



# THE 184TH CHEMICAL PLATOON: THE MOST DECORATED UNIT OF THE CHEMICAL CORPS

By Dr. John E. Thiel



## The Vietnam War

Most people, whether within or outside of the U.S. Army Chemical Corps, are unaware of its operations in the Vietnam War. Therefore, it is no wonder that its units and Soldiers go unmentioned in the annals of the war. Chemical units were not elite units with illustrious histories like infantry battalions. They were small units, generally with fewer than 45 Soldiers, so it is not surprising that they would get lost among the combat divisions of 12,000 or more. Still, the chemical units significantly contributed to the war effort and saved many lives on the ground.

Chemical Soldiers were a diverse bunch who did not know what they were getting into but followed orders as best they could. They did not earn combat infantry badges, but they spent time on isolated firebases and even humped through the jungle and had overnight campouts there—just like the grunts. They flew more missions that counted as combat assaults than the average infantryman, including perilous daily intelligence-gathering missions over enemy territory. They rigged high explosives and dispersed large quantities of herbicides, insecticides, riot control agents, and napalm by air and on the ground. This is not to diminish the day-to-day suffering that the infantrymen endured, as the chemical Soldiers led a life of comparative luxury; still, they also faced circumstances that required bravery above and beyond the typical call of duty.

The business of being a chemical Soldier in Vietnam was dangerous. Every mission was dangerous. Those men did not want to be there any more or less than anyone else, but they did not hesitate to do their frightening jobs. They were enlisted or drafted with visions of duty behind the frontlines. Instead, they found themselves in the air, hovering over enemy camps, dropping exploding drums of riot control agent or napalm, flying at treetop level with bullets whizzing about them, or mapping enemy positions; on the ground, handling explosives; and sometimes, even underground. Indeed, all the men who served in the Chemical Corps in Vietnam were heroes, demonstrating courage, daring, and self-sacrifice. As always, though, some stood out from among the others.

## War Heroes

Many of the members of one small Chemical Corps unit in Vietnam, the 184th Chemical Platoon (Direct Support), 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), performed heroic actions during the war. This article describes some of those actions.

Indeed, other heroic actions were also performed; however, this discussion is limited to those for which details are readily available.

### January 1967

On 19 January 1967, elements of the 1st Battalion, 14th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, discovered a vast cavern and tunnel complex in the mountains between the Soui Ca and Vinh Thanh Valleys. The caverns were believed to have been used as the Viet Cong Provincial Headquarters. On 26 January, the 184th Chemical Platoon was called upon to help clear the cave complex. The commanding officer, First Lieutenant Gary E. Harvey, and Specialist Fourth Class Jose R. Santiago-Colon entered one of the caverns. They moved slowly along the dark passages until an enemy soldier fired upon them. They killed the enemy soldier and then continued routing five additional Viet Cong from the cavern. For their heroic actions, Harvey and Santiago-Colon were awarded the Bronze Star with V for valor.<sup>1,2</sup>

### June 1967

At approximately 0400, 6 June 1967, Specialist Fourth Class Bobby Blount, Company B, 15th Medical Battalion, saw two enemy mortar rounds land in the ammunition dump at Landing Zone (LZ) English in Vietnam. The “Operational Report and Lessons Learned” of the 1st Cavalry Division states, “On 6 June, the division lost a 3-day stock of Class II, IV, and V supplies in a fire and subsequent explosions caused by enemy action at LZ English. Two division members were killed and 39 wounded during the holocaust.”<sup>3</sup> The 3-day stock translates to approximately 1,900 tons of supplies. Nearly two-thirds of those supplies consisted of ammunition—1,250 tons of assorted shells, rockets, grenades, and incendiaries.

While it is true that “only” two men died as a result of the ammunition dump explosions, many more than the reported 39 were wounded, as at least 109 Purple Hearts were awarded in relation to the incident.<sup>4, 5, 6, 7</sup> It is also noteworthy that the “Operational Report and Lessons Learned” uses the word “holocaust” to describe the mass destruction, emphasizing that this was no ordinary fire. The secondary fires and explosions continued for more than 5 hours; fragments, unexploded ordnance, and burning debris rained over most of the base, destroying tentage and equipment, including helicopters. The exploding ammunition (Class V supplies) alone would have been bad enough, but clothing and equipment

(Class II supplies), including tentage; housekeeping supplies; and construction materials (Class IV supplies), such as lumber and sandbags, were also stored in the area. In addition, the Division Support Command reported that the area had also contained packaged petroleum, oil, and lubricants (Class III supplies).<sup>8</sup> Consequently, the fires ignited by the explosions were supplied with an abundance of fuel, perpetuating the catastrophe. Also compounding the devastation was the fact there were no sandbags or earth berms separating the various explosives from the other classes of supplies at the dump. Everything was stored side by side on wooden pallets.

Because U.S. Army divisions do not include fire companies like stateside military installations do, there was no firefighting capability at LZ English. However, not far away to the south, at LZ Two-Bits, the 1st Cavalry Division did have a power-driven decontaminating apparatus, a truck-mounted 400-gallon water tank with pumps that made it capable of use like a fire truck. The commanding officer of the 184th Chemical Platoon, First Lieutenant Ver Neil D. Mesecher, and four volunteers, at significant peril, rushed the power-driven decontaminating apparatus up the road to LZ English in an attempt to control the fires. Upon arriving on the scene, the team found a large ammunition bunker burning and in grave danger of exploding. At the risk of losing their lives, the team members entered the bunker and extinguished the fire. Although exposed to flying shrapnel and intense heat, the team directed their firefighting efforts to other supply and troop billeting areas. Their actions resulted in saving critically needed ammunition, valuable government property, and several lives.<sup>9</sup> For their heroic actions, Mesecher; Specialist Fifth Class George C. Deveau; and Specialists Fourth Class Alan W. Catlett, Ronald L. Green, and Jose R. Santiago-Colon were awarded the Soldier's Medal. And yes, that is the same Specialist Fourth Class Santiago-Colon who, 6 months earlier, had earned the Bronze Star with V for valor.

### **March 1968**

Late Wednesday night, 24 March 1968, the most intense shelling of the Vietnam War began on Camp Evans. A significant number of the mortar rounds landed in the area of the 184th Chemical Platoon due to its proximity to the division tactical operations center. One of the early rounds hit a rafter of the officers' hooch, severely wounding executive officer Second Lieutenant John W. (Bill) Smith. Shortly thereafter, Specialist Fourth Class Richard E. Wipert and Private First Class John E. Thiel were severely wounded when a mortar round hit the ridge board of their hooch. Fearing a ground attack, the commanding officer, First Lieutenant Jan A. Van Prooyen, braved the incoming mortars to run to the main troop bunker to organize the men. When the shelling let up, Van Prooyen sent the platoon sergeant to obtain medical aid and asked for volunteers to look for and assist casualties. He then returned to assist Second Lieutenant Smith.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the threat of continued shelling, Sergeant Nathaniel J. Booker, Specialist Fourth Class Edward Brown, and Private First Class James C. Covington answered the call for volunteers. They knew that there was at least one casualty in Hooch Number 5, so they entered it first. In the darkness, they found a hole in the floor and Private First Class Thiel in the hole. After Thiel had initially been wounded, another mortar


round had landed close to him. That round had penetrated the floor, and the explosion had acted like an air burst under the floor. The blast had blown out an approximately 1-foot-deep crater under the hooch, the floor had collapsed under Thiel's weight, and he had fallen through it, into the shallow hole under the hooch. Sergeant Booker jumped into the hole and lifted Thiel to Specialist Fourth Class Brown and Private First Class Covington, who carried him to a truck that then took him and Wipert (who was recovered by Staff Sergeant Louis M. Morrison) to the aid station. Van Prooyen was awarded the Bronze Star with V for valor, and Booker, Brown, and Covington were awarded the Army Commendation Medal with V for valor.<sup>11</sup>

### **December 1968**

Specialist Fourth Class Hershel D. Cude Jr. and Sergeant George M. Fagerstrom, 184th Chemical Platoon, were part of the airborne personnel detector crew of the 184th Chemical Platoon on a mission flown by Troop A, 1st Battalion, 9th Cavalry Regiment, northeast of Tay Ninh, near LZ Joe, on 13 December 1968. Cude's seat was on the left side of the helicopter. The aircraft had been flying at treetop level when it crossed a road at a right angle. A lone figure on the road caught Cude's eye. In a split second, Cude recognized the green uniform and pith helmet of a North Vietnamese soldier bringing his AK-47 to bear on the helicopter. Cude grabbed his M-16, which was already locked and loaded on fully automatic, and fired on the target, killing the soldier before he could fire on the helicopter. The pilot circled back for a second look and confirmed that the North Vietnamese soldier was lying in the road. Cude was awarded the Air Medal with V for valor for his quick action, which prevented a potentially catastrophic loss of life and equipment.<sup>12</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Considering only awards for valor, the 184th Chemical Platoon can lay claim to the title of "Most Decorated Chemical Unit in Vietnam" with 14 such awards—a total of six Soldier's Medals, three Bronze Stars for Valor, two Air Medals for Valor, and three Army Commendation Medals for Valor. If awards for meritorious service were included in consideration, the 184th would still be among the leaders, if not the sole leader, as it was also awarded a Meritorious Unit Citation.

As an integral part of the 1st Cavalry Division, the 184th Chemical Platoon operated in the most hostile environments during the Vietnam War. Indeed, it lost as many men (two) to enemy action as any other chemical unit and totaled at least 16 Purple Hearts. By any measure, the men of the 184th Chemical Platoon distinguished themselves during their service in the Vietnam War. The record of the 184th Chemical Platoon must be included in the discussion of the most decorated unit in the history of the Chemical Corps—especially since the platoon was a small unit made up of only 42 Soldiers. 

### **Endnotes:**

<sup>1</sup>General Order 1640, 1st Cavalry Division, 13 April 1967.

<sup>2</sup>General Order 1690, 1st Cavalry Division, 14 April 1967.

<sup>3</sup>"Operational Report and Lessons Learned", 1st Cavalry Division, quarter ending 31 July 1967.

<sup>4</sup>General Order 3463, 1st Cavalry Division, 25 June 1967.

<sup>5</sup>General Order 4787, 1st Cavalry Division, 22 August 1967.

<sup>6</sup>General Order 4930, 1st Cavalry Division, 29 August 1967.

<sup>7</sup>General Order 4932, 1st Cavalry Division, 29 August 1967.

<sup>8</sup>“Operational Report and Lessons Learned”, p 24.

<sup>9</sup>General Order 4741, 1st Cavalry Division, 19 August 1967.

<sup>10</sup>General Order 5125, 1st Cavalry Division, 18 June 1968.

<sup>11</sup>Eyewitness report from Major General Jan A. Van Prooyen (Retired), Ph.D.; First Sergeant Richard Robertson (Retired); Master Sergeant Louis M. Morrison (Retired); and Sergeant First Class Edward Brown (Retired), Ph.D. during an interview, October 2019.

<sup>12</sup>Eyewitness report from Sergeant George A. Fagerstrom during an interview with the author, April 2012.



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*Dr. Thiel retired from the U.S. Army with permanent disability due to combat wounds received while serving with the 184th Chemical Platoon and the 26th Chemical Detachment, both of the 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) in Vietnam. He is an expert on U.S. Army Chemical Corps unit operations in the Vietnam War and World War II. He has been a prolific contributor to the U.S. Army Chemical Corps Museum and the Corps Historian's Office. He was admitted to the Honorable Order of the Dragon by direction of the Chief of Chemical and selected to the U.S. Army Chemical Corps Hall of Fame as its 70th member. Dr. Thiel holds a bachelor of science degree in management; a master's degree in business administration; and a Ph.D. in strategic business analysis from the Kelley School of Business, Indiana University, Bloomington.*

## Photograph and Illustration Guide

Photographs and illustrations contribute a great deal to the visual appeal of an article. When submitting them with your article, please keep the following in mind:

- Subject matter—Action shots that show Soldiers who are training or performing their jobs are the best way to enhance an article. Static photographs of landscapes, structures, or distant machinery in action are less useful. Photographs of groups of people smiling at the camera or “grip and grin” shots add little to an article and are unlikely to be used.
- Format—Photographs saved in JPEG (or JPG) format and sent as attachments to an e-mail are best. Photographs and other graphics should not be embedded in a Microsoft® Word document or PowerPoint presentation. Graphics files are large, and there are limits to the size of messages that can be sent via e-mail systems. For example, our system cannot accept messages larger than 20 megabytes (MB). One solution is to send separate e-mails with just one or two attachments each.
- Size and resolution—The ideal photograph or graphic for reproduction is 5 x 7 inches at 300 dots per inch (dpi), but smaller sizes may be acceptable. If the photograph is a JPEG, it should be no smaller than 150 kilobytes. A 5- x 7-inch, 300 dpi photograph saved as a TIF should be 1MB to 3MB in size. When taking photographs, use the highest resolution setting on your camera and save them at a resolution no lower than 200 dpi. Do not manipulate photographs by sharpening, resizing, retouching, or cropping the image. Using a graphics software program (such as Adobe® Photoshop) to increase the size and/or resolution of a small photograph will not increase the quality of the photograph.
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