

Joint Readiness Training Center: The Final Test

By Major Sergio M. Dickerson

After spending 3 years immersed in a myriad of staff jobs, it strikes me that what attracted me most to the military—leadership, command, and soldiers—are the hallmarks of training at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC). With one exception, command, I cannot recall a more demanding, rewarding, and purposeful job. As I savored the experience, I found myself taking special notice of the chemical observer/controllers (O/Cs) who were gracious enough to allow me to peer into their jobs. This article is a brief look into the critical, yet exciting, job of the JRTC chemical O/C.

On a monthly average (2 weeks between rotations), a new unit from Hawaii to New York arrives at JRTC for the chance to battle the notorious Opposing Force (OPFOR), the 1st Battalion (Airborne), 509th Infantry. The chemical O/C team is on-site from the initial introduction to the final after-action report, shadowing their Blue Force (BLUEFOR) counterparts from the platoon to brigade levels. Their functions, as outlined in Edition 6 of the O/C Handbook, are to “control and observe training, teach and coach, provide feedback and conduct after-action reviews, and monitor safety.” The result of these primary duties trains, refines, and challenges our soldiers to meet their final test. Their job importance, given their purpose and end state, is hard to refute!

To perform these functions, each O/C must be intimately familiar with applicable regulations—a subject-matter expert within his/her specialty. The O/Cs must endure rotation after rotation in the field, maintaining 24-hour coverage on BLUEFOR. They must adhere to uniform and equipment standards as they are continually in view of and scrutinized by BLUEFOR. They are often called to adjudicate tough engagements between OPFOR and BLUEFOR, 24-hours a day. Even so, if questioned, any chemical O/C will tell you with great pride that he has the best job in the Army. For these reasons, O/Cs pride themselves on forging the chemical side of the “Warrior Spirit.”

The chemical O/C team ensures that nuclear, biological, and chemical scenarios are played out to standard—witnessing and adjudicating chemical-related activity such as a thorough decontamination, a Fox reconnaissance of a contaminated area, and smoke obscuration of a MOUT site during a mechanized assault. Every effort is given to ensure realism and near-combat conditions. Even the smallest details in a chemical attack, such as air/ground delivery systems and a visible agent (look-alike), are used to involve all five senses in the action. BLUEFOR units are challenged to follow correct procedures before they can return to combat effectiveness. The level of detail and involvement in this process, as some find out, can be painfully realistic—hence, they have endured the thrill of a JRTC experience.

It is no surprise then, that these officers and NCOs are selected from the best the Chemical Corps has to offer, given their past experiences and accomplishments. This allows Major Tim Fisher, chemical team chief, the latitude to synchronize realistic chemical scenarios all over the battlefield with a combined effect that coincides directly with the intelligence picture—in effect, a well-coordinated, decentralized execution by professional soldiers. These Dragon Soldiers are among the best!

As I look back at my experience at JRTC, I would like to thank Major Fisher, his fine officers, and the NCOs for the privilege of working with them. Witnessing the impact that capable officers and NCOs working in concert have on our chemical institution gives me a renewed sense of pride. As a proud Dragon Soldier, I salute your team for bringing our chemical mission to the forefront of the battlefield.

Major Dickerson is currently attending the Command and General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. Previously he was chief of accreditation for The Army School System (TASS) assigned to the U.S. Army Chemical School, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. He provided accreditation, assessment, and assistance to seven TASS chemical battalions throughout the continental United States.