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Pine Bluff Arsenal

A Storied Past, A Transformed Future

By Colonel Matthew C. Mason

For 85 years, Pine Bluff Arsenal (PBA) has stood as a bastion of support for the American Warfighter and a cornerstone of the Chemical Corps. Its history is a vivid reflection of our nation's defense posture—a narrative of profound adaptation, technical mastery, and unwavering service. From its origins forging incendiary munitions in the crucible of World War II to its complex Cold War missions and its subsequent, successful demilitarization of a significant portion of the nation's chemical stockpile, PBA has consistently evolved to meet the nation's call.

Today, this storied installation is not resting on its legacy; it is actively transforming into the "Arsenal of Tomorrow," ensuring its vital role for the next 85 years and solidifying its position as a command of choice for the Chemical Corps' most dynamic leaders.

A Legacy Forged in Fire and Resolve

The story of PBA begins on the eve of World War II. Established in 1941 as the Chemical Warfare Arsenal, its primary mission was the mass production of incendiary

munitions. At its peak, nearly 10,000 civilians worked around the clock, producing millions of thermite and magnesium bombs critical to the Allied war effort.

As the world entered the shadowy battleground of the Cold War, PBA's mission pivoted to support the nation's deterrence strategy. It became a key production center for the U.S. Army Chemical Corps, responsible for manufacturing and storing both chemical and biological weapons.

When national policy shifted once more, PBA again answered the call, this time taking on one of the most complex environmental and engineering missions in modern U.S. history: the safe elimination of the chemical weapons stored at the installation. Through advanced destruction technologies and years of disciplined effort, the workforce at PBA successfully destroyed the final munitions in 2010, closing a major chapter in America's chemical-weapons legacy.

Separate from this demilitarization mission, nearby federal research facilities once associated with Army programs were transferred decades earlier to the U.S. Food and Drug



Arsenal Ready Transformation Journey

Administration. In 1971, these facilities became the National Center for Toxicological Research, which has since grown into a world-class scientific institution dedicated to public health and regulatory science.

The Arsenal of Tomorrow: A Deliberate Transformation

The turning point for this new era came in the summer of 2025. The publication of the Army Transformation Initiative placed PBA at a critical inflection point: remain the “Arsenal of Yesterday,” a respected but legacy institution, or take bold, decisive action to become the “Arsenal of Tomorrow.” PBA chose to transform, a decision that has captured the attention of the highest levels of military leadership.

Recent visits from the Chief of Staff of the Army (CSA) and the Deputy Under Secretary of the Army are a direct result of this new direction. These leaders are engaging with PBA not out of obligation but because they recognize the tangible results of this transformation and view the installation as a strategic asset with immense potential for the Organic Industrial Base (OIB). The CSA’s engagement underscores a clear senior leader with intent for decisive, visible progress, affirming that PBA’s “Arsenal Ready” campaign is a vision already in motion.

A Deliberate Transformation Driven by Army Priorities

This transformation is not merely about preserving legacy missions; it is a strategic realignment to meet future warfare demands, guided directly by the CSA’s key priorities for the entire Army enterprise.

The Vision in Motion: From Niche Capability to Strategic Portfolio

The strategic outlook for the “Arsenal of Tomorrow” is to build upon its foundation as a Center of Industrial and Technical Excellence (CITE) by aggressively pursuing modernization and expanding its mission set. As noted by the CSA, “designation does not equal limitation.”¹ PBA is evolving its niche capabilities into broader, more comprehensive portfolios aligned with the future needs of the joint force.

Expanding the Munitions Portfolio

PBA is transitioning from its legacy focus on smoke and pyrotechnics toward enabling lethal munitions. This includes developing capabilities for energetics, propellants, precursors, and subassemblies, which will be complementary to production at other OIB sites such as the one in Camden, Arkansas, enhancing the resilience of the entire enterprise.

Expanding the Protection Portfolio

PBA’s renowned expertise in chemical and biological defense is growing beyond traditional items to support the broader layered protection portfolio. In close collaboration with subject matter experts at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, this effort includes sustainment, integration, and the development of next-generation capabilities such as multispectral smoke.

Public-Private Partnerships as the Foundation

The vehicle for this modernization is the strategic use of public-private partnerships and enhanced use leases, which are now the foundation for the arsenal’s future viability. Recognizing that standalone government-owned, government-operated (GOGO) constructs are insufficient for future demand, PBA is leveraging private sector capital and innovation.

Arsenal Ready (Anticipation-Adapt-Overcome) Acronym Definition

"ARSENAL READY"

Anticipate - Adapt - Overcome

This is our commitment to proactively meeting the challenges of today and tomorrow, ensuring we continue to deliver for our Warfighters through operational and strategic readiness.

- A - Accountability:** Upholding responsibility for QUALITY, SAFETY, and MISSION READINESS.
- R - Readiness:** Ensuring preparedness to deliver critical materials and support on time.
- S - Sustainment:** Maintaining excellence in production, storage, testing & delivery of critical resources.
- E - Efficiency:** Streamlining operations and adopting innovative technologies to maximize output.
- N - Networks:** Strengthening collaborations across the OIB, industry, military units, and Senior Leaders.
- A - Adaptability:** Embracing change and evolving processes to meet future combat needs.
- L - Leadership:** Driving modernization efforts and setting the standard for excellence in defense logistics.

- R - Resilience:** Building robust systems and infrastructure to sustain operations under any conditions.
- E - Excellence:** Striving for superior quality and innovation in every task.
- A - Agility:** Quickly adapting to shifting demands and operational requirements.
- D - Dedication:** Committing to the mission and exceeding expectations to support modernization goals.
- Y - Yield:** Delivering measurable results that enhance readiness and operational effectiveness.

"Right Today - Better Tomorrow" -- "America's Arsenal - Arsenal Ready"

A recent example is the long-term lease awarded to Hanwha Defense USA to build and operate a new, modern munitions facility on the installation. This partnership directly improves the lethality and performance of munitions such as 155mm artillery shells. Furthermore, the Army is actively seeking partners to establish a state-of-the-art rare earth mineral manufacturing campus onsite. By creating a synergistic defense ecosystem inside its gates, PBA is ensuring it remains a vital asset to the nation's defense for decades to come.

A Premier Command for Chemical Corps Leaders

For a Chemical Corps colonel selected for command, PBA offers an unparalleled leadership experience. This is not a caretaker command; it is an opportunity to lead a complex enterprise at a strategic inflection point. The PBA Commander is not just responsible for one installation but exercises leadership and oversight of a multistate enterprise including Holston and Radford Army Ammunition Plants—the two battalion-level commands responsible for the nation's primary production of military explosives and propellants.

This unique, multiechelon command structure provides an unmatched opportunity to influence the broader ammunition industrial base. A commander at PBA gains invaluable experience in how the OIB directly supports the Warfighter, how to forge strategic partnerships with industry leaders, and how to interact with the highest echelons of our military and congressional delegation. It is a command that expands a leader's expertise far beyond the gates of a single installation, offering a 360-degree view of the industrial base essential for future strategic roles.

PBA is honoring its storied past by boldly building its future. By embracing transformation and innovation, PBA is ensuring that it will remain an indispensable asset to the Chemical Corps and the joint force for the next 85 years. PBA is proving itself to be a dynamic and essential command for the very best leaders the Chemical Corps has to offer—a place where they can make a lasting, strategic impact on the readiness and lethality of the United States Army.

Colonel Mason is the commander of Pine Bluff Arsenal, Arkansas. He holds a bachelor's degree in geography from University of Central Missouri, Warrensburg.

Endnote:

¹ https://www.pba.army.mil/newspaper/fy26/jan26/jan26_arsenal.pdf.

*The contents of this article do not represent the official views of, nor are they endorsed by, the U.S. Army, the Department of War (DoW), or the U.S. Government.

*This article was edited with the assistance of AI tools, and subsequently reviewed and edited by relevant Department of War (DoW) personnel to ensure accuracy, clarity, and compliance with DoW policies and guidance.

| PBA Vision Arsenal of Tomorrow



PBA VISION Arsenal of Tomorrow



- Innovative – Transformative “big ideas”
- Collaborative “integrated” model
- Expanded capabilities and improved efficiency
 - Full-Spectrum Arsenal
 - Lethality
 - Layered Protection
- Strengthened partnerships with industry
 - Public-Private-Partnership (P3)
 - Enhanced Use Lease (EUL)



We are not just supporting the Arsenal of Freedom; we are building its blueprint

We stand ready and willing to support the Defense Industrial Base for the next 85+ years