

training that builds, binds, readies— Combat-Ready

by CPT David Alegre
Division Staff Officer,
6th Infantry Division (Light)
Fort Richardson, Alaska

“Wilco . . . out.”

The platoon leader releases the microphone switch, leans against his HMMWV and, map and notepad still in hand, gazes over the lightly forested valley that was the brigade's battlefield. Smoke from artillery, burning vehicles, and the remains of his smoke platoon's screen

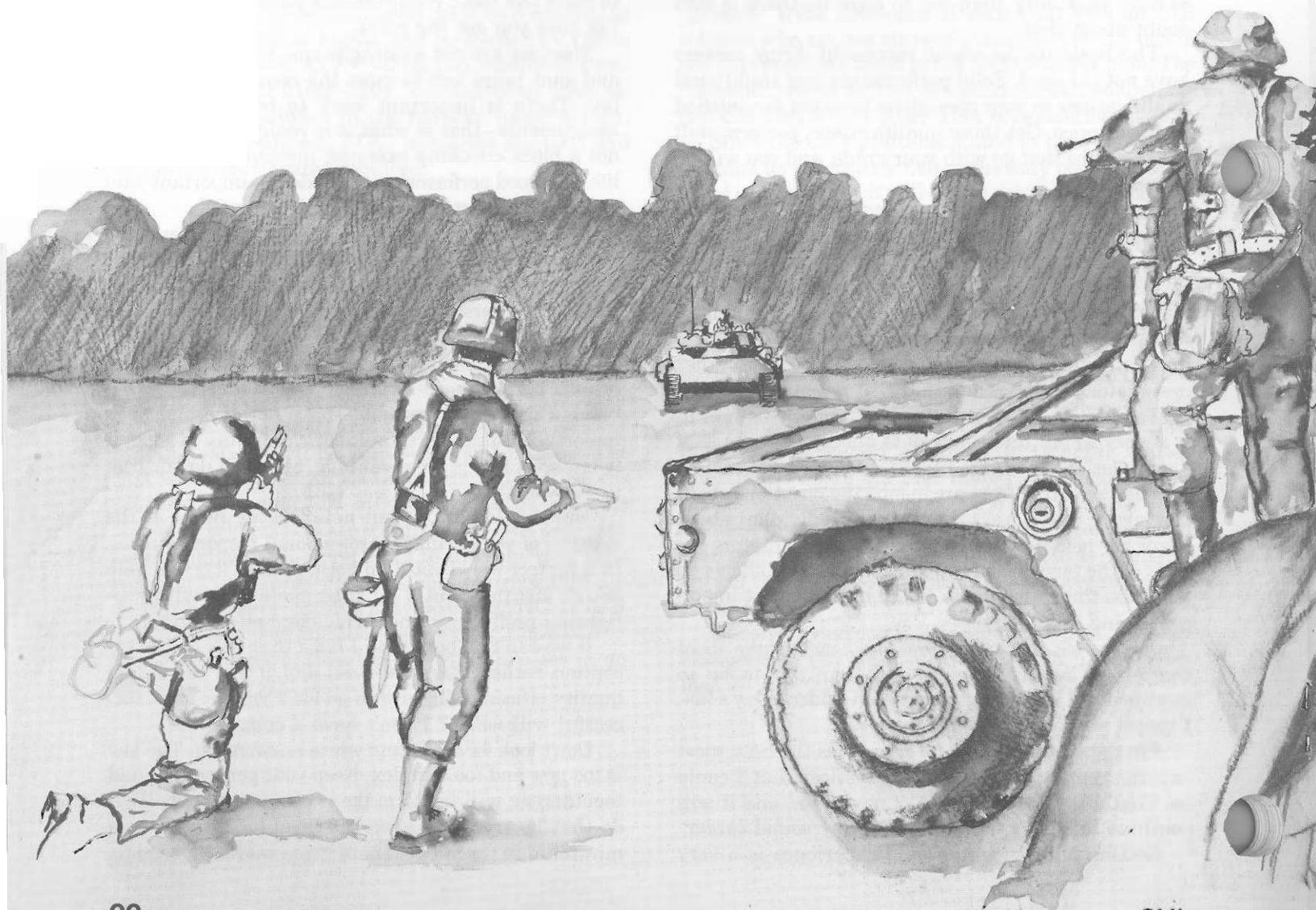
mix in a soup of flashes and reports along the valley slopes.

Armored vehicles still fight, he thinks, although the battle sounds like it's winding down. Even so, he feels a chill of nervous anticipation as he studies the map and valley before him and thinks about the mission he has just received from the task force commander. The platoon's job is not over.

The war was worse before this. Five weeks of raging battle—

exhausting motor marches back and forth, wrecked vehicles and abandoned equipment, the terror of artillery and attack aircraft, and the stench of death—blot out the frenzied activity of deploying overseas.

They remember these horrors, but the battles of the past two weeks seem slower. The task force's movements are fewer, shorter, less energetic. Ammunition's hard to find. He remembers the platoon sergeant saying that both sides must

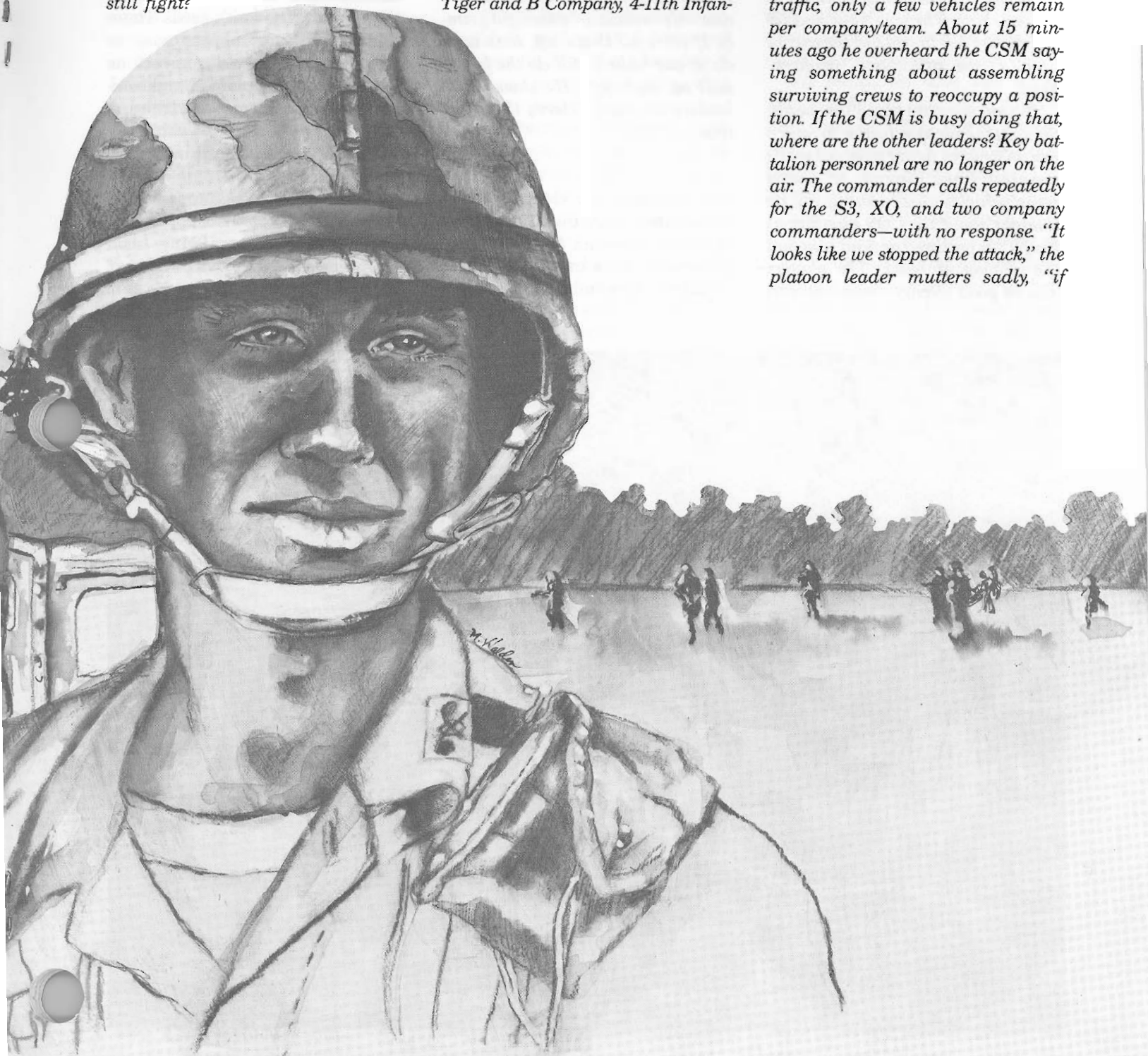


ay Training for Chemical Units

be running out of armor. How can armies lose so many vehicles and still fight?

That seems to be the problem in Task Force Mike. Teams C and Tiger and B Company, 4-11th Infan-

try, hold their battle positions, but judging from the task force's radio traffic, only a few vehicles remain per company/team. About 15 minutes ago he overheard the CSM saying something about assembling surviving crews to reoccupy a position. If the CSM is busy doing that, where are the other leaders? Key battalion personnel are no longer on the air. The commander calls repeatedly for the S3, XO, and two company commanders—with no response. "It looks like we stopped the attack," the platoon leader mutters sadly, "if



there's enough of the task force left to know it and hold the ground."

Five minutes ago the task force commander called with the mission to move to the top of the valley and attack several small newly-occupied enemy positions. Apparently some anti-armor hunter-killer teams were knocking out task force vehicles at a steady rate. The task force had little infantry left to root out the enemy. COULD the still-intact "smokers" help?

We smokers are going into battle, thought the platoon leader, to return fire, instead of firing potshots while running from aircraft or enemy recon vehicles as we usually do. He thought about the CO's question as his NCOs gathered around him and the platoon sergeant. The platoon was in good strength now and car-

ried a formidable load of weapons—.50 caliber and M60 machine guns, and M203 grenade launchers—as chemical units always do. He had insisted on extra combat training. The other platoons had laughed. "We're chemical," one platoon leader had remarked. "We don't ever do that stuff." Well, this is a battlefield and we're soldiers, he thought grimly. If we're all that's left, then we'll do it; our bullets will do the job as well as anybody's. He showed his leaders the map. "Here's the situation . . ."

Every year our chemical units train extensively to perform their chemical missions. Chemical unit leaders, as other unit leaders, also identify individual and unit train-

ing needs and shortfalls as their units complete cycles of garrison training, field and range training, and deployment exercises.

At the same time, unit leaders face an additional challenge—how to productively supplement the units' scheduled field and maintenance time with training that best fits the unit's needs. These routine problems appear easy to resolve together—yet many of us who serve at the platoon and company level recall company training meetings where the company leaders had difficulty filling in the training schedules.

I recommend that units faced with these problems supplement their chemical training and maintenance time with combat

Patrolling is one of the best leadership development vehicles.



training at the individual, and unit level. The final training objective—to *attack, defend, and patrol* as effectively as light infantry when required.

Some chemical leaders may consider this suggestion too “hoo-rah” or suicidal, perhaps believing that armor and mechanized infantry automatically rule out any serious combat capability of chemical units. I believe that everything is possible in battle at all times in all possible theatres. Light infantry division design is based on the need for fast, silent, lightly armed and dismounted combat units in some combat scenarios. Would you refuse to fight if you and your combat support unit were among the last intact armed units on the battlefield?

Supplementing chemical unit training with combat training improves a unit's readiness in several areas:

Combat training increases combat readiness, an obvious outcome of practicing fighting skills. A chemical unit must defend itself, and that task should be mastered first. However, a chemical unit should learn how to *attack and aggressively patrol*, too. I don't deny the dominance of advanced weapon systems on today's European Airland Battlefield.

However, American soldiers operate in many areas in the world that do not allow optimal use of these weapon systems; the light infantry soldier is best suited for these regions. In areas that preclude armor employment, a chemical unit, armed at the platoon level with several .50 caliber and M60 machine guns and M203 grenade launchers, is more heavily armed than most other field units. A chemical company packs quite a punch if it has to. Look at the Army's history: in the Battle of the Bulge, support units forsook their functional specialty to punch, and stop, a threatening enemy.

Combat training provides meaningful training for soldiers. Assuming that soliders are receiving satisfactory MOS training (including maintenance training), combat training refreshes their common skills of combat and survival; it toughens soldiers.

Combat training builds teams, discipline, and esprit. A bonus effect, but its important because it reinforces strong leadership that should be present in the company first and foremost. Successful training in offense, defense, and patrolling builds unit confidence and interdependence throughout the squads and platoons. Combat training exercises key leaders, helps improve weaker leaders, and identifies potential leaders among the junior enlisted soliders, especially if chain of command positions are temporarily rotated in training. Successful training improves individual and unit perceptions of self-importance, which in turn may improve discipline and reduce misconduct in a unit. This unexpected and seemingly unrelated positive outcome may well attract chemical commanders to try this training!

The high banks of the creek hiding the platoon's motor movement play out at an outcropping of rock. The rock stretches a short distance to the top of the ridge where the enemy is supposed to be. This is as far as the platoon leader dares to ride mounted. He and two reinforced squads dismount and creep quietly into the trees while the third squad carefully idles away in the HMMWVs.

The squad leader takes the HMMWVs to the top of a nearby ridge where the .50 calibers can fire down onto the valley floor and most of the slope where the AT teams are supposed to be hiding. The rest of the platoon, loaded down with extra

bandoleers, Laws, and 40mm grenades, quietly move up the draw in two wedges.

The platoon leader checks his watch and motions to his lead squad to hurry—he may be too late, he thinks. He shakes his head to brush away his growing impatience and scans the vegetation up the draw; he does not wish to walk into an enemy lookout's ambush.

He recalls the time, two weeks now, that he and most of his platoon had destroyed three BMPs parked near his company's night position about one hour before sunrise. The brigade they supported was surprised that night and thrown back several miles in a furious enemy attack. This enemy platoon had been part of a follow-on echelon that had parked at the mouth of a wash to eat and rest—not knowing that a smoke company lay hidden and trapped several meters away behind the banks of the creek.

Dawn was approaching and the company soon would be visible. Acting out of desperation, he and the others crept silently alongside the vehicles and wiped out the entire BMP platoon with rifles, grenades, and—knives. The CO recommended them for the Silver Star, but this took second place to the platoon's pride that they had fought like soldiers, were very lucky, and would live another day because of it.

Months before in CONUS, he and the platoon sergeant taught the platoon to attack and defend; they used infantry manuals to plan their training. The troops joked and complained about the “extra training” at first; however, as the unit progressed from squad to platoon operations, they practiced more enthusiastically and especially enjoyed taking turns as tactical leaders when the platoon and squad leaders were “killed.”

Also, the platoon leader felt that his troops were watching TV news reports on the worsening interna-

tional situation and probably knew that they would need this training.

The platoon training began with patrolling and steadily sharpened its ability to think and act as a team. Of course, they still studied smoke operations and pulled maintenance regularly. The CO insisted on that. But the extra training bound the unit together. The first few times they were fired at, the troops followed drills and leaders' orders impressively. In this battlefield far from home, they learned that they could move quietly, shoot, and (more importantly) shoot back. It was a different feeling.

The platoon leader shook off these thoughts as he and the platoon, spotting a lookout at the rear of the ridge, dropped silently to the ground. He answered the squad leader's warning signal with a pointed finger and a chopping motion. His squad leader nodded and drew his knife.

A combat training program may be integrated into a company training plan as follows:

The Preparatory Phase sharpens the individual soldier's common skills used to attack, defend, and patrol. This training, preferably performance-oriented and hands-on, easily integrates into a company training plan; most units train on individual common skills as a normal variety to field training and maintenance. Preparatory subjects include radio communications, CEOL, first aid, combat intelligence/SALUTE, fire support planning, weapons training, and land navigation, camouflage, and survival. This training is best conducted at the squad level.

Offensive and Defensive Operations Phase. Units train to defend and attack as light infantry units from squad to company size. FM 7-8, *The Infantry Squad and Platoon*, and FM 7-10, *The Infantry Company*, are the trainers' primary

references. When a unit can attack an enemy one-third its size and defend against an enemy three times its size with a reasonable chance of success, unit proficiency is satisfactory.

Patrolling Phase. Patrolling is a combat skill; however, it's also a leadership development vehicle, perhaps the best in the world (as patrolling is probably the toughest combat skill in war). As leadership positions are rotated, all soldiers receive crosstraining and emerging unit leaders become more visible in the ranks. Initial instruction begins with the troop leading procedure; warning order and operations order; coordination; reconnaissance, ambush, and raid patrols; and patrol base activities and movement. Then comes practice walk-throughs, instructor-led patrols, and soldier-led patrols. Successful mastery of the patrolling phase is a point where a unit may reach its readiness peak.

There's no limit to the amount and variety of other training topics which an imaginative unit leader may supplement those suggested. Combat training that is well-timed, planned, and conducted can turn a good unit into a skilled, cohesive, and tough outfit.

Kneeling between the squads, the platoon leader squeezes off a shot and drills a SAGGER gunner in the back of his helmet. As the gunner slumps over his missile rail, a rattling roar of the platoon's grenade and machine gun fire reverberates from either side of the platoon leader and echos through the valley as continuous, rolling thunder. The enemy AT positions are easily visible from the top of the ridge; the platoon fans its fire in a semi-circle on the AT teams' positions.

The platoon leader scarcely feels conscious as he runs and slides down the valley slopes, tossing

grenades and shooting into any target in sight. The fighting's a fast and furious combination of running, rolling, shooting, and reloading as the platoon rushes by squads from position to position down to the valley floor. He sees a BRDM emerge from a clump of trees to his far right; almost immediately it's peppered with a clanging swarm of steel—the third squad's .50 calibers from the nest ridge have opened up, and a BRDM rolls to a halt. No one dismounts. Dripping with sweat, his chest heaving with the exertion, the platoon leader gazes around the valley floor he and his platoon have reached. Beyond a nearby boulder, almost invisible from just a few meters uphill, an Abrams tank sits with a TC leaning over the hatch. A weary grin, shout, and "thumbs up" signal from the tanker is a better reward to the platoon leader than a medal. One of his men is dead, a few are injured, but his platoon has counterattacked and linked up with Task Force Mike. A piece of the battlefield is saved. A chemical unit has fought and won.

CPT David Alegre is a division staff officer with the 8th Infantry Division (Light) at Fort Richardson, Alaska. Before his present assignment, he worked in the Directorate of Training and Doctrine at the US Army Chemical School. Commissioned in 1981, he holds a bachelor of science degree from the United States Military Academy at West Point. CPT Alegre's assignments have included mechanized infantry battalion chemical officer in the 4th Infantry Division, and chemical smoke generator platoon leader and company executive officer in the 172d Chemical Company (SG) at Fort Carson, Colorado. He was GDBC platoon trainer and commander of HHC, 84th Chemical Battalion, Fort McClellan, Alabama. CPT Alegre is a graduate of the chemical officer basic and advanced courses, the nonresident Infantry and Engineer officer advanced courses, the Combined Arms and Service Staff School, and Airborne, Air Assault, and Ranger Schools.