

The Transformation of the Chemical Corps: Bring it Down to Where the Fight Is

By Captain William A. Costello

As U.S. Army chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) Soldiers, we hear a lot about the “transformation of the Chemical Corps.” But as an armor company CBRN noncommissioned officer (NCO), combined arms battalion (CAB) CBRN officer, or Dragon Soldier who spends year after year with a combat arms unit in Iraq or Afghanistan, do you see it? No, I didn’t think so.

In the land of combat arms, the CBRN world barely exists. The only time it might rear its ugly head is when a patrol finds a cache of nitric acid or chlorine stashed in an Iraqi building or factory or on an Afghanistan farm. Aside from such a discovery, contact with CBRN-related issues and the “transformation” of the Corps are far from view, seemingly taking place only in new, Regular Army chemical brigades or the U.S. Army CBRN School—or maybe even only on paper.

Given that deployments are always just around the corner for every combat arms unit, it’s a challenge for battalion CBRN officers and NCOs to assemble all company CBRN Soldiers in one place, at one time. So, how can this be fixed? It might take a little more emphasis from higher headquarters and a minor reorganization of CBRN personnel in combat arms units—nothing too drastic or too far from reach.

Current Situation

CBRN personnel are arrayed throughout a typical CAB. There is at least one CBRN Soldier in each company and two on staff. This task organization looks great on paper (Table 1). But in the real world, where units are constantly on deployment rotations followed by periods of equipment and personnel reset in conjunction with post detail “ankle biters” such as funeral detail, it’s hard to get the most from training. When even one Soldier from such a low-density military occupational specialty (MOS) misses a training event, not only does the event become nearly impossible to perform, but the Soldier who does not participate has a difficult time getting trained to standard. Therefore, although the typical setup works for deployments and field training exercises (FTXs), it is not conducive for training in garrison. How do we fix this?

Let’s take a look at how other low-density MOSs within the CAB are structured and managed and how they make effective use of their time. All other CAB specialty MOSs,

including medics and fire supporters, are centralized under the headquarters and headquarters company (HHC) and task-organized where they would be most effective upon deployment or during FTXs. It’s that simple.

Now, let’s take a look at a typical heavy brigade combat team (HBCT) CAB fire support platoon to see how they conduct business:

- All members of the fire support platoon, from officers to enlisted personnel, are located within HHC by modified tables of organization and equipment (MTOEs).
- The battalion effects coordinator and effects NCO plan all training and serve as battalion level voices for the fire supporters to obtain required training and equipment.
- All training is managed by HHC; however, each fire support team develops a working relationship with a maneuver company and is task-organized to that company (or wherever else the commander feels the team is best-suited) during deployments and FTXs.

And this works. Fire supporters receive the vital training and equipment they need while also developing crucial working relationships with the maneuver companies they expect to support during deployments and FTXs. They don’t fall “under the radar,” and they aren’t ignored by higher echelons—as often happens with CBRN personnel, training, and supplies.

Table 1. CBRN personnel arranged by MTOE in a typical HBCT CAB

Unit	Personnel
Battalion staff	1 battalion CBRN officer (O-2) 1 battalion CBRN NCO (E-6)
HHC	1 company CBRN NCO (E-5) 1 decontamination specialist (E-4)
2 rifle companies	2 company CBRN NCOs (E-5)
2 armor companies	2 company CBRN NCOs (E-5)
1 engineer company	1 company CBRN NCO (E-5)
1 forward-support company	1 company CBRN NCO (E-5)
Total number of CBRN personnel: 10	

Proposal

I propose that—in addition to the fire support, medical, and mortar platoons—there should also be a CBRN section in HHC. This would—

- Require no additional personnel or equipment—just a reorganization of the current MTOE.
- Provide more time for training and professional development and warrant more emphasis from higher echelons.

Specifically, all CBRN personnel should be reorganized into a CBRN section that is located under the battalion HHC (Table 2). In addition to their regular staff duties, the battalion CBRN officer would serve as the officer in charge (OIC) of the HHC CBRN section and the battalion CBRN NCO would serve as the noncommissioned officer in charge (NCOIC). At first, these might seem like excessive responsibilities, but in reality, the tasks would go hand in hand and would provide well-deserving leaders with the opportunity to gain the necessary leadership experience that they are often denied by serving in such a small branch. An added benefit of such an arrangement would be that battalion leaders would realize that they are valued as more than just additional staff officers or NCOs to take the brunt of all additional duties known to man. Yes—they could still take on some of these duties, but they would be forced to “distribute the wealth” so that all staff officers and NCOs would

Table 2. Proposed HBCT CAB CBRN Section in HHC

1 section OIC/battalion CBRN officer (O-2)
1 section NCOIC/battalion CBRN NCO (E-6)
1 decontamination specialist (who works with the section NCOIC) (E-4)
7 company CBRN NCOs (E-5)
Total number of CBRN personnel: 10 (no change from current MTOE)

be responsible for their fair share of additional duties, including serving as the battalion unit status report representative, unit movement officer, or environmental compliance officer. All enlisted battalion CBRN Soldiers would fall under the new battalion CBRN section. They would train and professionally develop together, but would also develop a working relationship with the company that they would be expected to support during deployments and FTXs. During deployments and FTXs, they would be task-organized to the companies with which they had worked in garrison or moved elsewhere based on the commander’s analysis of the best fit—just as with fire support platoons. When working with companies, CBRN personnel would continue to be used just as they are now—working CBRN defense issues and filling company level slots where their assistance is needed. They would, however, maintain the flexibility to be pulled back together as one trained unit under HHC to assist with CBRN-related issues facing the battalion, such as the recovery of a nitric acid cache in the area of operations or the setup of a small decontamination site to handle vehicles that have come into contact with an improvised explosive device composed of a suspected or confirmed blister agent munition.

The reorganization of CBRN personnel in CABs would be a significant advancement in the way training is provided and maintenance, supply, and personnel issues are managed with regard to unit CBRN defense. Such a reorganization would allow brigade CBRN personnel to schedule and assist battalions in establishing centralized training for all brigade CBRN personnel. In an HBCT, this will bring more than thirty CBRN personnel together to practice and train on vital, deployment-related CBRN tasks. In short, the proposed reorganization would provide the opportunity to develop key future leaders in today’s ever-transforming Chemical Corps.

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