

Call to the North

— Army unit performs unique mission

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Civilian scuba divers searching for war souvenirs off Captain's Bay dock in the remote Alaskan village of Unalaska at first thought they had recovered large vials of morphine. They quickly notified the chief of police of their discovery.

Chief Peter Davis, a retired major from the Honolulu, Hawaii, Police Department, had extensive experience with the military during his career. Believing the items might be

acid vials from World War II-vintage sea mines, he contacted the Navy for assistance. They could not identify the items and referred him to the Army.

Members of the 176th Ordnance Detachment (Explosive Ordnance Disposal) from Fort Richardson, Alaska, arrived in Unalaska. They recognized the items.

On 12 January 1987, the US Army Technical Escort Unit, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland, received a call requesting assistance in identifying and recovering the liquid-filled glass vials.

That's how a team (headed by me

and two 54E chemical operation NCOs) from the US Army Technical Escort Unit entered the picture. We identified the vials as components of the Gas Identification Set, Detonation, M1.

The set consists of 48 hermetically sealed glass tubes. Each tube, measuring approximately one inch in diameter and seven inches in length, contains 40cc of agent or agent solution. There were four agent types in this set—two blister agents, mustard (HS), and lewisite (M1), as well as the choking agent, phosgene (CG), and vomiting agent, chloropicrin (PS)—twelve vials of each. These sets were used between 1930 and 1950 to train soldiers and sailors in chemical warfare defense.

The set was used for open air training. A blasting cap was taped to each tube. Students stood 30 to 40 yards downwind. The tube was detonated

Vials of aging agent or agent solution were found in shallow water near bay in Unalaska.





and the class was instructed to sniff the odor of the agent. The objective was to prepare them in case they encountered the agent in combat.

During the early days of WWII, the Navy had a large port facility, an airstrip, barracks, gun positions, and an ammunition igloo complex on Unalaska. The Army had barracks, warehouses, and gun positions. At the height of the war, there were 50,000 troops stationed there. Today, little remains. The Corps of Engineers destroyed or removed many structures. The gas sets were probably taken there to train troops in chemical warfare defense prior to their deployment into the Pacific Theater.

When our technical escort team arrived, we faced some unique problems. Unalaska is 800 miles west of Anchorage, and telephone communications were roughly equivalent to speaking to another planet. This made coordination with Fort Richardson and our parent unit at Aberdeen extremely difficult.

We requested a naval explosive ordnance disposal dive team to recover the vials, located in over 40 feet of sea water in the bay.

The Army's Technical Escort Unit, in two separate operations, recovered a total of 513 vials from prime crabbing and fishing waters off southwest Alaska.

However, a blizzard on 23 January shut down the Pentagon for four days while the request was working its way through channels. During the same time, we were experiencing an unseasonable period of mild weather.

By the time the dive team arrived from Keyport, Washington, my team had to modify their protective clothing. We knew the recommended protective clothing of the M3 toxicological agent protective suit would freeze and crack in the frigid arctic climate. So we chose to wear level B protective clothing which included a toxicological apron, M17 protective mask with hood, butyl rubber gloves, and protective boots. For warmth we wore long underwear and sweatshirts over our impregnated undergarments. Using common sense, but still complying with the regulations governing safety, we were able to come up with a workable compromise. This modification reduced our chances of contracting frostbite and still afforded full protection. The Navy EOD divers wore dry suits and air tanks.

A few new problems surfaced as work began. To properly support the divers, we had to set up our emergency personnel decontamination station on a six-foot by twelve-foot floating dock in the 35-degree ocean water of Alaska's Bering Sea. We had not

trained for this type of operation under these extreme geographic and climatic conditions, but found that land-based concepts easily transferred to our situation.

All of the vials recovered by the civilian divers were resting in sea grass on the sea bottom. When the naval divers recovered a semi-intact shipping container, a new situation arose—how do you unpack glass vials from a deteriorated steel container that has been in sea water for 40 years without breaking the vials? We found that a simple pocket knife was the answer and that gentle prying and scraping freed the Pyrex vials.

In one day we unpacked, surface decontaminated with bleach, and repacked all the vials in accordance with Department of Transportation regulations. The 44 recovered vials were then flown to Johnston Atoll in the Pacific for disposal. We returned to Aberdeen believing that we had completed our recovery operation.

On 19 March 1987, Unalaska experienced extremely low tides. As the sea retreated, ten additional shipping containers were uncovered about 100 yards from the normal shoreline. Although this had happened in past years, everyone thought that the containers were merely old pipes. This time the locals knew better.



Once again members of the 176th Ordnance Detachment from Fort Richardson responded. They worked quickly during low tide and moved the containers to a storage site. Technical Escort Unit was called again. When my team (me, one 55D explosive ordnance disposal NCO, and two 54E chemical operation NCOs) arrived, the EOD team left. During the first recovery, the entire side of the container was missing. We were not so lucky this time.

Eight containers were relatively intact with only 1/4-inch to two-inch holes in them. We were forced to find a way into the containers because they could not be shipped in their deteriorated condition. Simply overpacking them is not allowed by the regulations.

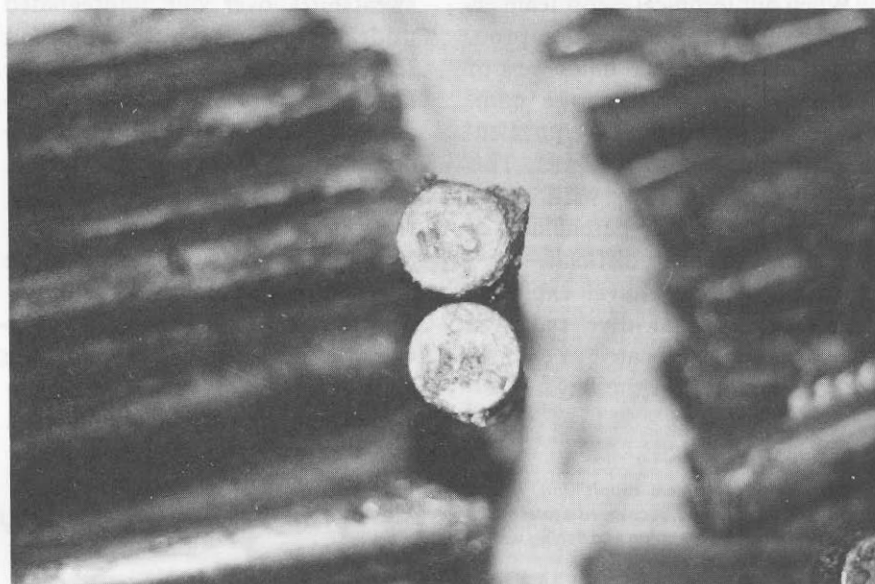
We solved the problem by using a portable grinder to cut the bolts holding the heavy steel lids of the ten containers. Once again we removed the vials by gently prying them loose. A total of 469 vials were unpacked, cleaned, surface decontaminated with bleach, sorted by type, and repacked for shipment. No vials were broken in the three-day process.

Surprisingly, although submerged in sea water for over 40 years, printing on the lids of some of the tubes was still readable, allowing us to identify the agent inside. The containers had become a part of their environment—two previously broken vials had small crabs living in them.

These vials also were flown to Johnston Atoll for disposal. Counting the 44 vials from the first recovery, a total of 513 vials were removed from prime crabbing and fishing waters off southwest Alaska.

Although the items involved in this mission were retired from the system in the late 1950s, we have recovered them on three continents during the past year.

Since no two recovery missions are quite alike, this type of mission offers unique challenges to the US Army Technical Escort Unit and the



Top photo shows a container after removing vials. Codes on many of the shipping tubes were legible.

chemical operation specialist and explosive ordnance disposal NCOs.

The ability to move into a remote community, allay public concern, remove a potential hazard with limited support, and deal with other branches of the service reflects the skills and ingenuity maintained by Technical Escort Unit soldiers in dealing with chemical items that have been out of the supply system for decades. [Note: See page 9 for recognition accorded this unit.]

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