

The Ever-Evolving Chemical Corps

As I begin this article, I reflect back on my initial experience in this great Army branch—the Chemical Corps. Some 23 years ago, I found myself changing my military occupational specialty for reclassification into a corps commonly known as *NBC*. I found it quite amusing that the acronym *NBC*—nuclear, biological, and chemical—was referred to by my counterparts in the Army as “nobody cares.” I can go a step further to say that during my initial assignment as a Chemical specialist in the 4th Chemical Company in South Korea, my major charge was to spray out bus stops with our handy-dandy M12s or be the laundry and bath expert at Team Spirit.



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I was taught that we should integrate *NBC* training into company, battalion, or brigade level standing operating procedures. But as I embarked on the task, I was always hit with the statement: “*NBC*, hmmm . . . Why train on something no one cares about?” As we entered the 1990s, we found ourselves facing an enemy country known to be using *NBC* weapons. This country’s leader—Saddam Hussein—had recently used *NBC* weapons in the war between Iran and Iraq, and Army leaders immediately felt that he would deploy these same weapons on our troops during Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield. It is during this time that the Chemical Corps was considered a high commodity on the battlefield. Somehow the acronym *NBC* had evolved from “nobody cares” to its true meaning of “nuclear, biological, and chemical.”

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During the initial phases of Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield, our military began to rely heavily on *NBC* specialists to ensure the operability of their M17A1 masks, M8 chemical-agent alarms, and all other elements of Chemical equipment. The Chemical specialist became “somebody,” an element needed to ensure mission success in the area of *NBC* threats.

At the conclusion of the first Iraqi war, redeployment efforts were realized. Back on the home front, on our prestigious American soil, the Chemical specialist reverted back into the old groove of “nobody cares” and “who are you?” As years passed, the M17A1 mask became history and the implementation of the M40 protective mask was achieved. The 11 September 2001 attack on our Nation introduced the fear of terrorists invading us on our soil. Shortly after 9/11, anthrax—a nonstandard chemical agent—showed its ugly head as terrorists attacked us through the U.S. Postal Service. These two events reestablished the importance of trained professionals in our Chemical Corps.

Operation Iraqi Freedom and the hunt for the “smoking gun” stash of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) once again brought the Chemical Corps to the forefront of the Army’s mission. However, with the military’s inability to find the weapons, we found ourselves reverting back into the secondary roles to which we had become accustomed.

WMD seems to be the new buzz phrase in Army language. What is the possibility that terrorists will use WMD in the United States to kill and injure American citizens and members of our armed forces? The threat is very genuine! As a society in this 21st Century, we are faced with the reality of terrorism and the likelihood that we could be attacked in one of four forms of WMD: chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN). The acronym *NBC*—and the associated stigma of “nobody cares”—is history. Detecting, identifying, mitigating, and decontaminating against CBRN threats is the future of the ever-evolving Chemical Corps. It is who we are; it is what we do best!