



AWAY FROM THE FLAGPOLE

By Captain Seth A. Banano

The mission set of the Chemical Corps, a relatively small branch within the U.S. Army, is defensive and reactive in nature. Chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) Soldiers patiently wait for the worst but hope that it never happens. CBRN positions that are attached to CBRN units, whether teams, platoons, companies, or battalions, are very limited in number and are often coveted. They are not easily accessible, and Soldiers who get these positions are considered “lucky.” So how do CBRN Soldiers effectively immerse themselves into today’s Army if they are not attached to a unit with a strong CBRN presence?

Advantages of a Strong CBRN Presence

There are many advantages for CBRN Soldiers who are assigned to large military installations such as Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri; Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington; Fort Bliss, Texas; Fort Cavazos, Texas; or Fort Stewart, Georgia. There is a very strong CBRN presence at these locations, which ensures easier access to professional development and subject matter experts (SMEs), while CBRN leadership and other available resources are also nearby. Being stationed at any of these locations means that CBRN Soldiers have access to CBRN experts and leaders. Regardless of the unit to which a CBRN Soldier may be attached, these locations offer ample opportunity to access and develop the skills necessary to effectively perform CBRN duties.

Large military installations with a strong CBRN presence allow Soldiers to be part of unique units such as infantry brigade combat teams and/or CBRN reconnaissance platoons, which are specifically designed to be agile and fast-moving while on foot. These unique and often coveted positions provide an enriching experience for CBRN Soldiers, and units are effective at immersing Soldiers into maneuver units. CBRN Soldiers must continue to develop the skills, knowledge, and expertise necessary to effectively perform their duties for these special units.

Being stationed away from these specialized CBRN units requires that CBRN Soldiers focus their efforts on integration into movement and maneuver warfighting functions; as a result, they would need to develop and expand their CBRN knowledge and experience in the field.

Limitations for CBRN Soldiers

Where CBRN leaders are absent and CBRN units are limited, it becomes increasingly challenging to complete CBRN training and maintain readiness. At smaller installations, efforts are focused more on Army-based skills that

are not specific to the CBRN arena. In these cases, CBRN Soldiers are at a disadvantage. Their opportunities to gain knowledge in the field are limited, and their ability to learn about CBRN-specific military occupational specialty tasks and equipment is significantly impacted.

Taking command of a headquarters company when no options for commanding a CBRN company exist can be detrimental to a CBRN officer, limiting his or her overall knowledge of CBRN. CBRN Soldiers who are assigned to positions with little to no CBRN oversight are often at the mercy of the larger unit to which they are attached. In these units, CBRN Soldiers are often assigned and limited to positions such as staff noncommissioned officers (NCOs) and operations clerks and/or given additional duties such as the responsibility for keeping the CBRN cage intact.

Battalion and brigade CBRN officers and NCOs can only do so much in terms of CBRN training. Unfortunately, CBRN training and expertise are low priorities for these units, despite how much the brigade CBRN officer may disagree. CBRN leaders often resort to fitting CBRN tasks and drills into the overall mission directed by the brigade or division. In terms of completing mission-essential tasks, this approach is sufficient. The problem is: Where and how do CBRN Soldiers and leaders expand their CBRN knowledge and capabilities?

The Chemical Corps has long struggled with effectively dividing and sharing the experiences that CBRN Soldiers receive once they leave training at Fort Leonard Wood. Assignments to locations like Joint Base Lewis-McChord allow CBRN Soldiers to be fully integrated into areas for which they are trained. But in reality, those opportunities are limited and Soldiers are often sent to locations with no CBRN presence at all. This creates a gap between their education and MOS-specific abilities. Beyond organizational training changes at a high level, the Chemical Corps must find ways to better incorporate CBRN Soldiers who find themselves away from CBRN units.

Integration of Troops Through Example

What happens to Soldiers and leaders when they’re not serving in a staff role? For example, as a CBRN lieutenant, there is no requirement to serve as a platoon leader or an executive officer if those positions are not available. Therefore, it is possible to serve as a CBRN battalion officer with little to no experience at the platoon or company level.

It is also possible for officers such as CBRN captains to be assigned to duty stations without a CBRN company. These

Soldiers often serve as brigade staff officers prior to taking command of the headquarters company; however, there are often very few options for taking command of a CBRN unit.

The disadvantages faced by the CBRN Soldier necessitate a change in order for the troops to be effectively integrated. Other units, such as those of the Engineer Corps, lead by example with regard to the successful integration of troops. Engineers have found a way to become an equal contributor for their infantry counterparts. The first step in making a change for the Corps is to develop a stronger esprit de corps among CBRN Soldiers and leaders.

Pride in the Chemical Corps

There are several ways to strengthen the ability of CBRN Soldiers to effectively integrate into the Army. Although the Engineer Corps often faces similar issues with integration capabilities, there is a major difference between the Engineer Corps and the Chemical Corps; engineers sell their capabilities and incorporate themselves into units.

The CBRN culture could be improved by better facilitating pride with regard to CBRN development capabilities. This is more effectively achieved when the CBRN Soldier has the support and backing of other CBRN units, regardless of unit location. The Chemical Corps cannot change its mission set, but it can and should influence how the CBRN Soldier is integrated into the Army. Regardless of the size of the CBRN footprint at any one location, it is increasingly important that CBRN Soldiers be integrated into units.

Conclusion

Although the Chemical Corps may be a niche group, it does play an important role in the Army. Chemical Corps priorities and responsibilities can vary from one duty location to another. In locations with little to no CBRN presence, Soldiers are unable to effectively learn CBRN-specific skills, potentially affecting their morale.

The Chemical Corps is currently unlikely to expand or alter its force composition, so it is becoming increasingly important to explore other areas for growth. One way to achieve this would be to promote CBRN capabilities to leaders at every level. If the brigade or division leadership is not sufficiently convinced of the importance of CBRN Soldiers to continue to develop military occupational specialty-specific training, then such training must be prioritized by the Chemical Corps. The Chemical Corps must sell the importance of the CBRN Soldier capability to the Army.

As CBRN Soldiers, we cannot change our mission set; however, we can change how we perceive and integrate ourselves.



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