

groups worked together to ensure that the veterans' visit to Fort Leonard Wood was safe, enjoyable, and memorable. That evening, at their annual dinner, the veterans discussed the reunion events. One man, an attendee of every reunion since 1946, announced that this year's reunion was the best ever. All were impressed by the honors paid to them, as a group and as individuals.

A direct descendant of the 1st Gas and Flame Regiment (World War I), the 2d Chemical Mortar Battalion was organized in 1935 to serve as the nation's primary

gas warfare unit. During World War II, the battalion fought in North Africa, Italy, France, and Germany, making two amphibious landings and one glider assault. The 2d was the only chemical mortar battalion to fight in Korea; and when the battalion was redesignated as infantry in 1953, it marked the end of the Chemical Corps' association with the 4.2-inch chemical mortar. 

Mr. Lindberg is the curator of collections at the US Army Chemical Corps Museum.

Tribute to the Men of the 2d Chemical Mortar Battalion



The following is an excerpt from a retreat ceremony honoring the memory of the men of the 2d Chemical Mortar Battalion. William R. Thomas delivered this speech on 15 September 2000 at Edgewood Arsenal (EA-APG), Maryland.

This historic Army post, once known as Army Chemical Center and as Edgewood Arsenal, was the last home of the Chemical Corps' oldest and most distinguished combat unit—the 2d Chemical Mortar Battalion.

We have assembled here today to observe a significant event in the history of our battalion and a memorable milestone for those of us who soldiered here fifty years ago. Exactly fifty years ago today, on September 15th in the year 1950, we boarded the troop train that would take us across the country to the ship that would take us to Korea. We left Edgewood to do what soldiers are supposed to do: fight wars to destroy the enemy and, in so doing, risk being destroyed.

Our departure marked the end of a year and a half of training, which began here with the reactivation of the 2d Chemical Mortar Battalion early in 1949. Because of our distinctive crest and patch, and perhaps because of our behavior, some called us the "Red Dragons." Our battalion commander was an old soldier who had fought in World War I and World War II. Many of our officers and NCOs had returned from the battlefields of World War II, which had ended only four years earlier. Like the Americans described in Tom Brokaw's best-selling book, they were indeed "the greatest generation." The rest of us had joined the Army recently, but shared a common belief that the purpose of the Army was to fight and win wars, not to

serve as a social laboratory for special interests or militant feminists. Most of our men had volunteered. Their serial numbers began with the letters RA—Regular Army. We were a Regular Army unit. We were a combat unit and proud of it!

Here at Edgewood, we trained hard and played hard. There were constant training cycles. We learned to fire mortars. We learned to use our individual weapons. We learned to live in the field. Inspections and parades were a way of life. We joined the rest of the Army in large maneuvers. We trained Reserve and National Guard units. However, none of us really believed we would be in a real war.

By today's standards, life in the Army of 1950 was tough. In fact, it was designed solely to build disciplined soldiers to fill the ranks of an Army that would prevail on the battlefield. At times, the NCOs were abrasive. At times, the officers were arrogant. We belonged to an austere Army managed largely by combat veterans who discouraged interference by social engineers. The few dollars disbursed to privates at the pay table were often gone before the end of the month. The barracks, like those of World War II, would seem primitive to the soldiers in today's Army. A soldier leaving the post on weekends needed a Class A pass, which officers and NCOs often denied as a disciplinary tool.

Back then, some of our Red Dragons played hard—at times too hard. To paraphrase the title of a recent book: *We Were Soldiers Once...and Young*—and wild. From time to time, wayward Dragons, who were not reluctant Dragons, frequented most of the bars between here and Baltimore. They came as ambassadors of goodwill with the best intentions, but there were rumors that they drank too much, picked fights with peace-loving civilians, and chased wild women. Some of these escapades led to AWOLs, company punishment, and court-martials. The battalion also had more than its share of discharges under the so-called Section 8.

All of the challenging activities I have described preceded the 2d Chemical Mortar Battalion's departure from Edgewood on September 15, 1950. According to the battalion command report, our actual strength was then 35 officers and 450 enlisted men, slightly less than two-thirds of our authorized strength. This was typical of the Army of 1950 which, like today's Army, was the victim

of which were deployed north of the village of Unsan, about 40 miles from the Chinese border. As the regiments we supported were overwhelmed and routed, our battalion experienced heavy losses in the Unsan engagement. These losses increased as we engaged in intense combat throughout the month of November 1950.

During much of this period, we supported the US 2d Infantry Division in a series of offensive and defensive engagements with the Chinese army, culminating in the critical and costly Battle of Kunuri. At that time, Walter Winchell, a widely followed commentator and columnist said of the 2d Infantry Division: "If you have a son overseas, write to him. If you have a son in the 2d Division, pray for him." This applied as well to the 2d Chemical Mortar Battalion.

By the end of November, the battalion command reports showed a total strength of only 25 officers and 314 enlisted men—30 percent less than the number who boarded the train at Edgewood and less than half of the

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of questionable political decisions that seriously compromised our nation's military strength. As we left Edgewood, it appeared that the retreating American and South Korean forces had halted North Korea's unexpected invasion of South Korea and had regained the initiative. Those of us who mistakenly yearned to be in a real war feared that it would end before we got there. Unfortunately, we got there in time.

Our ship arrived in Pusan on October 8, 1950. By then, most of the North Korean Army had retreated across the 38th Parallel back into North Korea. On October 22, we caught up with the front, which was then north of Pyongyang (North Korea's capital). There, we were placed in support of the 1st Republic of Korea Infantry Division—called the 1st ROK Division—and fired our first mission the next day.

To make a very long story short, the war did not end as it should have. Within days of our arrival at the front, the Chinese Communist forces intervened with their numerically superior army, which soon numbered over 300,000 men. Their initial devastating attack was focused on the 1st ROK Division (which our battalion then supported) and the adjacent US 1st Cavalry Division, both

authorized strength. This significant attrition resulted mainly from battle casualties (including those killed, wounded, or captured) and a limited number of nonbattle casualties. More than half of the brave men whose names appear on the bronze plaque to be dedicated today were lost by the end of November 1950.

For the next two months, pursued by the Chinese army in bone-chilling, subzero weather, we participated in the longest retreat in the American Army's history. In January 1951, the dwindling ranks of the original Red Dragons who left Edgewood were reinforced by urgently needed replacements, totaling 7 officers and 140 enlisted men. The last major Chinese attack was contained in April 1951, and the tides of battle turned in favor of the American Army. The UN Commander in Chief, General Matthew Ridgeway, later said, "If we had been ordered to fight our way to the Yalu, we could have done it." However, the political leaders of the United States and the United Nations were unwilling to pay the price of absolute victory. Instead, they opted for fruitless truce talks, which began in July 1951, while a costly limited-objective war raged for two more years.

Throughout these trying two years, our battalion remained in the fight, supporting a growing list of United States and United Nations infantry divisions. The tremendous firepower of our 36 mortars took a heavy toll on the enemy, but the brave men of our battalion also paid a heavy price, measured by our growing roster of casualties. Finally, an armistice agreement was signed on July 27, 1953, and Korea remained a divided nation.

Hundreds of replacements replenished the ranks of the 2d Chemical Mortar Battalion during its nearly three years of combat in Korea. For the last six months of the war, it was renamed the 461st Infantry Battalion (Heavy Mortar). Those soldiers who served in our battalion at any time, under either name, have collaborated in writing the many chapters of its distinguished history.

The real heroes of our battalion are not here today. They made the supreme sacrifice nearly 50 years ago. Their young lives ended prematurely on the Korean battlefields and in prison camps. They are gone, but not forgotten. We gather here today to salute them and, immediately after this retreat parade, to dedicate a bronze plaque which records their 61 names so that future generations may pay tribute to them. Because of their sacrifice, we and others will know that *Freedom Is Not Free.* 🇺🇸

This tribute was originally published in the October 2000 issue of Red Dragon, the newsletter of the 2d Chemical Mortar Battalion Association.



Submitting an Article to *Army Chemical Review*

Articles may range from 2,000 to 4,000 words. Send a paper copy along with an electronic copy in Microsoft Word on a 3 1/2-inch or compact disk to *Army Chemical Review*, 401 MANSCEN Loop, Suite 1029, Fort Leonard Word, Missouri 65473-8926 or e-mail <acr@wood.army.mil> with "Submit an Article" in the subject line.

Contributors are encouraged to include black-and-white or color photographs, artwork, and/or line diagrams that illustrate information in the article. Include captions for any photographs submitted. If possible, include photographs of soldiers performing their missions. Hard-copy photographs are preferred, but we will accept digital images in TIF or JPG format originally saved at a resolution no lower than 200 dpi. Please do not include them in the text. If you use PowerPoint, save each illustration as a separate file and avoid excessive use of color and shading in graphics and slides. Please do not send photographs embedded in PowerPoint or Microsoft Word documents.

Articles should come from contributors with firsthand experience of the subject being presented. Articles should be concise, straightforward, and in the active voice. Any article containing information or quotations not referenced in the text should carry appropriate endnotes.

Include your full name, rank, current unit, and job title. Also include a list of your past assignments, experience, and education and your mailing address, fax number, and commercial daytime telephone number.

Include a statement from your local security office stating that the information contained in the article is unclassified, nonsensitive, and releasable to the public.

All submissions are subject to editing.