

CBRN Officer Versus CBRN Warrant Officer

By Captain Chad M. Baker

“Following the events of 11 September 2001 and continuing through the current operating environment, the role of the Chemical Corps has evolved from conducting conventional chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) passive defense to encompassing the full spectrum of operations, including consequence management; weapons of mass destruction—elimination; and toxic industrial chemical, toxic industrial material, and radiological hazards mitigation.”¹ This new focus has placed an even greater emphasis on the need for Chemical Corps Soldiers who are technical experts in the areas of CBRN hazards and operations.

The Chemical Corps supplies the Army with highly trained CBRN experts. “Currently, the Corps is composed of officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted Soldiers. There are not, nor have there ever been, warrant officers in the Chemical Corps.”² The increase in technical CBRN requirements has resulted in a greater challenge regarding the development of incoming lieutenants. “Unit expectations for these new [soon-to-be platoon leaders, executive officers, and] battalion CBRN officers [have] shifted from combined arms tactics and leadership advisor to technical expert for all new technologies developed and fielded to support the expanding missions.”³

To help bridge the technical gap, the U.S. Army CBRN School has identified the need for a new military occupational specialty within the Chemical Corps—the CBRN warrant officer. “These warrant officers are expected to provide the Army with CBRN technical expertise on

existing equipment and new technologies at all levels of command.”⁴

Although the intent of this forward thinking may be good, the initial perception is that Chemical Corps officers, noncommissioned officers, and enlisted Soldiers must not be performing their duties to current standards. This article identifies the advantages and disadvantages of the new CBRN Warrant Officer Program from the perspective of a Regular Army CBRN officer.

Commissioned officers normally serve as general leaders in staff and command positions. And the Army requires that its leaders exhibit certain qualities, such as self-discipline, intelligence, confidence, and initiative. They must also be physically fit and have the intestinal fortitude to perform under the physical and mental pressures of combat. Army leaders are required to lead from the front and adjust to ever-changing environments. They are expected to make quick decisions, while maintaining their focus on mission completion. And they are intensely judged by their ability to make these decisions on their own and to bear ultimate responsibility for these decisions. In addition, CBRN officers must be technically proficient with branch- and mission-specific tools, equipment, and systems. The success of the CBRN mission demands the proper balance between technical skills and the ability to understand and apply appropriate tactical skills at the right moment.

Upon completion of the Basic Officer Leader’s Course, newly promoted second lieutenants are required to serve

This new focus has placed an even greater emphasis on the need for Chemical Corps Soldiers who are technical experts in the areas of CBRN hazards and operations.

To help bridge the technical gap, the U.S. Army CBRN School has identified the need for a new military occupational specialty within the Chemical Corps—the CBRN warrant officer.

The success of the CBRN mission demands the proper balance between technical skills and the ability to understand and apply appropriate tactical skills at the right moment.

in a variety of positions to gain the knowledge and experience needed throughout their military careers. The Army force generation schedule is used to determine where these new officers are needed throughout the Army. Due primarily to the size of the Chemical Corps, only the most fortunate CBRN officers have the opportunity to serve in company level positions within chemical units. For example, a CBRN officer rarely has the opportunity to serve as a platoon leader or executive officer in a headquarters company. Those who are not assigned to a chemical company serve in command and staff roles as battalion CBRN officers or battalion assistant operation officers, where they are required to "... plan, coordinate, and direct CBRN operations and training within a command or activity, to include CBRN vulnerability assessment; multispectral obscuration; sensitive-site exploitation and assessment; CBRN reconnaissance; CBRN decontamination; CBRN force protection; and combating weapons of mass destruction, which includes nonproliferation, counterproliferation, and consequence management."⁵

As commissioned officers progress through the military, they are monitored to ensure that they complete certain criteria, including the requirement to serve in specific positions. This tracking process ensures that officers acquire the experience and skill sets that will enable them to be successful. In a perfect world, a lieutenant's professional development is monitored by the commanding officer—the immediate company commander or the battalion or brigade commander.

Unlike most Army branches, the Chemical Corps has not had a warrant officer position. The typical Army warrant officer is a technical expert who is the primary source of information for a specific career field. This is basically the same thing the Army expects from its CBRN officers—except the officers have the added responsibility of leading Soldiers.

As the Chemical Corps becomes a more technical branch and the future force concept sweeps across the Department of Defense, the implementation of the CBRN Warrant Officer Program is expected to make the transition a little less dramatic. CBRN warrant officers are expected to provide in-depth technical expertise in the

areas of CBRN defense. They will eventually be responsible for planning, coordinating, and directing CBRN operations and training, including CBRN vulnerability assessments; sensitive-site exploitations and assessments; CBRN reconnaissance; CBRN decontamination; CBRN force protection; combating weapons of mass destruction (nonproliferation, counterproliferation, consequence management, and identification of hazmat, including toxic industrial chemicals and toxic industrial materials); defense support to civil authorities; and planning, coordinating, and employing CBRN systems in support of joint inter-agency, intergovernmental, multinational, and combined arms operations. Ultimately, the CBRN warrant officer will take over technical responsibilities from the CBRN officer. But can CBRN officers and CBRN warrant officers coexist in such a small branch?

According to Colonel Robert Walk and Chief Warrant Officer Two Charles McKnight, "In the Army, trade offs must be made when a change in force structure is needed."⁶ Until the CBRN Warrant Officer Program is fully implemented and the first warrant officer leaves the school house and enters the work force, the advantages and disadvantages of this change in force structure must be determined theoretically.

Advantages

There are a few advantages to having a CBRN warrant officer in the Chemical Corps. Due to their previous enlisted experience, warrant officers are expected to provide the CBRN expertise lacking in some of the current CBRN officers. After all, "... lieutenants are busy learning their trade, but by the time they become experts in their field, they are promoted and trained in general leadership roles to fill higher-level positions."⁷

Another "advantage" (but, in my opinion, also a disadvantage) to adding CBRN warrant officers to the Chemical Corps is that the Army will reallocate current CBRN officer positions to compensate for the influx of CBRN warrant officers (rather than simply adding personnel slots). In short, CBRN warrant officer positions will be added at the expense of current officer slots. This may be an overall benefit to the Army through a reduction in paperwork, but it is not a benefit for

The typical Army warrant officer is a technical expert who is the primary source of information for a specific career field.

CBRN officers. “The implementation of the CBRN Warrant Officer Program requires that 13 percent of the CBRN officer positions be converted to CBRN warrant officer positions. The officer conversions apply to Regular Army and Reserve Component positions, ultimately decreasing the number of branch detail officers by 30 to 50 percent. The adjustment will provide an increased opportunity for many CBRN lieutenants to serve in platoon leader positions—positions that were previously filled by branch detail officers.”⁸ These officers represent projected Chemical Corps losses because they are generally expected to complete their initial obligations and then move on to their originally assigned branches. Fortunately, a few branch detail officers will elect to remain in the Chemical Corps. The end result is a slight increase in the availability of platoon leader and executive officer positions, but the question is: Once those slots are filled, what happens to the remaining lieutenants?

A third advantage of the CBRN Warrant Officer Program is that it will provide a huge opportunity for dedicated, hard-working enlisted CBRN Soldiers. It creates an alternative career path for those who seek to be “subject matter experts” and those who desire more responsibility. However, there are also some disadvantages to incorporating CBRN warrant officers into the Chemical Corps.

Disadvantages

The competition for training and key leadership positions in the Army is intense. But, while officer training is becoming more generalized, the Chemical Branch is becoming more technical. Because effective leaders must understand the capabilities of their Soldiers and know the limitations of the equipment, the Chemical Corps needs leaders who are also experts in platoon and company level CBRN operations. Furthermore, brigade and battalion level staff positions are essential to the leadership development of lieutenants and junior captains. Consequently, CBRN officers serving as technical experts in battalion or brigade level staff positions should not be replaced by CBRN warrant officers.

Under the CBRN Warrant Officer Program, warrant officers are slated to become the CBRN experts; therefore, they will have priority with regard to technical training. However, to be effective leaders, lieutenants and captains must also receive technical training. At this critical point in their careers, young officers must gain a solid technical foundation so that they may make the best decisions possible. There will be plenty of time for these junior

officers to receive generalized training once they have mastered platoon and company level operations and are ready to transition into the field grade ranks.

In implementing the CBRN Warrant Officer Program, the Army plans to slot new CBRN warrant officers in positions currently held by lieutenants, which will put the lieutenants at a huge disadvantage. These junior company grade officers need the knowledge and experience gained from filling positions such as platoon leaders, executive officers, and battalion and brigade CBRN officers. CBRN officers who lack this knowledge and experience will likely struggle in company command and higher-level staff positions, and this could be detrimental to their careers. Under the CBRN Warrant Officer Program, the Chemical Corps will gain knowledgeable warrant officers, but inexperienced CBRN officers will be leading and employing Soldiers in combat. This is a trade off that should be reexamined to determine whether it is in the best interests of both officers.

Conclusion

As the Chemical Corps transitions to the future force concept, highly trained CBRN experts are in demand. To address this issue, the Army has introduced the CBRN Warrant Officer Program—but at what cost? “As the Army transitions to the future force concept, the [CBRN] officer as we know it will disappear.”⁹ To allow for CBRN officers and CBRN warrant officers to coexist in the Chemical Corps, the situation should be seriously reconsidered. ●●●

Endnotes:

¹Tammy R. Alatorre, “The New CBRN Warrant Officer Program,” *Army Chemical Review*, Summer 2010.

²Robert Walk and Charles McKnight, “Do We Need a CBRN Operations Warrant Officer Corps?” *Army Chemical Review*, July–December 2007.

³Alatorre, 2010.

⁴Ibid.

⁵“MOS 74A—Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear (CBRN) Officer,” *Army-Portal.com*, <<http://www.army-portal.com/jobs/chemical/74a.html>>, accessed on 18 April 2011.

⁶Walk and McKnight, 2007.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Alatorre, 2010.

⁹Walk and McKnight, 2007.

At the time this article was written, Captain Baker was a student in the CBRN Captain's Career Course at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri.