



A “People Sniffer” Operation That Went Terribly Wrong

By Sergeant Major Mike R. Vining (Retired)

The date 13 February 1971 started out as a typical day for the First Team. But that was about to change; a field experiment was to be conducted. The 1st Cavalry Division had been conducting “people sniffer” missions, which involved searching out the enemy by deploying a riot control agent, such as tear gas, causing enemy soldiers to reveal themselves from their concealed positions. Once exposed, gunships could then engage the enemy.

Leading the experiment that day was Captain Frederick “Fred” Phillip Smith, the assistant division Chemical officer assigned to Headquarters, Headquarters Company, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). Support was provided by Headquarters, Headquarters Battery, 2d Battalion, 20th Artillery (Aerial Rocket) and a UH-1H Huey helicopter. Soldiers from the 184th Chemical Platoon (Direct Support) also assisted. The team flew over Binh Thuy Providence, Republic of South Vietnam.

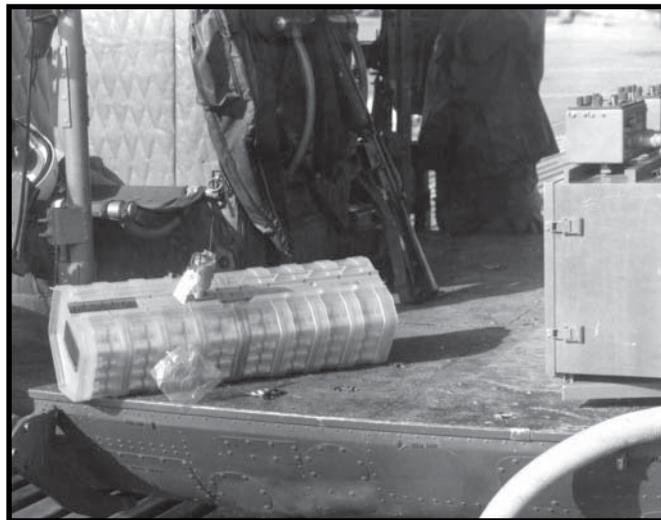
The experiment involved the use of an Air Force E158 2-chlorobenzalmalononitrile (CS) cluster bomb, which was considered to be the best CS delivery system during the Vietnam War. The bomb consisted of 264 canisters (each about the size of a D-cell battery) of CS held in place by a 1- by 3-foot plastic unit. A timing fuze was to detonate a bursting/igniting charge that, in turn, would send the smaller munitions over an area 50 meters in diameter, spraying CS as they went.

Somehow, in the process of deploying the munition, the arming wires were loosened and the E158s began detonating inside the helicopter. Captain Smith’s clothing caught fire, and he was badly burned. Although blinded by the fire and resulting smoke, Captain Smith was able to push the cluster munitions out of the helicopter. However, in the confusion, Captain Smith went out with the munitions and fell 1,500 feet to his death. Others onboard the helicopter received burns, and some required extensive hospitalization. Captain

Smith’s quick thinking and actions saved the helicopter and the lives of seven people. His body was not recovered until three days later.

Captain Smith’s heroism is recalled in a book entitled *Hunter-Killer Squadron: Aero-Weapons, Aero-Scouts, Aero-Rifles, Vietnam 1965–1972*.¹ Chapter 26, “Chemicals and People Sniffers,” was written by Captain Bob Parker, commanding officer of the 184th Chemical Platoon.

In a personal letter to me, Captain Parker stated, “The sad part was that [Captain Smith] and I had discussed the dangers in how we carried the E158’s and he hoped to prove that it would be safe to deploy them en mass, which as it turned out it didn’t work. I was on another bird returning from Long Binh when we saw the fire break out in another bird off to our right. Our bird immediately rallied to their bird and landed next to it. There was another bird that was with them and it took the Sergeant Major and some of the others on board in for treatment for their burns.



E158 cluster bomb



Captain Fred Smith

Luckily the injuries were not life threatening and one of my troops ended up in Japan for a month or so for a large burn. He was the one who told us about what had happened as it went up in front of him. [sic]"

Captain Smith's decorations and awards included a Silver Star, Bronze Star Medal with oak leaf cluster, Air Medal with three oak leaf clusters, Army Commendation Medal, Good Conduct Medal, National Defense

Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal, Parachutist Badge, and Senior Explosive Ordnance Disposal Badge.

Captain Smith was born on 6 March 1946; his hometown was Oklahoma City, Oklahoma. He arrived

in Vietnam on 23 March 1970. At the time of his death, Captain Smith was stationed at Phuoc Vinh, Republic of South Vietnam. He served as the Chemical officer and assistant operations and training officer (S3) for 2d Brigade, First Cavalry Division.

While Captain Smith was serving in Vietnam, his wife gave birth to a son who, unfortunately, never had a chance to meet his father.

I am searching for any witnesses to this tragic event. Please contact me at (719) 873-1065 or mvining@amigo.net if you have any information. 🗨️

Endnote:

¹Matthew Brennan, editor, *Hunter-Killer Squadron: Aero-Weapons, Aero-Scouts, Aero-Rifles, Vietnam 1965-1972*, Presidio Press, Notavo, California, 1990.

Sergeant Major Vining (Retired) is a 30-year Army veteran. From 26 February 1970 through 29 January 1971, he was assigned to the 99th Ordnance Detachment, Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit, Phuoc Vinh, Republic of South Vietnam.

(“Observations From Ardent Sentry 2007,” continued from page 13)

This creates the need for DOD to understand the operational employment concepts and equipment that may be employed by civilian first responders. The AS07 exercise provided DOD with that opportunity.

We do not train just for the sake of training. We train because we may actually need to execute the scenario someday. 🗨️

Endnotes:

¹The Homeland Security Council, “Scenario 1: Nuclear Detonation—10-Kiloton Improvised Nuclear Device,” *National Planning Scenarios*, March 2006.

²United States Code (USC), Title 32, *National Guard*.

³From a Chemical/Biological Incident Response Force organizational brief and statements made by CCMRF task force response personnel at the CCMRF Commanders’ Conference hosted by Joint Task Force—Civil Support, Fort Monroe, Virginia, 28–30 August 2007.

⁴In 2003, SBCCOM was renamed the Natick Soldier Research, Development, and Engineering Center under the U.S. Army Research and Development Command.

⁵SBCCOM, *Guidelines for Mass Casualty Decontamination During a Terrorist Chemical Agent Incident*, January 2000, available at <http://www.esd.uga.edu/hart/Web%20Page/Publications/Mass%20Cas.%20Decon.pdf>, accessed on 15 April 2008.

⁶USC, Title 10, *Armed Forces*.

References:

CBRNAC Number CR-04-12, *Emergency Decontamination Corridor and Ladder Pipe Decontamination Systems*, May 2004.

DHS *Lessons Learned, Information Sharing* Web site, <http://www.LLIS.gov>, accessed on 16 April 2008.

DHS, *National Response Framework*, 22 March 2008.

DHS, *National Response Plan*, December 2004.

EPA 550-F-00-009, *First Responders’ Environmental Liability Due to Mass Decontamination Runoff*, July 2000.

NORTHCOM Contingency Plan 2501, *Defense Support to Civil Authorities (DSCA)*, 11 March 2006.

Public Law (PL) 93-288, *Robert T. Stafford Disaster Relief and Emergency Assistance Act* (as codified at 42 USC 68), 22 May 1974.

SOAR-03-10, *Best Practices and Guidelines for Mass Personnel Decontamination*, June 2003.

USC, Title 18, Section 1385, *Posse Comitatus Act*, 16 June 1878.

USC, Title 31, Section 1535, *The Economy Act*, 25 June 2003.

Mr. Snyder is a homeland security advisor with Battelle Memorial Institute. He is a retired infantry lieutenant colonel and holds a bachelor’s degree in history from the University of Colorado.

Mr. Sobieski works for Battelle Memorial Institute. He is an Air Force Reserve lieutenant colonel and holds a bachelor’s degree in electrical engineering from Lehigh University, Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, and a master’s degree in engineering management from the University of Alaska.