NBC in Light Infantry

—a brigade chemical officer's perspective

by CPT Andrew Feickert
Brigade Chemical Officer
HQ, 1st Bde, 10th Mtn Div (LI)
Fort Drum, NY 13602

Light infantry provides the National Command Authority with the strategic flexibility to respond to a myriad of situations or conflicts. Although light infantry can trace its lineage back centuries, modern light infantry is emerging as the force of the future. Since WWII, all conflicts can be classified as either mid- or low-intensity.

With the current trend toward lighter, more cost-effective and deployable units and the serious overtures toward conventional force reductions, light infantry's niche seems assured. Keeping pace with the constantly evolving role of light infantry is a daily affair. The nuclear, biological, and chemical doctrine for light infantry is enjoying a similar renaissance. In order to put the relationship between light infantry and NBC doctrine in perspective, a "view from the trenches" may be helpful.

The cutting edge of the light infantry is the light infantry soldier, his individual weapon, and his rucksack. The term "soldier's load" is heard daily in the light infantry and is the driving factor in much of our NBC doctrine. The battles are fought by squads and platoons and are, by nature, decentralized. The NBC battle must be equally decentralized and provides an additional challenge to platoon and squad leaders. The light infantry is characterized by austere support. Many chemical defense items such as smoke generators and power-driven decontamination devices are not to be had.

The traditional perception that light infantry does not face an NBC threat is rapidly fading, thanks to world events over the course of the past decade. Commanders with an already full training docket find new and innovative ways of integrating NBC training. Gone are the "NBC Weeks" and "NBC Olympics" of the past. The goal of making NBC a day-to-day training event is becoming a reality. Commanders realize that their units' survivability hinges on contamination avoidance and much of the training focuses toward that end.

How to carry chemical defense equipment into battle poses a major consideration. Light infantry fights on foot and normally carries only an assault pack. An assault pack is big enough to accommodate a wet weather top, a pair of socks, two MREs, and mission-related items, such as ammunition, demolitions, and other squad equipment.

Chemical protective overgarments, M256 kits, and M8A1 alarms are not included in the soldier's load equation if it means leaving out some of the mission-essential items. A solution to this problem and one widely used in the light community is the squad NBC bag. Each squad places its protective overgarments, boots, gloves, and other chemical defensive equipment (CDE) items into one or two duffle bags. These bags are stored in the battalion staff area or battalion field trains. Based on the S2's threat assessment and the chemical officer's MOPP analysis, the bags are brought forward by ground or air transportation.

This tactic pushes the risk-taking philosophy of MOPP to the limit. During our recent Joint Readiness Training Center rotation, approximately 70 suits bound for the company were destroyed by enemy fire, so this technique is by no means foolproof. For the most part, the suits closed with the battalion in a rapid and orderly manner.

The M256 kits used by the chemical detection teams are broken down to squad level. Four detector tickets fit quite easily into a BDU jacket pocket. The decentralized nature of light infantry operations demands that squads know how to identify chemical contamination. Squads operating in this manner provide a better picture of actual contamination over a greater area due to the dispersed nature of their operations.

The M8A1 chemical alarm and radiac equipment are also kept in the trains and are load-planned on the light infantry company's one direct support HMMWV. Since light infantry rarely is static, the M8A1 usually is employed to provide early warning for command posts and trains—prime candidates for a chemical attack.

The cache concept, where essential equipment and supplies are pre-positioned and concealed, is a particularly viable technique for CDE. Decon sites can be selected throughout the area of operations and all essential equipment, decontaminants, and suits buried in the vicinity of the site for future recovery and use. Smoke pots and fog oil for anticipated smoke operations also can be pre-positioned in a similar manner.

"The cutting edge of the light infantry is the light infantry soldier."

The proper marking and reporting of contaminated areas supports the contamination avoidance emphasis of light forces. The NBC marking kit is too bulky to be carried, so the signs are removed and distributed among the squad. As contaminated areas are encountered they can be marked and reported.

One of light infantry's fortes is its ability to operate under conditions of limited visibility. Smoke provides the commander the ability to impose his own conditions of limited visibility at the time and place of his choosing. While generated smoke is not always available in the light infantry, smoke pots are. Smoke pots, easily operated and positioned, don't have the same duration or the same logistical requirements as generated smoke. Smoke is particularly effective for hasty breaches and MOUT operations, standard missions in the light infantry. Smoke draws attention, thus providing an excellent means of deception.

Decontamination may be the Achilles heel of the light infantry. It's a logistically intensive operation in terms of equipment, supplies, and personnel. Unless a light infantry unit is augmented with dedicated decontamination support, detailed decontamination is practically impossible. In most cases, light infantry units rely on hasty decontamination and MOPP gear exchange to reduce their protective posture.

Doctrinally, only detailed decontamination provides permanent relief from MOPP and allows equipment to be operated in a normal manner. If the contamination level is not excessive, MOPP gear exchange and equipment washdown may allow soldiers to return MOPP zero.

In this case, extensive monitoring and testing is imperative to ensure that an acceptable level of decontamination is reached. Hand-held devices, such as the CAM, will enhance this capability ten-fold. In the light infantry, decontamination requires commanders to take risks.

As light infantry trains to fight today's and tomorrow's battles, the spectre of NBC warfare looms omnipresent. To ensure that the light infantry is prepared to meet the challenges of the battlefield, NBC doctrine must be equally bold and avant garde. The light infantry faces many diverse challenges as it forges into the future. The NBC challenge may prove to be its most decisive.

CPT Andrew D. Feickert is the brigade chemical officer for the 1st Infantry Brigade, 10th Mountain Division, at Fort Drum, New York. His previous assignments include group chemical officer for the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne). He has also commanded a Special Forces detachment. CPT Feickert is a 1982 graduate of the United States Military Academy at West Point. He graduated from the Combined Arms and Services Staff School, the Special Forces Detachment Commander's Course, and the Chemical Officers Advanced Course.