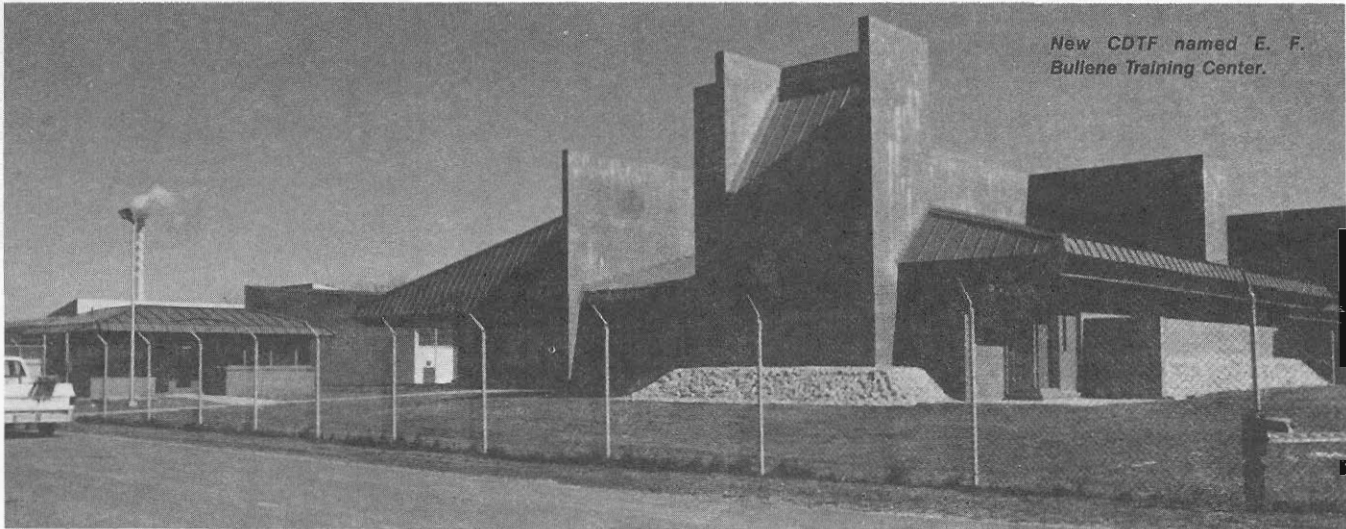




New CDTF named E. F.
Bullene Training Center.

Toxic Chemical Training

— USACMLS Commandant MG Watson first “student”

by CPT Chris Parker
Operations/Executive Officer
Chemical Decontamination
Training Facility
USACMLS

On 3 March 1987 something happened at Fort McClellan, Alabama, that has not happened in years: chemical soldiers trained with actual toxic chemical agents. After three years of construction and testing, the chemical decontamination training facility (CDTF) started into operation. Small quantities of nerve agents GB and VX are mixed and used at the facility.

Following a detailed inspection from TRADOC, the CDTF Laboratory mixed agents for the first time on 10 February. Following the mixing process, the CDTF cadre conducted two weeks of testing to ensure training with live agents is as safe as possible.

MG Gerald G. Watson, commandant of the US Army Chemical

School, was the first “student” taken into the agent area on 19 February. As the first American to wear the battle dress overgarment in a toxic chemical environment, MG Watson not only “graduated” with flying colors, but also showed the instructors some tricks of the trade in working with actual agents.

On 26 February, the Chemical School senior leadership participated in a toxic exercise. Finally, members of the Chemical Officer Advanced Course 2-87 completed the CDTF training 2-4 March 1987—the first Chemical School students to do so.

All classes must first complete a four-hour practical exercise on outdoor simulant pads (using no agents). This exercise enables students to practice the tasks they will perform inside the agent area, and helps verify the students’ ability to wear MOPP4 for an extended period of time.

Training with actual toxic agents is conducted inside a specially designed training building. All students in

COAC 2-87 successfully completed their toxic agent training. Toxic agents provide a stressful environment for students to train in. Such training helps students become confident. Confident soldiers perform their missions better, and have more credibility with their leaders/peers.

What is the training like? Well, let’s pretend you’re a student about to go through the CDTF. This is what you’ll experience on your live agent training day.

As you get off the bus, you see a large complex surrounded by a chain-link fence. Signs posted on the fence warn that “USE OF DEADLY FORCE IS AUTHORIZED.” A security guard meets you at the gate. He checks your name against the class roster—no one enters the facility who is not authorized.

After a classroom safety briefing, you get into your 10-person student group with your assigned “buddy”—just as in the earlier outdoor exercise. Now your buddy becomes even more important to you. You must depend



Soldier uses M113 to decontaminate tank.

on your buddy; your buddy must depend on you.

As a group, you go to the training building (where the agents are). The safety control office NCOIC pushes a button that electronically unlocks the entrance door. You are checked off another roster and directed to the locker rooms (male and female) where you find your name on a wall locker. The locker contains everything you will wear into the live agent environment. None of your personal clothing goes inside.

As you begin to suit up, you notice how quiet the room seems. Everyone concentrates on what he or she is doing. An occasional nervous joke breaks the silence. You feel a little apprehensive while getting dressed, but remember being told during the safety briefing to expect some nervous-

ness. It's a trick your body uses to help make you more alert.

After you are completely dressed in MOPP4, you and your buddy check each other out. Are all the zippers zipped? Buttons buttoned? Mask on correctly? Now the instructors take your group back to safety control where your equipment is checked again, this time by the instructor. The instructor finds nothing wrong—your buddy did a good job.

The instructor signals safety control and you enter an airlock. You are squeezed in tightly. Nobody is talking. Your heart beats a little faster. The instructor pushes a button and opens a heavy, sealed door. You follow him into the mask check chamber. As the door closes, you hear a rush of air. Your ears pop from the change in pressure.

You think the mask check chamber looks like something from a horror



Main corridor leading to the seven "hot" training bays.

movie. There are large, clear plastic hoods suspended from metal racks. The chamber operator helps you get under one of these hoods. An instructor comes by and fills your hood with an irritating smoke to check your mask for leaks. You do breathing exercises, head movements, and finally read a special paragraph aloud.

You don't smell any smoke, but someone in your group steps out from under his hood. He did not have his mask on right. The instructors take him back to safety control.

Everyone in the group steps out from under their hoods. The chamber operator pushes two more buttons, and your instructor opens another heavy door leading into the service corridor. You've seen pictures of the corridor, but now you're amazed at how big it seems. In the service corridor you are issued three nerve agent antidote kits. Your group is then taken down the corridor to one of the small training bays. In the bay sits a ¼-ton vehicle. You and



your buddy help prepare the equipment you will be using. The instructor pushes the intercom button and calls safety control. "This is group number one in training bay number six. We're ready for the agent pourers."

As the training bay door opens, two instructors step into the bay. One of them is carrying a closed yellow box. This is it. Your heart beats faster again. The instructor lifts a small vial from the box and shows it to each student in the group. "This is nerve agent VX," he says. "This is the real thing." It looks like corn oil to you. Then the instructor takes a syringe containing VX and pours the agent on the jeep in several areas. Everyone in the group has a section to work on.

Using your detector paper and kit, you take a sample of the agent from your section. The paper turns dark green. The instructor isn't kidding; the agent is real. Funny, the VX droplets look harmless just sitting there, but you know the tiniest drop can kill you—if you're not protected.

The agent pourers come back. They have returned the student whose



Instructor checks student mask in mask check chamber.

mask was leaking. This time his mask is fitted properly. Again, a small vial is shown to the group. "This is nerve agent GB," the instructor says. It looks like cloudy water to you.

The instructor takes out another syringe. You remember that GB creates a greater vapor hazard than VX and check your mask again. The instructor begins to pour the agent. But before he makes it to all the sections of the jeep, the chemical agent alarm goes off with its eerie whistling sound. You've heard it before in training, but it seems different this time. You know the GB is real.

You take another sample and confirm it's GB nerve agent. Your group uses M11 decontamination apparatuses filled with DS2 solution. A whitish haze fills the room as everyone decontaminates their section of the jeep.

Now the instructor takes you to the large training bay. Here you find a three-inch Navy deck gun and an

M551 Sheridan recon vehicle (tank). Again, the instructor pours agent on the tank. You go through the decon procedures again, but this time using the M13 decon apparatus.

This finishes the "hot" part of the training. You emerge more confident than when you began—confident in your instructors, your equipment, your training, your buddies, and yourself.

CPT Chris Parker is the operations/executive officer of the Chemical Decontamination Training Facility at the US Army Chemical School. Commissioned in 1978, he holds a bachelor's degree in medical technology from Drake University. CPT Parker's assignments have included brigade, NBCE, and assistant division chemical officer positions in the 25th and 7th Infantry Divisions, and company commander at Fort McClellan, AL. He received the FORSCOM Fourth Estate Award for Excellence in Military Journalism in 1983.