



The 23d Chemical Battalion Leader Certification Program

By Captain Meredith Noll

A morning fog rolls into the Naktong River Valley in South Korea. Soldiers position heavy packs on their backs, depart the assembly area, and begin a grueling ascent to the top of Hill 303. The atmosphere is somber. The pace is intense. Battle buddies are helping each other climb the hill. At the top, victory awaits!

Although this could be an entry from a Soldier's personal journal from the Korean War, it is in fact, the capstone event of the 23d Chemical Battalion Leader Certification Program. Alongside the Hill 303 Memorial, the Commander of the 23d Chemical Battalion awards officers and senior noncommissioned officers (NCOs) certificates and coins for completing the program—a program unlike no other in the Chemical Corps.

Throughout the history of the U.S. Army, Chemical Soldiers have been a part of various units' symbols of excellence, to include the Parachute, Air Assault, and Pathfinder Badges; Prop Blast celebration; Order of the Spur; and Ranger Tab. Some Chemical Soldiers have earned all of these. But what has been missing is a symbol of excellence that defines Corps personnel. The 23d Chemical Battalion initiated a leader's certification program to indoctrinate Chemical Soldiers into an organization that symbolizes both distinction and an affiliation with a proud history. This article covers the inception, current operations, and future of the 23d Chemical Battalion Leader Certification Program.

Significance of Hill 303: Fallen But Not Forgotten

On 17 August 1950, scouts from G Troop, 5th Cavalry Regiment, came upon wounded Private Roy Manning on Hill 303. He had been shot in the legs and the arm by a North Korean burp gun and had begun to crawl down the hill. After spotting him, the scouts ascended to his location. As the scouts were treating the private's wounds, he told them of the tragedy that had occurred over the past two days. The men of Heavy Mortar Platoon, H Company, were positioned near Hill 303, along the Taegu Front on 15 August when the platoon leader became aware of enemy activity in the area of operations. The lieutenant

received communication from his commander that 60 Republic of Korea (ROK) soldiers would reinforce the mortar platoon. Later that day, Korean soldiers appeared along the slope and a patrol was sent forward to link up with the reinforcements. It was not until the red stars were visible on the Koreans' caps that the Americans realized they were not the reinforcements but, rather, the enemy. The North Koreans easily took the stunned Soldiers' weapons, tied their hands behind their backs, and forced them to walk over rough terrain without boots. One Soldier was even tortured with a can opener in an open wound. On 17 August, the North Koreans began receiving indirect fire from American artillery and air strikes. Unable to hold their position or continue to keep their prisoners, the North Koreans fired into a ditch where they kept the bound Soldiers. This heinous act killed 40 men and wounded 5. When the scouts arrived at the top of Hill 303, they saw the massacre. "The boys lay packed tightly, shoulder to shoulder, lying on their sides, curled like babies sleeping in the sun. Their feet, bloodied and bare, from walking on the rocks, stuck out stiffly. . . . All had hands tied behind their backs, some with cord, others with regular Army issue communication wire. Only a few hands were clenched."¹ The five Soldiers who survived did so by hiding in the ditch under their murdered comrades. One Soldier was even able to remain still as a North Korean shot into the ditch a second time, hitting him in the arm and leg.

The atrocities on Hill 303 caused General Douglas MacArthur to send a broadcast and distribute leaflets to the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces of North Korea. "Inertia on your part and on the part of your senior field commanders in the discharge of this grave and universally recognized command responsibility may only be construed as a condonation and encouragement of such outrage, for which, if not promptly corrected, I shall hold you and your commanders criminally accountable under the rules and precedents of war."²

The Korean War is known to many as the "Forgotten War." And that was true for the men of Heavy Mortar Platoon, H Company, 5th Cavalry Regiment. The Veterans



Leadership of the 23d Chemical Battalion at the Hill 303 Memorial during the first leadership certification program ceremony (in 2001)

of Foreign Wars (VFW) Post 10033 in Taegu, South Korea, built a memorial on Hill 303 to honor the Soldiers involved in the tragedy. The memorial contains five posts (one for each Soldier who survived) encircled by a chain containing 40 links (one for each Soldier massacred). On 20 June 2000, the memorial was commemorated with two of the survivors present, one of which was Private Manring. The Hill 303 Memorial will ensure that fallen Soldiers of the Heavy Mortar Platoon, H Company, are not forgotten.

History of Leader Certification: From Korea to Afghanistan

The history of the Leader Certification Program began in 1999 at Camp Carroll, South Korea (the home base of the 23d Chemical Battalion since 1988). Colonel Michael Bolluyt (Chief of the Requirements Determination Division at the U.S. Army Maneuver Support Center), while serving as Battalion Operations and Training Officer (U.S. Army) (S3) under the command of Colonel Greg Olson (currently the Assistant Commandant of the U.S. Army Chemical School), initiated research into Hill 303 and how it related to the Korean War. The 23d Chemical Battalion wanted to honor the fallen Soldiers by ascending the same hill that the Soldiers of the Heavy Mortar Platoon did in 1950.

In 2001, Colonel Al Swanda (currently the Defense Attaché to Thailand) conceived the Leader Certification Program and was the first battalion commander to execute the program planned and developed by his battalion S3, Lieutenant Colonel James E. Bonner (currently Commander of the 23d), and executive officer, Lieutenant

Colonel Ron Fizer (currently a strategist for the Chief of Staff for the Army Staff Group). The culminating event: a rucksack march up Hill 303 where, at the top, while overlooking the Naktong River Valley, the leaders of the 23d Chemical Battalion were awarded the battalion coin and Chemical Corps Branch Insignia adorned with “23.”

As Colonel Bill Barnett (currently the Commander of Pine Bluff Arsenal) took command of the 23d in 2002, he carried on the tradition. However, this time he included the leaders of the 13th Chemical Company (Biological Integrated Detection System [BIDS]), 2d Chemical Battalion (who were forward-deployed to South Korea with the 23d). When Lieutenant Colonel William E. King IV (currently attending the Industrial College of the Armed Forces) was in command from 2004 to 2006, the 23d Chemical Battalion was restationed in the continental United States and the Leader Certification Program was transformed for the great Pacific Northwest. The rucksack march occurred at Solo Point (a beach in Washington State where the Puget Sound meets Fort Lewis) and included two separate 30 percent grades that demanded great endurance and stamina from participants.

When Lieutenant Colonel Bonner assumed command of the 23d in 2006, he felt that the program should be expanded to include all battalion Soldiers, not just leaders. He visualized the program not as a “rite of passage” for the leaders, but as a qualification consisting of all the skills necessary to perform in a chemical unit (much like the Expert Infantryman Badge [EIB] and Expert Field Medics Badge [EFMB]). Those who completed the program displayed the skills to perform the Soldier and leader tasks necessary to fight and win in wartime. One of the most intense components of the newly developed qualification was Level 1 combative certification (conducted at the battalion’s Lion’s Den Academy, one of two certified academies on Fort Lewis). The five-day, concentrated course honed in on warrior tasks for Soldiers and leaders by building confidence in hand-to-hand combat skills. The latest amendment occurred when the battalion deployed for Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) 06-08 in support of the 82d Airborne Division. The battalion leadership recognized this deployment as certification, and all Soldiers and leaders who deployed received the 23d Chemical Battalion belt buckle.

Why Leader Certification?

Colonel Swanda (Commander of the 23d from 2000 to 2002) understood that with the limited number of leadership positions for Chemical NCOs and officers, there needed to be a baseline of training to certify these leaders. This was done to ensure that Soldiers were

able to conduct wartime missions proficiently. Colonel Swanda envisioned a standard qualification test to certify that leaders possess the necessary technical and tactical skills. He compared the Leader Certification Program to mechanized infantry and armor Table VIII and Table XII training, keeping in mind that leaders need to be knowledgeable with their equipment and confident in leading in combat. He wanted to make the certification physically and mentally challenging—a test of stamina and mental endurance. The company grade officers were also required to conduct a book review from the battalion commander’s reading list (a selection of books ranging from basic military history to the Korean War to nuclear, biological, and chemical warfare [past and present]).

Components of the Program

There are five components that encompass the Leader Certification Program. All components contain skills in which Chemical Soldiers and leaders need to be proficient—skills where leaders are confident in their abilities and Soldiers are confident in their leaders, with the unit functioning as a cohesive team. The certification program consists of—

- Core requirements, including officer and NCO evaluation report counseling sessions (initial and annual) for Soldiers and attendance at the battalion newcomer’s briefing.
- Individual training requirements, including an Army Physical Fitness Test event, a 4-mile run to be completed in 36 minutes, weapons qualification, common-task training, combat lifesaving-skills certification, communications equipment use, preventive-maintenance checks and services certification, unit equipment and confidence/obstacle course licensing, and Level I combative certification.
- Field training exercise (FTX) requirements, which include at least one battalion, company, or platoon level exercise; proficiency on weapons employment and organic communication; technical and tactical chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) tasks; and the employment of navigation equipment.
- Professional development requirements, which include developing a risk assessment based on a tactical scenario; understanding the battalion commander’s vision, philosophy, and training guidance; and understanding the battalion and brigade missions/mission-essential task list requirements.



A Soldier receives the 82d Airborne Patch during a ceremony in February 2007.

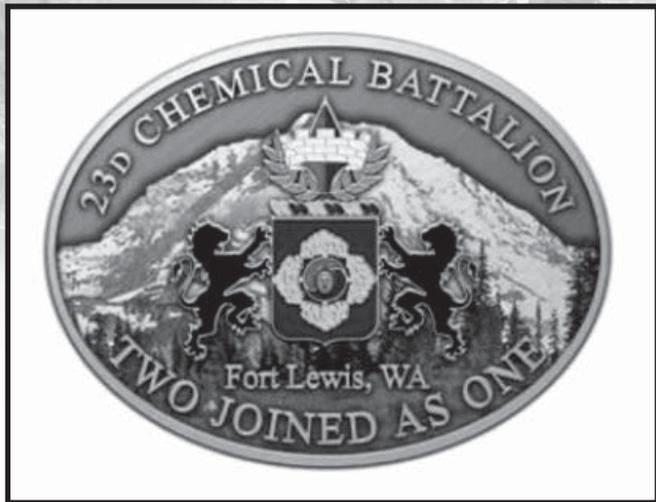
- Lion Pride participation, including the capstone event of a 10-kilometer road march that incorporates dismounted land navigation, weapons assembly, call-for-fire, communication skills, CBRN skills, and medical tasks. The Lion Pride events are executed over a three-day period and consist of intense and rigorous testing similar to EIB and EFMB qualifications.

The Belt Buckle

With the transformation of Army uniforms from the battle dress uniform (BDU) to the Army combat uniform (ACU), Lieutenant Colonel Bonner transformed the 23d Chemical Battalion insignia concept into a belt buckle. This allowed Soldiers and leaders in the battalion to wear the symbol of excellence—a symbol of Soldier integration and unity—long after their departure from the unit. The belt buckle—designed and developed by Lieutenant Colonel Bonner, Major Daryl Hood



A Soldier demonstrates combative techniques at the Lion’s Den Academy.



23d Chemical Battalion belt buckle

(U.S. Army Central Command), and Command Sergeant Major Matthew Barnes (23d Chemical Battalion)—is ornamented with the coat of arms containing symbols of the battalion’s operations during World War II and the Korean War, majestic Mount Rainier (a representation of the battalion’s current location in Washington State), and the battalion translation (from the Korean motto “*moong chi ja*”) of “two joined as one” (a tribute to the battalion’s service in the Korean Peninsula, 1950–1954 and 1988–2005). On the back of the buckle, the battalion’s campaigns are displayed—from the beaches of Normandy to Afghanistan (a total of 15 campaign streamers), two ROK Presidential Unit Citations, and two Meritorious Unit Commendations. Upon the completion of OEF, the belt buckle will be updated to include a third Meritorious Unit Commendation and a 16th campaign streamer. It will also encompass additions to the Distinguished Unit Insignia and Coat of Arms.

Certified Leaders

Many Soldiers who served in the 23d Chemical Battalion in Korea were leader-certified on top of Hill 303 and have carried on a legacy of leadership and commitment. Command Sergeant Major Alston (currently the Regimental Command Sergeant Major) received his certification on Hill 303 in 2001, along with Colonel Swanda, Lieutenant Colonel Fizer, and Lieutenant Colonel Bonner. There are others who were previously certified, returned to the unit to serve, and have since received the belt buckle: Major James Conner (currently the 23d Chemical Battalion S3) earned his certification in 2003; Captain Erick Velasquez (currently Commander of the 62d

Chemical Company) received his certification in 2004.

Under Lieutenant Colonel Bonner, the 23d began an honorary certification in appreciation for the development of Soldiers and leaders of the battalion as well as the outstanding support that leaders have provided the battalion. The first inductee was Colonel Victor Petrenko, Chief of Staff, 82d Airborne Division, for his support of the 23d Chemical Battalion while the unit served at Bagram Airfield, Afghanistan (in support of Combined Joint Task Force [CJTF] 82).

Future of the Leader Certification Program

As the 23d Chemical Battalion returns home to Fort Lewis, the Leader Certification Program will be open to all CBRN Soldiers on the installation. The battalion looks forward to integrating not only the 48th Chemical Brigade and 20th Support Command subordinate units (110th Technical Escort Battalion and 3d Explosive Ordnance Battalion), but also CBRN Soldiers in the Stryker Brigade Combat Teams, 2d Ranger Battalion, 1st Special Forces Group, and all other major subordinate commands at Fort Lewis. As the Leader Certification Program continues, more CBRN Soldiers will earn the coveted belt buckle and be united in history. 🗨️

Endnotes:

¹Charles and Eugene Jones, *The Face of War*, pp. 45–49.

²“Massacre at Hill 303,” *Time Magazine*, 28 August 1950.

Captain Noll is the commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Detachment, 23d Chemical Battalion.



The 23d Chemical Battalion belt buckle is awarded to a Soldier during a ceremony in Bagram, Afghanistan.