

# ***CBRN Soldier Personifies Personal Courage, Places Mission First***

*By Sergeant Mary E. Ferguson*

Integrity check: Have you ever thought, or maybe even said, “This is not my job, I didn’t sign up for this, I’m not supposed to be here, doing this?” Even the most dedicated, selfless Soldier must admit to having had these types of thoughts. After all, Soldiers are human too. They are not set apart because they refuse to wonder, “What about me?” They are set apart because, despite being human, they somehow find within themselves the personal courage to place the mission first.

Sergeant Charles A. Claude, Jr., found the personal courage; and then throughout his seven years in uniform, has lived that personal courage. During his time in the Army, Sergeant Claude has had many opportunities to think, “This is not my job,” though perhaps none more compelling than what he experienced during his recent tour in Iraq. In December 2007, Sergeant Claude completed a 15-month tour in Mosul with E Company, 2d Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, where he earned the Bronze Star with “V” device (denoting valor) and a Purple Heart for doing what he’s always done—placing the mission first.

Sergeant Claude explained, “We’re a combat engineering company, and we were in charge of clearing all of Mosul [of improvised explosive devices], which is the second largest city in Iraq. And we only had one battalion and one route-clearing company, so we did two to three missions a day. We were about three months from coming home. It was September second. I’d been the first sergeant’s gunner since the second month of the deployment, and we were the element that would pursue people that fired RPGs [rocket-propelled grenades] and small-arms fire at us after an IED [improvised explosive device]. That’s what we were doing that day—moving to contact on some guys that fired an RPG at [us], and it was a big firefight. All hell broke loose. We were coming down this back road, and I was shooting this car. And around the corner there was an insurgent, and he tried to go head to head with our ASV [armored security vehicle]. He actually did some damage—took my driver’s window completely out and blew my sight out.”

During the firefight, one of the insurgent’s rounds came through the broken ASV window, flipped around inside the vehicle, and shattered apart—wounding Claude’s arm and his first sergeant’s leg. “I didn’t even know I was hit at that time,” Claude recalled. “It all happened so fast. We got a call from the vehicle behind us saying that the [insurgent] was hanging on our vehicle, so I popped out of the hatch and shot him. That day was just as crazy as the rest of the days, but that day we got hurt. I’d say it was only about two weeks later, and we were back out on the road again.”

By the way, unlike most Soldiers in his company, Sergeant Claude isn’t a combat engineer (21B). He’s a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) specialist (74D). But on that September day, like the hundreds of combat days before it, Sergeant Claude didn’t act like a 21B or a 74D. “I just acted like a Soldier,” he said, “It’s something I’ve always tried to do, so that moment was no different.”



**Sergeant Charles A. Claude, Jr.**

And it's true—Sergeant Claude's actions before 2 September 2007 reflected the same attitude. For example, after assuming the position as the first sergeant's gunner earlier in the deployment, Sergeant Claude continued to serve as the unit nuclear, biological, and chemical (NBC) and ammunition noncommissioned officer (NCO). "Originally, other engineers were supposed to be the first sergeant's gunner . . . people were stepping up and filling spots, and that may have included going on a five-hour mission, coming back, and being in charge of the [tactical operations center] . . . and completing my ammunition duties. And we were firing off rounds every day," Claude said, "But, I'm not the type of guy that wants to sit in the office listening to all the action on the radio. Of course, with my background, I wanted to be out there with my unit."

The background Sergeant Claude refers to includes his three years as an infantryman (11B) and an earlier (April 2003) tour in Iraq with the 10th Mountain Division. "I reclassified after my first deployment because I wanted more time to go to school. I wanted to challenge my brain, and I just thought the Chemical Corps was interesting," he explained. "I didn't expect to do what I did during this last deployment. I'd already done that as an 11B. I wasn't thinking I'd be out there fighting every day." Sergeant Claude recalls sitting in the combat support hospital while having his arm cleaned after the 2 September firefight and thinking, "I've seen more action as an NBC guy than I ever did as an 11B."

In fact, this most recent combat tour wasn't the first time since he reclassified that Sergeant Claude had tackled missions outside the CBRN field—missions that some might say aren't part of his job description. "My personal experience since I've reclassified is that units see the [Combat Infantry Badge] and know I used to be infantry, and they think, 'We can have him do anything,'" Sergeant Claude said. "Even when I was at a Chemical company, I was training people on how to do room clearing. Not that I mind. I have the experience, so if I can help, if it's the mission, I will complete it."

Colonel Michael Bolluyt, Claude's former Chemical battalion commander at Fort Polk, Louisiana (and now the chief of the Requirements Determination Division, Capability Development and Integration Directorate, U.S. Army Maneuver Support Center), said, "Sergeant Claude came to the battalion during a crucial period, and he stood out with basic combat skills as we began training on the brigade-sponsored, live-fire ranges. He became a teacher and mentor to his peers in all the skills we were introducing to CBRN Soldiers." Bolluyt added, "In the blistering heat of Fort Polk, he never complained, never quit, and put the mission first because he knew how important the training was—despite one's MOS [military occupational specialty]."

While his infantry experience has led to unusual missions, Claude said that all Chemical Corps Soldiers should be prepared for the experiences he has faced as an NBC/CBRN NCO. "It's important for some of the younger [Soldiers] to read this and think, 'That could be me in a year or two,'" Claude said. "With any MOS like this, where you are probably the only one in a company, you have to really show that you are supposed to be there to earn respect. You have to have pride in the Chemical Corps, represent it, and think, 'I'm going to do this job as well as anyone.'"

Colonel Bolluyt said this message is incredibly relevant for CBRN Soldiers because the Chemical Corps is one of the few Army branches that have Soldiers at the corps, division, brigade, battalion, and company levels. "The Chemical Corps is making enormous contributions. We are the fifth most-deployed branch," Bolluyt explained. "All formations across the battlefield are vulnerable. By hearing Sergeant Claude's experiences, I hope senior leaders see the importance of exposing their Soldiers to a mixture of combat skills."

Claude agreed and said that today, all warriors must be infantry Soldiers at heart and that they need to know how to do the jobs around them because—even though they may have a specialty—they may need to cover for others to accomplish the mission, as he has throughout his career. He also said that his experiences have made him a better-rounded NCO, with the ability to adapt and change to lead all types of Soldiers. "During this last deployment, I had a squad of six Soldiers, and none of them were my MOS," he said. "But again, if you do what you're supposed to do as a Soldier and an NCO, it will take care of itself. Over time, they will not even look at you as 'just the NBC guy' anymore."

As a Soldier, an NCO, and a member of the Chemical Corps, "Sergeant Claude has made a mark for future CBRN Soldiers to recognize and emulate," Bolluyt said. "He is a warrior of the highest caliber."

Yet, even Claude admits, "Sure, there have been plenty of times when I've felt like 'Why am I doing this?'" But that never stopped him from climbing into the gunner's turret of his first sergeant's vehicle. He said, "You've got to always think, no matter what, 'I'm a Soldier. Putting the mission first is always my job—regardless of what that mission is.'" 

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