

A Vision Into the Future

ALTHOUGH IT SEEMED LIKE A LIFETIME AGO, only 25 years had passed since the turn of the millennium when a major initiative was taken to improve our rapid-reaction capability. At the time there had been considerable debate over which direction the light force enhancements should go. There were lots of ideas. Many were analyzed, some were selected for experimentation; in the end, however, only a few concepts survived. Fortunately, these key concepts were not only fielded but were done so with an extensive training initiative in place.

And it was a good thing too, because only a year after this force was fielded, a sequence of hostilities broke out, one right after the other, all of which necessitated the use of rapid military response. In some of these cases, just the presence of credible peacekeeping forces was sufficient to contain the situation, while in others, military force was used to halt atrocities, defend allies, and protect national interests. He remembered how, in one of those operations years ago, he was only a lieutenant in the Army when his unit was called on alert and flown overseas in 24 hours. Their mission was to retrieve compromised nuclear weapons. Although the enemy had actually detonated one of the low-yield nuclear warheads in the major access port to try to stop military action, his force was designed, trained, and equipped to handle even these kinds of situations and environments.

Unhampered by the threat of these weapons, his unit continued with the rapid execution of an offensive ground operation. It resulted in a quick and decisive reclamation of a small stockpile of nuclear weapons with few casualties, putting a decisive end to the year of terrorism that held the world hostage.

The costs were extensive. Some turbulent times passed with major program shifts, cross-service budget cuts, and accelerated fielding of equipment, along with massive rewriting of all the doctrine and field manuals. As a result of the rapid force transition, there were several years of dramatic change when new high-tech lightweight systems were replacing the earlier generation of systems. Fortunately, this change was managed with extreme care. From the warfighters to the scientists and technologists to the policymakers and planners, they worked as a team. These forces were barely ready in time. But they were ready.

*As he put his feet up on the large oak desk in his oval office, evaluating the new set of modernization changes being proposed by the Army leadership, he reflected back those two and a half decades to when he was just a lieutenant fresh out of training, when the first of these crises in the new millennium broke out. Yes, they **were** ready.*