

The Dozier Kidnapping: Confronting the Red Brigades

by

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Introduction

On the evening of December 17, 1981, U.S. Army Brigadier General James L. Dozier, senior American official at a NATO headquarters in Verona, Italy, was abducted by Red Brigades terrorists. The targeting of General Dozier broke the pattern of previous terrorist activities in Italy; until that time terrorist groups had concentrated their actions against senior Italian politicians, industrialists, jurists, newspaper publishers and police officials. In the days that followed General Dozier's kidnapping, numerous additional threats were received which, in combination, seemed to provide a clear indication that other Americans and U.S. facilities were potential targets for terrorist actions. The threat information came through many channels, from several sources, and differed greatly regarding its specificity and assessed reliability; nevertheless, the overall picture portrayed a probable period of jeopardy for American officials and American installations in Northern Italy. This is the story of the actions taken by one small, isolated unit to confront the terrorist threat.

The Setting

Detachment 9, 1141 USAF Special Activities Squadron, was an unusual organization: the unit did not "own" any base facilities, had no integral security assets, and the American service members supported by it were intermingled with allied forces as part of a NATO organization. The detachment's headquarters was located on Dal Molin Aeroporto, an Italian Air Force base on the outskirts of Vicenza; the nearest American facility was a U.S. Army Post (Caserma Ederle) located several miles away. The closest U.S. Air Force support was from Aviano AB, about 100 miles distant.

When the Red Brigades abducted General Dozier, Detachment 9 supported approximately 100 U.S. Air Force members and families, plus some U.S. Navy, U.S. Army and assorted German, Turkish, and French personnel assigned to international organizations scattered throughout Northern Italy. About half were stationed at a NATO headquarters (Fifth Allied Tactical Air Force) in Vicenza, Italy, while the remainder were assigned to Headquarters LANDSOUTH and located at operating sites in and around Verona, Italy, 55 miles away. The locations in Verona were in turn separated by distances of 25-30 miles. At the time, there was no military housing for detachment members at either location. Everyone – married and single members alike – lived "on the economy", widely dispersed in numerous towns and villages surrounding the two larger cities. At the beginning of the threat period, only 19 of the 100 assigned personnel had telephones in their residences. (Due to a shortage of phones and circuits, telephone installation in Italy was a cumbersome process; it involved a very high initial deposit fee and a waiting period often lasting a year or more.) Thus, when the detachment was alerted to the news that General Dozier had been kidnapped, it became clear rather quickly that many of the "standard" approaches to security would not apply.



Detachment 9 personnel were assigned to locations in and around Vicenza and Verona.

Verona, December 17, 1981: General Dozier abducted from his downtown apartment.

Vicenza, December 24, 1981: The first of several threats received targeting Detachment 9 members.

Rovigo, January 4, 1982: Red Brigades sympathizers blew out a portion of a prison wall, freeing several group members. One prison guard was killed and six others were wounded.

Rome, January 10, 1982: Police raid on a Red Brigades hideout found surface to air missiles, RPGs, bazookas, small arms and ammunition.

Biella, January 16, 1982: At a Red Brigades safe house police discovered explosive gelignite,

detonators, fuses and cables.

Rome, January 18, 1982:
Police foil a Red Brigades plan to raid the convention of a major political party on January 28. The plan called for the kidnapping or assassination of as many as 100 political leaders.

Padova, January 28, 1982:
Italian elite police units freed General Dozier from a "people's prison".

Initial Actions

When the officers and NCOs supported by the detachment met in the early hours following the kidnapping, several steps were immediately set in motion. The first was to build an emergency fact sheet containing points of contact and basic "things to look for", "things to do" precautions and put it in the hands of every service member and family. The unit requested and received information from sources such as the Provost Marshall at the nearest U.S. Army Post and from Supreme Headquarters Allied Powers Europe (SHAPE) counter-intelligence personnel. This package was written, produced, and disseminated by mid-morning of December 18. Later feedback indicated that the immediate availability of these instructions, which gave families tangible guidance (most kept copies visibly posted in their homes and cars), helped ameliorate the initial high anxiety and began the process of restoring confidence. As the episode evolved over the following weeks, the precautions checklist would be greatly expanded, but these initial measures helped get people security minded and provided them with an immediate focus for their efforts and attention.

The second action was for the Commander and First Sergeant to visit the unit's members to answer questions and address concerns. Detachment officials attempted to provide all the information available to the unit at the time. Although the extent of the information was initially limited, the staff quickly learned that any possible concern about "over informing" people would be unfounded. There was a great thirst for news throughout the crisis period. Even potentially uncomfortable information releasable under security constraints was discussed with detachment members. Overall, even though some information was "bad news", it was clear that people were more comfortable when they felt they were getting all the information that was available.

Because the propaganda and media value associated with the abduction of high-ranking officials is a significant consideration in terrorist actions, discussions noted that potential terrorist acts would likely be most directly focused towards senior personnel. This was a factual assessment based on available information and an analysis of past terrorist actions -- and was later corroborated when Italian police began rounding up suspects. Captured terrorists revealed that random kidnapping was not, at least at that time, part of the terrorist "game plan".

Additionally, detachment personnel were advised that there was no present indication that family members would become terrorist targets. This was also based on a solid assessment. Deliberate violence against family members is antithetical to the Italian culture, and because of the strong feeling in the society toward wives and children the backlash resulting from damage to family members would be counter-productive to the terrorists' aims. Information of this type eased some of the apprehension members understandably felt concerning the well being of their families. However, while this intelligence provided helpful reassurance, all unit members were urged to be sure their activities would not allow terrorist groups an opportunity so easily exploitable they could not afford to ignore them.

Supervisors at the three Verona operating locations were instructed to contact and brief all personnel, including off duty shift workers. Security information was handcarried to all sites and standard telephone conference times were established to share information and coordinate actions. These contacts continued throughout the crisis period.

Additionally, because of the dispersed nature of the Verona locations, and the scattering of Americans through various communities in the Verona area, "check in" procedures were developed to account for all personnel and families periodically each day. This was particularly important because the majority were shift workers whose duty schedules would normally keep them "out of pocket" for varying periods, and the absence of telephones in residences prevented status checks from being made by phone. The detachment's "audit" procedures involved a combination of private telephones where available, visit contacts by one neighbor with others, a "deposit slip" certification by a family member at a safe location during prescribed intervals, and "patrols" on a rotating basis by designated individuals to confirm the well-being of other Americans living nearby. This menu of techniques allowed the unit to verify the safety of everyone, everyday.

Later, these measures would be embellished by several individual initiatives. Spouses who had telephones in their homes developed routines for calling others to confirm their status and that of other American families who lived in close proximity. (No doubt these conversations also provided an outlet to chat and helped reduce the tension.) Many families used pre-arranged signals which allowed the spouse, by the positioning of window shades, outside lights, etc., to confirm the absence of anything suspicious to the military member before that individual exited a vehicle when returning from work. Visual "trouble signals" with neighbors were also arranged.

Near the close of a very busy first day, the detachment coordinated with other U.S. sister services with personnel assigned at Verona to install a temporary "no uniform" policy for Americans working at the NATO complex in the center of the city. This approach was intended not only to reduce the visibility of U.S. personnel but also to shield them from the massive numbers of news media representatives who immediately saturated the city. Concurrently, members and families were advised to refer queries received from the news media to the Public Affairs office at the NATO headquarters.

First Follow-up Actions

These initial efforts were followed soon with expansions to the security checklists. Thorough printed guidance, briefings, and training in areas such as residence, vehicle, office security and defensive driving were quickly developed and delivered. Frequent meetings were held with families. Many of the suggestions presented at these sessions were common sense measures and none in itself was of cosmic importance. In combination, though, this series of small steps, a few of which are briefly noted in the following paragraphs, improved security consciousness. Each contributed an additional layer of informed protection for military families who "bought into" the process and became strong adherents.

The importance of no lost dependent ID cards was repeatedly stressed. Security officials regarded an ID card as an entry ticket to a U.S. or NATO installation. Service members were asked to ensure that their dependents had ID cards in their possession and to report any lost ID cards immediately.

Families were counseled against being drawn into conversations that would reveal the locations of American residences in the local community.

Much tighter controls were placed on the availability and distribution of organizational listings and "social rosters" which would reveal names, ranks, duty titles and local addresses of people assigned to the unit.

As one of many efforts to place Americans in a lower profile configuration, families with telephones were urged to answer the phone in Italian and not to indicate name or rank until the identity of the person calling was confirmed. Name designations or displays showing affiliation with U.S. forces were removed from door bells and mail boxes.

Guidance regarding residence security was expanded and reiterated. Families were instructed that when maintenance, repair, or utility company personnel were called to the home, to request their arrival at a specified time and to confirm with the company that their employees had, in fact, been dispatched. (Terrorists had entered the Dozier apartment under the guise of being plumbing repairmen.) Also, since many Italian dwellings had utility or "extra" rooms on the ground floor and living quarters on the upper levels, family members were reminded to lock all interior doors as well as outside entrances and the door to the living quarters. The same guidance applied to windows and doors opening to outside balconies, which are common features on Italian homes.

Commanders of units located in foreign countries often "preach sermons" about the need to sensitive to the image portrayed by Americans. Detachment officers and NCOs now found the need to communicate this message even more forcefully. The urgency was prompted by two considerations. First, embarrassment-free conduct would enhance the good feelings that were increasingly coming from the Italian populace. Second, a "low profile" was exactly what the situation required for the security of the detachment's people. The last thing the unit needed was for any of its members to provide the terrorist organization with such a visible, obvious target that the group could easily take advantage of the opportunity. And, given the circumstances at the time, it only made good sense to avoid alienating Italian friends; few things could contribute more to the security of Detachment 9 people than the presence of "good neighbors".

Finally, unit leaders frequently reiterated the basic precautions of varying routes to and from work, keeping doors locked at all times, and allowing no unidentified individuals into the residence complex. The latter two were especially important considerations. The track record of the Red Brigades and similar groups indicated that they preferred to gain access through subterfuge, or through an unlocked door, or capture the target on an open road, rather than attempting to batter their way in to take someone from a locked and secured residence. One – notable – apparent exception to the usual modus operandi occurred during the crisis. On January 4, 1982, terrorists with probable sympathies to the Red Brigades blew away a portion of a prison wall and freed four convicted group members. It was a meticulously planned operation that killed one prison guard and wounded six others.

Increased Threat

For the first week of the crisis, the detachment had been attempting to respond to a serious, but somewhat generalized threat prompted by the abduction of a senior American official in the immediate vicinity. This situation changed late on Christmas Eve 1981, when the first of several

additional threat notices was received from apparently credible sources that seemed to make the threat much more directly focused against specific people in Detachment 9. The threat notice was relayed to the Detachment 9 Commander by the Italian carabinieri (national paramilitary police) through the Italian colonel Base Commander of the airfield on which the detachment's headquarters was located. Detachment "circuit riders" immediately set out to inform those whom the message seemed to place most at risk and to confirm that each family's personal and security needs were attended to. During these contacts, individual reactions were also assessed. In the unlikely event that any family member became "unraveled" by the news, action would have to be taken quickly to deal with the problem. Fortunately, that was never necessary. Some individuals and families required more in the way of information and discussion than others, but none reacted in anything but the most mature and responsible manner.

Additional Measures

Because the threat had become more focused against people and facilities in the Detachment's immediate area, several additional measures were immediately put in place to further enhance the security of the unit's people and work locations.

Detachment officials worked with the military police at the local U.S. Army Post and coordinated with Italian local police and carabinieri to arrange for police patrols around the residences of Americans who seemed to be the most potentially threatened. Because of the absence of telephones the detachment provided "strip maps" to police officials denoting the location of American homes. The maps assisted police in their patrol efforts and enabled them to respond more quickly to threat notifications. These strip maps were placed in the cruisers of American military police and were given to Italian police in the surrounding communities where detachment families lived. Local police then began making frequent checks of the homes.

Soon after, detachment and NATO officials were able to augment this system by the acquisition of radios that were given to the members of the most apparent target group. After assistance by some very skilled Air Force communications technicians, the range of these radios was boosted sufficiently to enable Detachment 9 people to be in direct contact at all times with both the military police desk on the U.S. Army Post and the switchboard at the NATO headquarters.

Additionally, assistance was received from high-ranking Italian officers in the NATO unit who intervened with local civilian authorities to expedite the placement of telephones in the homes of the most threatened individuals. This was a very successful and most appreciated effort. Families who had been waiting for more than a year for a telephone usually found one installed within a week.

At Detachment 9 locations, Explosive Ordnance Disposal briefings were immediately arranged for all personnel to respond to the possibility of explosive devices being placed in the organization's facilities. On the same briefing program, SHAPE counter-intelligence personnel presented information on terrorist groups and methods, and reiterated precautionary measures.

Meanwhile, detachment NCOs were working with Italian counterparts at the air base which housed the unit's headquarters to address after hours security of the detachment's facilities. Italian personnel did an excellent job of surveying the installation from a security standpoint. U.S. offices were "sealed off" after duty hours, and many other buildings were locked and entrance prohibited after being identified as not requiring after hours access. Other more routine and visible measures taken by Italian national authorities included augmenting the installation's perimeter security, roving patrols, machine gun posts at major entrances, checks of all cars entering the compound, and expanded personal identification checks.

To assist the Italian national police in screening people and vehicles entering the NATO complex, the detachment provided NATO security personnel with listings of vehicles stolen from U.S. personnel and missing license plates from American-owned cars. (In Italy, automobiles of American military personnel are identified with distinct "Allied Forces Italy" license plates.)

The "worst case scenario" was, of course, a direct attack on U.S. facilities. Intelligence reports regarding the Red Brigades' intentions were ambiguous, but it was clear that the group had the capability to launch attacks if opportunities presented themselves. On January 10, carabinieri raided a Red Brigades' hideout in Rome and found, in addition to an impressive array of small arms and ammunition, surface to air missiles, rocket propelled grenades, and bazookas. Six days later, at another Red Brigades' safe haven in Biella, police discovered 1,000 sticks of explosive gelignite, 764 detonators, and 750 yards of fuses and cable. Clearly, precautions were warranted and measures were immediately taken. Weapons for unit members assigned to the headquarters and remote sites were tested, ammunition was placed adjacent to the weapons, weapons qualifications were assessed, training was conducted, and weapons issuing procedures were rehearsed. Each of these was a necessary step given the detachment's operating environment and mission. Italy has some of the world's most restrictive and stringently enforced weapons laws. Thus, the unit was precluded from issuing weapons that could be taken off the installation. The detachment's weapons – M-16s and .38 revolvers – were kept in an armory at the NATO headquarters. In normal threat conditions, ammunition was stored in a separate bunker located a considerable distance from the weapons. However, with the assistance of the Italian Base Commander, arrangements were very quickly made to collocate ammunition with weapons and to accelerate release procedures.

Installation Security

As noted, the detachment did not "own" any facilities and had no assigned security assets integral to the unit. However, because of their scope and success, the techniques employed at the nearest American installation (Caserma Ederle, an U.S. Army Post) deserve comment.

The most notable of these techniques was the massive, visible presence of heavily armed security personnel at all entrance gates. Not only was the tangible presence of numerous security people important in responding to the threat of attack, but the psychological impact these forces no doubt created in the minds of any persons contemplating shooting their way into the post also had to be most impressive. The number of access gates was greatly reduced, and the hours each was open were changed frequently and on short notice. Care was taken to post sharpshooters from vantage points offering unrestricted fields of fire. Personal identity documents of all vehicle occupants were carefully checked. During the most intense period, every car was stopped. Hoods and trunks were opened to search for explosive devices; mirrors were placed under vehicles for the same purpose. Bomb disposal experts were always available, close at hand.

The perimeter of the installation was patrolled 24 hours a day. The post boundary "wire" fronted on everything from a congested residential area to cornfields and open ground; night vision devices proved invaluable.

Roving quick response teams cruised at random around the base. CQs were armed. During the most difficult days, a mobile strike force was kept on alert in a barracks area. The purpose of this force was to respond immediately with firepower and numbers to any terrorist assault or Lod airport-type "suicide squad" attack. Security personnel practiced deployment to pre-assigned areas. Top priorities for defense were given the dependent school and the hospital. Rehearsals to move to, guard, and defend these and other key locations on the installation were frequently held. (Interestingly, although the subject of a possible terrorist attack on the detachment's support post was in itself

quite grim, when family members were told during the briefing sessions about the precautions being taken, most emerged from the meetings considerably more reassured.)

The full vehicle searches understandably slowed traffic attempting to enter the post. On most entrances, however, after search personnel became proficient, the worst delays approximated only 15-20 minutes during peak periods. Army officials attempted to address this situation by staggering duty hours for various units and by Public Affairs "spots" broadcast by the Armed Forces Network radio station, urging patience and explaining the need for the checks. At Commander's Calls and group meetings, local commanders reiterated the need for patience, counseling troops that the searches were necessary to insure maximum protection for themselves and their families. There were few complaints.

Other Considerations

The initiatives taken during the threat period provided valuable insights in several important areas such as dealing with allies, family security, communications from the outside, Public Affairs involvement, and many others.

-Family Activities-

Where reasonable security could be provided, organizational activities were continued – and expanded. The detachment staff believed it was important to draw the small community even closer together during this time. With great care taken for security, holiday parties, ball games, and social activities were continued.

-Importance of Outside Channels-

The only English language broadcast service available to detachment families came from a small Armed Forces Network radio station located in Vicenza. American families in both Vicenza and Verona were dependent on this source for current U.S. and local news affecting Americans. The news service was especially important in providing information to people in outlying areas. Families relied on the broadcasts to "keep in touch" with events during this difficult period. Additionally, because it also broadcast stateside information, American music, sporting events, etc., the station served as a continuous and comfortable link with "home".

How much they relied on this outlet was made clear when the station began experiencing difficulties that impaired reception in some areas. Understandably, while these problems lasted, they created considerable consternation; remote site families felt isolated and out of touch. A great deal of time was spent with the station manager, chief engineer, and network director, working to pinpoint difficulties and advising them of the locations and extent of reception difficulties being reported by the detachment's families. The unit provided the assistance of Air Force communications technicians to help ameliorate transmitter, cable, and antenna problems. "Pirate" stations operating illegally on or near the frequency assigned to the American station posed an additional difficulty. Eventually, it became necessary to escalate a request for assistance to U.S. embassy officials who then interfaced with representatives of the Italian government.

-Notes on Public Affairs-

The actions of the Public Affairs offices at HQ LANDSOUTH, Caserma Ederle, and Aviano AB yielded valuable lessons, both positive and negative. Particularly useful were the radio "spots" developed by the Public Affairs office at the U.S. Army post to counsel patience during delays caused

by car searches when entering the post, identify what to look for in the way of suspicious occurrences, describe precautionary measures for the home and car, and indicate where to go and what to do in event of an emergency. These spot announcements were aired several times each day and aided in educating service members and families in security matters. Similar articles in the post newspaper were also helpful.

However, actions were sometimes taken that showed a lack of proper foresight. For example, soon after General Dozier was kidnapped, one Public Affairs office released a picture of the General in a group of other officers; the photo permitted the identification of officers standing near the General. The picture appeared in major newspapers and had the potential effect, through their clear identification, of placing the safety of other individuals in jeopardy. Conversely, several photos of General Dozier that were released to the press were of such poor quality that they would have been of little use to the populace in helping identify the General even if by fortuitous circumstance anyone had happened to catch sight of him. Finally, after General Dozier's abduction, a Public Affairs office made the mistake of identifying other senior U.S. military officers in the immediate area by name, location, and organization of assignment.

Public Affairs people performed yeoman service, however, in handling queries from the media. Guidance given to detachment families in Verona, where the media presence was most intense, was to refer press queries to the Public Affairs office. This purpose of this guidance was to remove the pressure from the families and to be sure the media received factual information, not rumor and conjecture. It seemed to those on scene at the time that articles in the press often reflected comments and reactions representing the most extreme and quasi-hysterical viewpoints. When press queries were referred to the Public Affairs offices, their efforts were helpful in presenting a more balanced perspective in the media.

-Good News—Be Careful-

The announcement on January 28, 1982, that an elite carabinieri team had succeeded in freeing General Dozier from a so-called "people's prison" in Padova understandably brought a great sense of relief to the American community. That feeling was certainly welcomed, but on the other hand detachment officials were concerned that it might be so extreme as to cause people to let down in taking precautions which clearly remained necessary. Follow-on terrorist threats were still operative and there was a danger of a backlash reaction by the Red Brigades or sympathizer groups in attempt to recoup the prestige lost with General Dozier's safe return. Indeed, threats of revenge came almost immediately. Therefore, a great deal of time was devoted to addressing the continued need for security measures. The detachment staff felt it had two things going for it during this effort. The first was the credibility of previous communications. The second was the fact that most people had by this time become so accustomed to taking security precautions that they no longer felt them burdensome.

Conclusion

The detachment's response to the Dozier kidnapping had implications not only for the unit itself, but for a wider audience as well. For the military community at large, the close cooperation with sister services, allied forces and indigenous police, and the measures taken by the unit – many of which were invented "on the fly" in response to rapidly changing threat conditions – provided valuable insights for other organizations facing "unconventional" security problems.

For the people within the detachment, three things turned out to be most significant in confronting the terrorist threat. The first was communication; specifically, the consistent, encompassing flow of candid information. The frequent face to face contacts with service members and families created

positive feelings and a relationship of trust that were especially valuable in stabilizing the organization. The continuing dialogue – and those words factually describe the concentrated effort to inform, listen, and respond – caused most to realize they were being given all the information that was available and they could count on receiving it on a continuing basis. The frequent briefings and discussions were supplemented with comprehensive guidance and training in major areas of personal security: family, residence, vehicle, and work place. These tangible steps, along with the obvious security measures taken at all locations, significantly increased the "comfort level" in the American community.

The second item, very much part and parcel of the first, was the visibility of the unit's leadership. Senior enlisted personnel and officers logged lots of miles on the road and in hallways, offices, and work sites, being "seen" and talking with members and families. In addition to dropping in at work areas, the staff tried to be at all group gatherings, athletic events, and special occasions. The conspicuous visibility of the unit's NCOs and officers helped provide reassurance and stability.

The final item of the three was the proper sense of awareness created by the first two. Members and families understood the reality of the threat and its apparent focus; they also came to appreciate the precautionary measures most likely to be effective against it.

In any threat situation, no matter how proficient the institutional response, there will always remain varying degrees of underlying apprehension. The extent of this anxiety is primarily dependent on the timing of the latest terrorist threat or the success of the most recent terrorist act. However, a valid sense of awareness can minimize the level of apprehension. It was Detachment 9's experience that most individuals came to realize that while the threat was real and probably of long duration, by exercising prudence they could reasonably expect to continue most activities and emerge unscathed. As a result, although the threat environment remained always in mind, even at the worst times it did not distract the unit from taking care of business.

Throughout the crisis, detachment leaders were consistently reassured by the courage and professionalism of American service members and their families. Even in the cold and darkness of the very threatening Christmas Eve when many were notified that they were under threat, the typical reaction was: "Appreciate your coming to tell us. We're staying. See you at work." Those are words to savor – and undoubtedly they will be same words heard by other American commanders at other times and places in the future.