

BEYOND THE BRICKS: NAMES AND STORIES BEHIND THE ENGRAVINGS

By Ms. Christy L. Lindberg

While preparing for an 11 September 2014 Operation Iraqi Freedom/Operation Enduring Freedom Monument dedication ceremony to be held in the Chemical Corps Memorial Grove, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, Brigadier General Maria R. Gervais, then commandant of the U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear School (USACBRNS), Fort Leonard Wood, asked the question: “Do we have a complete list of all of our fallen chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear (CBRN) Soldiers?” At that time, the answer was no. But nearly 8 years later, with generous donations of time and money from many current and former CBRN Soldiers, the funding, research, compilation, editing, and verification necessary to generate a list and engrave bricks with names of fallen CBRN Soldiers was completed. In November 2022, the bricks were dedicated in the Memorial Grove.

This article highlights some of our fallen, representing every major conflict involving the Chemical Warfare Service and Chemical Corps and revealing their stories beyond the engravings on the bricks.

World War I

Second Lieutenant Joseph T. Hanlon

Second Lieutenant Joseph T. Hanlon, Company B, 1st Gas Regiment, American Expeditionary Force, was the first chemical officer killed in battle when he was mortally wounded on 30 July 1918 near Villers-sur-Fere, France. On 30 August 1918, the Services of Supply Office, Chief of Chemical Warfare Section, American Expeditionary Forces Headquarters, honored Lieutenant Hanlon with the following:

“I. Hereafter, the experimental field, Chemical Warfare Service, will be known as ‘Hanlon Field,’ Chemical Warfare Service, in honor of Lieutenant Joseph Hanlon, Company B, 1st Gas Regiment, who was killed in action 30 July 1918, near Villers-sur-Fere while engaged in conducting a carrying party to the site of a proposed stokes mortar operation in support of an infantry attack when the Germans were being driven back from the Marne to the Vesle.

II. Lieutenant Hanlon was an officer of unusual promise, extraordinary ability, high ideals, and every inch a Soldier, and he was loved by all who knew him. In his death, the Service suffered a severe loss. As the experimental field typifies the very soul of the Chemical Warfare Service in its various activities, it is most fitting that it should bear the name of one who, in his youthful life, typified all that is good in the Service.”

In 2017, the 84th Chemical Battalion Headquarters, Fort Leonard Wood, was also dedicated to Lieutenant Hanlon.

Sergeant Major Joseph Snelsire

Sergeant Major Joseph Snelsire, 1st Battalion, 1st Gas Regiment, American Expeditionary Force, participated in five campaigns during World War I. After surviving 6 months of combat and seeing the end of the war, Sergeant Major Snelsire died of pneumonia during the Great Influenza Pandemic of 1919.

World War II

701st Chemical Maintenance Company (Aviation)

In November 1943, a seven-man detachment from the 701st Chemical Maintenance Company (Aviation), Chemical Warfare Service—a unit trained in the movement, storage, maintenance, handling, and loading of aerial chemical munitions—boarded the *SS John Harvey* “liberty ship,” bound for Bari Harbor, Italy. The cargo consisted of more than 5,000 tons of munitions, which included as many as 24,000 M-47 mustard agent bombs.

On the evening of 2 December 1943, the harbor at Bari was full of Allied ships queued up to unload their cargo, providing a target-rich environment for German bombers. The Germans took advantage of the situation by coordinating a massive air bombardment. Many crewmen immediately abandoned their ships; however, observers noted that, as the attack raged on, the crew of the *SS John Harvey*, including the members of the 701st, tirelessly worked for hours, fighting fires and attempting to prevent the loss of their ship and its cargo.

The seven members of the 701st Chemical Maintenance Company detachment sacrificed their lives in service to the Nation on 2 December 1943:

- First Lieutenant Howard Dale Beckstrom.
- Sergeant Broadus J. Jamerson Jr.
- Private First Class Bennie G. Taylor.
- Private First Class Charles E. Thompson.
- Private First Class Fred Wilson.
- Private Wilson Brodie.
- Private Willie Tensley.

Tragically, the entire crew of the *SS John Harvey* was lost when the ship exploded. Sadly, none of the members of the 701st were recovered.

LST-422 83d Chemical Mortar Battalion

26 January 1944 was the darkest day in Chemical Corps history. At 0100 that day, Landing Ship Tank (LST)-422, which was designed to carry large cargo and land it directly on the beach without the need for docks or piers, was fighting high seas and gale force winds as it approached the Allied beachhead at Anzio, Italy. Companies C and D and the Headquarters Company, 83d Chemical Mortar Battalion—along with unit vehicles, mortars, and ammunition as well as hundreds of 55-gallon drums of fuel for the vehicles already in combat on the Anzio battlefield—were on board.

Twelve miles from the Anzio beachhead, the LST-422 struck a German sea mine. The explosion opened a huge hole in the hull of the ship and ignited the drums of fuel, triggering additional explosions of the mortars and ammunition. The fire and explosions trapped most of the chemical Soldiers below deck, and they were unable to escape as the ship burned and sank. In all, 289 members of the battalion were lost, which is, by far, the greatest single-day loss in the 100-year history of the Chemical Corps. Sadly, most of the bodies were never recovered; and until November 2022, no memorial existed.

Korean Conflict

Master Sergeant Hugh D. Whitacre

On 25 November 1950, Chinese Communist forces attacked en masse along the U.S. Eighth Army front on both sides of the Ch'ongch'on River in northwestern North Korea. The 2d Infantry Division and supporting units were vastly outnumbered and forced to conduct fighting withdrawals to the south in order to prevent Chinese flanking maneuvers. During the beginning of their offensive, Chinese troops overran some of the artillery and mortar units that were in positions along the river.



Master Sergeant Hugh D. Whitacre

Master Sergeant Hugh D. Whitacre, who had entered the Army from Maryland and was serving with Company C, 2d Chemical Mortar Battalion, 2d Infantry Division, was killed in action by enemy forces on 26 November while 2d Infantry Division units were defending the Ch'ongch'on River line. His remains were not recovered, and he is still unaccounted for. Today, Master Sergeant Whitacre is memorialized

on the Courts of the Missing at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, Honolulu, Hawaii. His name is also inscribed on the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., which was updated in 2022 to include the names of the fallen.

Vietnam War

Captain Wayne H. Kidd

Captain Wayne H. Kidd, Chemical Corps, distinguished himself by a heroic action while engaged in

military operations against an opposing armed force in Vietnam on 11 December 1964. As a subsector advisor in a province in the Republic of Vietnam, Captain Kidd demonstrated grit and perseverance in his efforts to prevent a Vietnamese town from being overrun by a Viet Cong battalion. Captain Kidd had estimated the Viet Cong buildup in the area and had requested reinforcements from higher headquarters for the defense of the town, which was protected only by a small force; however, the enemy launched an attack before support arrived.



Captain Wayne H. Kidd

In contacting higher headquarters for air strike support, Captain Kidd bravely left his covered position, exposing himself to small-arms and mortar fire. He then moved to the bunker of the district chief, who informed him that evacuation was possible via the road. Although he was allowed to leave the combat zone, Kidd remained in the area to advise the district chief and maintain contact with the aircraft when it arrived. He continued his courageous efforts throughout the hazardous situation until he was mortally wounded by the enemy. Captain Kidd was the first Chemical Corps Soldier killed in Vietnam. His heroic conduct reflects distinct credit upon himself and the U.S. Army. Captain Kidd is interred in Greenlawn Cemetery, Clarksburg, West Virginia, and is remembered on Panel 01E Line 076 of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.

Specialist Five James D. Valov



Specialist Five James D. Valov

Specialist Five James Damion Valov began his service in Vietnam on 8 March 1969. He was a chemical staff specialist assigned to the 26th Chemical Detachment, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). At the time of his death, he was attached to Company B, 1st Battalion, 5th Cavalry, as part of a tunnel and bunker contamination team.

On 25 April 1969, Specialist Five John Thiel (team leader) and Specialist Five Valov left landing zone (LZ) Dolly by helicopter to contaminate a small bunker complex that Company B had discovered about 8 kilometers southeast of LZ Dolly. The original plan was to return to LZ Dolly that afternoon, but the tactical situation changed, requiring the team to remain with Company B in the triple-canopy jungle overnight. Shortly after midnight, the enemy fired mortars on the company night position, wounding several men, including Specialist Five Thiel, and killing the company commander, Captain Charles W. Chandler, and Specialist Five Valov. Specialist Five Valov is interred in the Russian Molokon Cemetery in Commerce, California, and is remembered on Panel 26W Line 059 of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial.



A few of the memorial bricks from the Chemical Corps Memorial Grove

Gulf War

Specialist Kenneth J. Perry

Specialist Kenneth J. Perry, a member of the 12th Chemical Company, 1st Infantry Division (mechanized), was killed in southwestern Kuwait when a bomb exploded while he was surveying shrapnel for signs of chemical residue. In his last letter to his sister, Perry said that the troops needed to be there and that he wanted to “liberate Kuwait.”

Global War on Terror

Sergeant First Class Mickey E. Zaun



**Sergeant First Class
Mickey E. Zaun**

Sergeant First Class Mickey E. Zaun was a chemical operations specialist with the U.S. Army Special Operations Command, Fort Bragg, North Carolina. On 28 January 2005, he died from injuries sustained in a collision between two armored vehicles in Mosul, Iraq.

Specialist Krystal M. (Alvarado) Fitts

Specialist Krystal M. (Alvarado) Fitts died on 17 July 2012, in Kandahar, Afghanistan, from injuries suffered from indirect fire. She was assigned to the 1st Battalion, 508th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 4th Brigade Combat Team, 82d Airborne Division, Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

Specialist Fitts was motivated, tenacious, and dedicated. Military



**Specialist Krystal M.
(Alvarado) Fitts**

officials stated that she filled a critical role in her unit and that she took on duties well beyond the scope of her training. She learned the Pashtu language to help her fellow Soldiers communicate with local citizens.

Conclusion

These are but a few of the stories behind the memorial bricks at the Chemical Corps Memorial Grove. Each of the 1,813 bricks honors the service and sacrifice of our fallen CBRN Soldiers. In the words of poet Laurence Binyon:

“They shall grow not old,

As we that are left grow old: Age shall not weary them, nor the years condemn.

At the going down of the sun and in the morning,

We will remember them.”¹

Editor’s note: Dr. John Thiel was the benefactor of the memorial bricks in the Chemical Corps Memorial Grove. Dr. Thiel served two tours in Vietnam and was medically retired as a staff sergeant in 1971. Today, Dr. Thiel remains a steadfast contributor to the legacy and incredible history of the Chemical Corps by ensuring that those who made the ultimate sacrifice will never be forgotten. His hobby is developing and preserving the histories of the units with which he served in Vietnam.

Endnote:

¹Laurence Binyon, *For the Fallen*, 1914, <<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poets/laurence-binyon>>, accessed on 29 February 2024.

Ms. Lindberg is the regimental historian with the History Office, USACBRNS. She holds a bachelor’s degree in history, humanities, and political science from the University of Northern Iowa, Cedar Falls, and a master’s degree in history from Missouri State University, Springfield.