

# Leveraging the Chemical Corps

By Captain Winslow Tandler

*The threat of a chemical or nuclear attack on the United States is real—and so, too, is the possibility of a biological agent release. Any of these could cause mass panic unlike anything we have ever seen. The Chemical Corps is charged with defending our Nation against chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) attacks; as CBRN Soldiers, it is our job to keep our fellow Soldiers and our Nation safe from such events. However, the Chemical Corps mission is primarily defensive in nature, focusing on consequence management, with little or no offensive capability. The Army needs a Chemical Corps that will proactively challenge and stop those who seek to use these weapons against the United States. Given the current environment, the modern Army and the Chemical Corps must actively combat CBRN threats before an attack occurs, rather than wait to manage the consequences later.*

Today's Chemical Corps has a split personality. On one hand, CBRN Soldiers in nonchemical units rarely practice their trade. They routinely find themselves relegated to various staff positions with a long list of additional duties. While these assignments may represent valuable, challenging experiences that produce well-rounded Soldiers, they greatly marginalize the expertise of CBRN personnel. Commanders of combat arms units generally have little interest in leveraging the knowledge of their CBRN staff. This is not the fault of the commander or the CBRN staff. Even a commander who has the best CBRN officer/noncommissioned officer team ever assembled still lacks the ability to influence a possible CBRN attack. When threatened by a CBRN attack, the commander is forced to raise the mission-oriented protective posture level or cease operations altogether, thereby limiting Soldier effectiveness. Although a truly successful commander can sometimes influence the operating environment to his advantage, one with limited CBRN assets at his disposal is stripped of the ability to do so.

On the other hand, CBRN Soldiers who serve in actual chemical units have a wide range of missions, including reconnaissance, decontamination, and technical escort. Although these units are comprised mainly of CBRN Soldiers assigned to CBRN missions, they remain underutilized as largely passive and defensive assets. They are invaluable in times of crisis, allowing units to recover from a CBRN attack, continue their missions through contaminated environments, or avoid previously contaminated areas. With the exception of technical escort or other highly specialized units, chemical units are completely passive and reactive. They cannot impact or prevent an attack before it takes place; they have a job only if a CBRN attack has already occurred. Technical escort units are very specialized units that focus on destruction and elimination operations. But while technical escort personnel may be the first on the scene of an incident and may take the lead during toxic materials handling, they require a secure area and outside support to operate. They lack the offensive capability to aggressively

search for the most dangerous weapons and the organizations that harbor them.

The current threat presents daunting challenges due to its evolving nature, the proliferation of independent terrorist cells, and the potential for unseen devastation. Twenty years ago, the most likely threat to the United States was from other nations. They had the manpower and resources necessary to develop sophisticated weapons. While we currently face no imminent threat from separate nation-states, Iran, North Korea, and third-world countries with psychotic dictators continue to keep us on our toes. But these nations are not our only threat. According to experts, a small, decentralized terrorist cell would be the most likely group to attack the United States with weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) today. Just a few years ago, these cells—many of which are spiritually dedicated to the destruction of Western civilization—were nearly impossible to track or infiltrate, presenting enormous challenges to the Army and civilian agencies working against them. While they do not possess the manpower or resources necessary to produce anything more harmful than a homemade improvised explosive device, their deep roots in various terrorist networks provide them with the ability to acquire nearly anything. For instance, just a little more than 2 years ago, reports indicated that 40 members of an al-Qaida affiliate in northern Algeria died after self-exposure to the bubonic plague while attempting to weaponize the bacteria.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, while al-Qaida was busy planning the 11 September 2001 airplane attacks on the United States, they were also planning a separate biological attack—and they nearly succeeded. Mr. George Tenet, the former director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), testified that while planning for the 11 September attacks, al-Qaida initiated a program dedicated to the development of weaponized anthrax and a dispersal device and that they hired Yazid Sufaat (a Malaysian terrorist who was a biologist from California State University in Sacramento) for the development.<sup>2</sup> More recently, Ms. Janet Napolitano, Secretary of the Department of Homeland Security,

explained to a House committee that the terrorist threat has “evolved significantly . . . and continues to evolve.”<sup>3</sup> Even the threat of small terrorist cells that consist of just one to three people with no affiliation to larger, foreign-based groups is real. Should a group like this gain the ability to disperse a biological agent on our home soil, it would be cataclysmic—forever altering not only the lives of this generation, but also the lives of those to come.

The United States cannot afford a single WMD attack. While our response to the events of 11 September 2001 has decreased the threat of another external attack, independent extremists from within our borders (such as Major Nidal Malik Hasan, formerly of Fort Hood, Texas, and many others) still pose a threat. The Army can reduce the ability of these internal groups to harm the United States by targeting their foreign sponsors and promoters—especially those who have access to WMD materials.

The distinction between internal and external threats is diminishing, and our margin of safety is decreasing. While the Department of Homeland Security works to stop internal threats, the U.S. military must work to halt overseas attacks. Fortunately, the units and capabilities necessary to combat these threats already exist. Special Forces (SF) chemical reconnaissance detachments have the training and support necessary to carry out aggressive, unilateral missions that can destroy the WMD capabilities of our largest—or smallest—threats. Chemical reconnaissance detachments, which are trained to operate in unique circumstances with little guidance, are able to detect, locate, seize, and render-safe or destroy specific hazards. A chemical reconnaissance detachment is essentially an extra SF detachment with the technical know-how and capability to accomplish any CBRN task within the SF mission set.

Assets with these capabilities are not limited to SF; however, other such teams are not available for widespread use. This is where changes to the Army and the Chemical Corps are needed. There is currently very little CBRN support in brigade combat teams (BCTs). While there are various CBRN Soldiers on staff and in Fox reconnaissance platoons, BCTs are poorly equipped to handle CBRN events—or, more importantly, to specifically target CBRN threats. To properly prevent any sort of CBRN event, BCTs need to be able to actively target the facilities and individuals at the heart of the threat. For instance, if a platoon in Iraq or Afghanistan were to come across a chemical facility or biohazard, they would have no choice but to leave it, secure the area, and wait for backup in the form of explosive ordnance disposal or technical escort personnel to arrive. This is an incredibly inefficient operation. For one thing, the platoon and higher units must rely on outside assets to complete their mission. More importantly, this system does not encourage the commander or staff to specifically target the chemical facilities or biological laboratories that may be the biggest threats within their battlespace. However, if each platoon—or maybe even one platoon in each company—had the basic skills and equipment necessary to handle the

situation themselves, they could actively target the chemical threats in their battlespace, while still maintaining their core competencies. They would become an incredible unit asset. Technical escort personnel should remain available for the less fluid situations, such as preplanned and coordinated missions and for more technically complex situations; but for routine patrolling and targeting, first responders should be from combat arms units—especially during full spectrum operations.

While BCTs would do well to increase their CBRN response capabilities, the Chemical Corps would also benefit from taking a more active approach to defeating WMD. The Corps should bring its two biggest assets—technical knowledge and equipment—to the fight. The SF chemical reconnaissance detachments could serve as models for this transformation.

In a combat support role, the Chemical Corps does not participate in the standard targeting cycle of an infantry battalion. This is the mind-set of a reactive Corps. Chemical units should, instead, adopt an offensive mind-set to prevent attacks from occurring. By adding explosive ordnance disposal-qualified Soldiers, the unit would create the internal ability to reconnoiter, detect, seize, and destroy any CBRN threat with which they come in contact. These required skills are already in place in most chemical units. The only things missing are the combat skills and direct action mission set that would vault the Chemical Corps into the next phase of our history.

The evolving threat that we face today is deadly. The modern Army and the Chemical Corps must adapt to actively combat CBRN threats before they occur, rather than wait to manage the consequences later. This can be accomplished in two distinct ways:

- Equip and train traditional BCTs to handle CBRN events and mission sets.
- Equip and train technically advanced Chemical Corps Soldiers to handle offensive combat situations, targeting the most dangerous threats on the battlefield.

These actions would push the Chemical Corps toward the mainstream within the Army and leverage the skill sets of some of the most technologically advanced Soldiers any army has ever seen. 

#### Endnotes:

<sup>1</sup>Eli Lake, “Al Qaeda Bungles Arms Experiment,” *The Washington Times*, 19 January 2009.

<sup>2</sup>Bob Graham et al., “World at Risk: The Report of the Commission on the Prevention of WMD Proliferation and Terrorism,” Vintage Books, New York, December 2008.

<sup>3</sup>Keith Johnson, “Officials Warn of Domestic Terrorism Threat,” *The Wall Street Journal*, 10 February 2011.

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