (LEGAD).
- Think with a counterinsurgency (COIN) mindset even in your own country: every attacker has to be considered a suicide bomber, even if he surrenders. Every attack has to be considered as a deception to another attack (maintain a global picture). Every explosion has to be treated as a possible chemical attack until testing can be completed.
- Be prepared to face the crushing need of immediate information from the hierarchical levels of the government. Being deployed in your own country, and specifically in Paris, has consequences:

- Small incidents can have a strategic dimension, because of social media or the political atmosphere. My tour was during the Presidential election in 2017, and all type of incidents may have been sensitive during that time.
- In case of a terrorist attack, senior political and military leaders want immediate information and will visit the scene, even if only the terrorist has been killed and nobody else (Museum of the Louvre, 3 February 2017; Airport of Orly, 18 March 2017). Regarding the attack in Orly, less than two hours after the Minister was there and answering questions from the media. As a commander you have to cope with the “fog of war” to deliver precise and accurate information as soon as possible, and to deal with the civilian authorities. In comparison, during an operation in Afghanistan, there was not such an impact each time an enemy was killed in action.

Q. How did you and your troops interact in the information environment (tourists, local population, social media, news organizations, etc.)?

Colonel Marchand: The challenge is to be efficient, to create an atmosphere of security instead of fear or stress, and to present a nice image of the nation’s Army. When patrolling, the soldiers are performing a kind of show—professional gesture, awareness of potential threats, and kindness to the people in the street.

Meanwhile, the soldiers have to be very cautious with social media regarding the image they give on duty, as well as what they are posting themselves during their time off. They all are “strategic corporals.”



Photo: Armée de Terre

Q. What were the key factors of success?”

Colonel Marchand: I think they vary by level of command and are as follows:

- Knowledge of the local environment and good relationship with the local actors at the lowest level (squad level, i.e. sergeant level)
- Responsiveness (linked to the initiative at the company level, i.e. captain level)
- Accurate operational picture of both actors (linked to the immediate information sharing capability at the task force level, i.e. task force headquarters level)
- Immediate intervention capability (quick response force)
- Preservation of the human capital (all echelons of command)

Q. What kind of training was conducted prior to deployment? How about during the mission?

Colonel Marchand: Prior to deployment, the training was more focused on tactics and techniques such as tactical shooting exercises and hand to hand combat.

During the mission, it was more about procedures, such as radio procedures at individual level and execution procedures at the headquarters level, which were exercised using battle drills based on vignettes, and involving the task force and company headquarters.

Meanwhile, some branch training was conducted at the company level or centralized at the headquarters level (e.g. airborne proficiency jumps).

Q. What non-standard equipment was needed by your unit to accomplish its mission?

Colonel Marchand: Many types of non-standard equipment were used during this operation because of the urban and civilian environment. This equipment included batons for hand to hand combat, commercial vehicles, and the Auxylium information system¹ which is a real-time information App on secured smartphones.

Q. What is the role of the Reserve Component?

Colonel Marchand: What we call the Operational Reserve in France is comparable to the U.S. Army Selected Reserve and plays a key role.

As a Regiment Commander, the use of the Reserve maximized my workforce and allowed me to keep on going with other activities for the non-committed soldiers of my regiment, such as long artillery exercises.

¹https://atos.net/en/2017/press-release/general-press-releases_2017_04_20/atos-ministry-defense-heart-operation-sentinelle-auxylium

From an Army-Nation relationship point of view, it is a way to include more citizens in the defense of their country with the service of volunteers, who are also able to help explain the mission to the nation once returning to civilian life.

Q. Do the soldiers have the feeling of being a target?

Colonel Marchand: The French soldiers have been attacked by the terrorists several times. In March 2012, a terrorist named Mohamed Merah killed three paratroopers in the South West of France. One year later, on 25 May 2013, Alexandre Dhaussy, a young French Muslim convert and al-Qaeda sympathizer, injured a French soldier in a knife attack. On 3 February 2015, Moussa Coulibaly attacked three French soldiers outside a Jewish community center in Nice, and in 2017 we had these two attacks in Le Louvre and Orly I mentioned before.

But our soldiers do not see themselves as targets but as shields. A guy like Abdallah El-Hamahmy (terrorist attack in Le Louvre, 3 February 2017), who attacked soldiers with two machetes when he was controlled by the squad, would have attacked civilians. It is better that he attack soldiers who are able to react in the appropriate manner.

It is difficult to say if and how many attacks have been avoided thanks to this operation, but I am convinced it has an effect against the “opportunity terrorists” and that it creates reassurance among the population rather than stress.

As a conclusion, I would like to highlight the fact that whether the same soldier is deployed in Mali or in Paris, he is facing the same enemy—over there at large or in France. The soldier is using the same assault rifle and personal equipment, and even if the environment is specific, there are more similarities than differences with an operational deployment overseas.