

Tools for a Successful Career as a CBRN Officer

By Major Sean Price

A successful career as an Army officer is often achieved through adaptation and the ability to overcome obstacles and pitfalls as they arise. I have faced many challenges and learned many important lessons throughout my career as a chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) officer. I hope that sharing these lessons might benefit new CBRN officers as they begin their exciting and rewarding careers.

The situations faced by a new CBRN officer are as unique to that officer's career path as are his or her personality, habits, work ethic, and situational awareness. There is no sure way to address every possible situation that might surface throughout an individual officer's career. However, there are ways to help avoid pitfalls and tools available to reach solutions when those pitfalls cannot be avoided.

The most basic rule of becoming a successful CBRN officer is to understand that no two career paths are the same. For example, the challenges that I have faced differ from those faced by my fellow Chemical Officer Basic Course (COBC) students. Although we received the same training, we were assigned to different units following graduation.

Entry level training is designed to provide students with the basic tools to be effective CBRN officers. It is important that new lieutenants gain as much knowledge as possible during initial training so that they can report to their first units as subject matter experts. Whether participating in a training exercise or an actual combat deployment, as soon as a question involving chemical, biological, radiological, nuclear, or high-yield explosives arises, the commander looks to his or her CBRN officer for advice and recommendations on how to ensure the safety of Soldiers. And now, as a CBRN officer, the pressure is on you! You can either gain the trust and confidence of the commander by having the answer ready or being able to quickly research the answer—or you lose the opportunity, in which case your career grinds to a halt before it gets started. And during deployment, the advice you give and recommendations you make may be the difference between life and death for the Soldiers in your unit.

In addition to learning the basics of the CBRN trade, it is imperative that new CBRN officers pay close attention to the combined arms training portion of COBC. Most new Chemical Corps lieutenants are assigned as battalion CBRN officers. While a staff position may not seem glamorous, it may prove

to be more challenging than expected because CBRN is not the only aspect of the job. The battalion CBRN officer is also an assistant operations and training officer (S3). Everything involving training, planning, battle tracking, and orders production goes through the S3; it is the center of activity during all operations. If you exert the minimum effort necessary to slip through the combined arms blocks of instruction, you will face an uphill battle in your attempt to learn the skills necessary to be successful upon your arrival at the battalion. The more you put into your COBC course, the better prepared you will be when you arrive at your first unit.

A new CBRN officer can also expect to prepare unit status reports (USRs). The USR is actually a very simple report; and with few exceptions, the guidelines are very easy to understand and follow. Yet, throughout my career, I have seldom seen a USR easily completed. The reason for this brings me to the next very important piece of advice, which involves reading publications. While reading publications may sound tedious, it will make all the difference in your career—regardless of the task at hand. I initially found the USR to be a nightmare. Each unit had a unique turn-in system or a different way of briefing the USR. Even more confusing was the number of different perspectives regarding the process for the compilation of information. I received a quick course on the method used to record data, locations of figures on briefing slides, personnel to be briefed, and briefing procedures. But as soon as my audience began asking questions, I got frustrated because I did not know where the data or figures came from or what they meant. Someone eventually showed me the regulation that governed USR reporting. I took the time to read through the regulation, and suddenly it all made sense! From then on, the USR was easy to understand and manage. An additional benefit of reading and understanding publications is that, when you are asked questions, you can refer to those publications in your responses. If you rely solely on your memory for answers, you may be challenged; but if you can produce documentation as backup, you gain instant credibility.

It is also important to be able to locate information contained in publications. One of the things that I have never understood is why any CBRN officer would roll out to the field and set up shop without first checking his or her field box to ensure that current versions of all applicable publications were available. Publications can be electronically stored on a compact

disk and pulled up on a laptop computer in a field setting. However, it is my experience that having an organized box of printed CBRN-specific publications on hand is the only way to ensure that you do not come up short during field operations. You may find that “your” field computer must be shared with others and that you do not have unlimited access to electronic information. Do not end up in this situation. Always make sure that hard copies of publications are readily available. This is a necessary redundancy in the field. Also, make sure that you check the field box yourself. If you take someone else’s word that the box has been checked and that it contains the proper publications, you may be sorry.

Situational awareness is also important. Throughout my career, I have found that most of the answers I was looking for were right in front of me. Pay attention to everyone and everything around you, regardless of whether or not you are directly involved. Analyze information, and learn from it. Every unit has a specific mission as well as multiple additional projects and taskings. There never seems to be enough time to complete everything, yet the assignments keep coming. Commanders must establish their priorities, and these are evident in various types of meetings (planning, training) that you will attend throughout your career. Ensure that your efforts support those of your commander. As a lieutenant, you will probably feel overloaded during the first few months. However, things will begin to make sense over time.

Another important function of new CBRN officers is ensuring the CBRN readiness of the unit. During peacetime, it is the CBRN officer’s job to ensure that unit CBRN training requirements are met. With the different responsibilities of a CBRN officer, it is often difficult to work CBRN training into the training schedule and even more difficult for the CBRN officer to be present when the training takes place. One key to success is figuring out how to conduct CBRN training in conjunction with unit training events such as field exercises. For example, CBRN personnel might practice operating and maintaining decontamination equipment by using sprayers to wash vehicles upon the completion of a field exercise. In addition, the CBRN officer might also work with the battalion S3 to develop a program in which company CBRN personnel compete with one another in the completion of various CBRN tasks. A plaque that is passed from one unit to another during battalion awards ceremonies might provide extra incentive to ensure that company CBRN training is conducted to standard.

Throughout the course of their careers, CBRN officers will learn that they do not know nearly as much as they thought they did when they came out of training. It is important that

new CBRN officers find another CBRN officer who can serve as a mentor. As a lieutenant, I found that my greatest asset was the regimental chemical officer. I learned more about my trade from him than I have from any other officer. He took it upon himself to teach me what he had learned throughout his career. I learned about CBRN employment doctrine, how CBRN agents work when humans come into contact with them, how to establish a course for the certification of CBRN personnel and, most importantly, about the finer points of being an officer in general. I applied the information that I learned from the regimental chemical officer to training exercises during my tenure as a brigade chemical officer. In addition, I followed the example of my mentor and took a vested interest in providing the same mentorship for my subordinates; make sure that you do the same.

The final advice that I want to pass on is to make sure that you are actively engaged in unit extracurricular activities and social functions. There are several reasons for this. First, the Army is steeped in tradition and formal functions have traditionally been held for officers throughout military history.

Second, these activities build a sense of unity among officers. Third, your rater and senior rater will see that you are a team player. You will likely be surprised at how much people enjoy formal events. If for no other reason, participate in these activities because they are part of what it means to be an officer. And bring your spouse

or significant other with you. Never forget your families—they care about you, are interested in what you do, and deserve to be included in events. Allow your family to be involved in your career.

These are some of the things that I have learned during my short career as a CBRN officer. I have experienced many changes, but the Army has recently begun changing at an even more rapid pace. With these changes, new lieutenants are faced with an increasing number of challenges. However, I believe that these tips are still relevant to the success of new CBRN officers. I encourage all of you to take heed and to pass your knowledge on to CBRN officers who will follow. 

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