

A Time When...

—chemical units saw more action than infantrymen

By LTC Robert L. McNamara

The world was in turmoil... An ultra-nationalistic strongman had initiated unprovoked military hostilities and violated internationally recognized territorial and sovereign boundaries. Home defense forces were unable to stem the torrential flood of invaders. Innocent civilians were routinely massacred and human rights wantonly disregarded.

In response to this maniacal onslaught, the international community rapidly assembled its collective political, economic, and military bases of power. Political and economic initiatives repeatedly failed to dissuade the aggressor to cease hostilities and to retreat from the violated territories.

Accordingly, coalition leaders directed their military forces to prepare to conduct a massive counterattack that would unequivocally dislodge the aggressor and his forces. Force planners and logisticians recognized that they would have to "...create, field, and supply an organization that could decidedly engage and defeat the worst counterattack the enemy was capable of devising."

Included within the multinational forces task organization was a massive array of US units. As expected, US ground forces provided a bulk of the military manpower for the counterattack operation, including elements of the VII (US) (Jayhawk) Corps as well as the 1st, 82d, and 101st divisions. In preparation for the counterattack operation, international intelligence reports highlighted the determination and skill of the enemy's battle-hardened veterans. Notably, entrenched enemy forces were not only well-equipped with modernized mechanized and armored forces—but, their arsenals allegedly contained deadly chemical and biological weapons of mass destruction as well.

To offset the enemy's capabilities to thwart the impending international task force's counterattack through the use of weapons of mass destruction, US chemical warfare personnel, materials, and equipment were hurriedly transported into overseas assembly areas. Upon arrival into these assembly areas, chemical units began their final pre-combat training and assault preparations.

These units were not only well prepared to take up their wartime specialty duties as required, but they were also prepared to execute a number of other non-specialty tasks to directly support the combined arms forces. Thus, the historical background was set for the counterattack, operation into...not Kuwait, into Normandy to liberate Europe.

US Chemical Warfare Service (CWS)-trained troops and units continuously provided smoke, flame, and incendiary support to Allied forces assaulting Normandy's beaches and accompanied combat forces in the frantic race east toward Berlin.

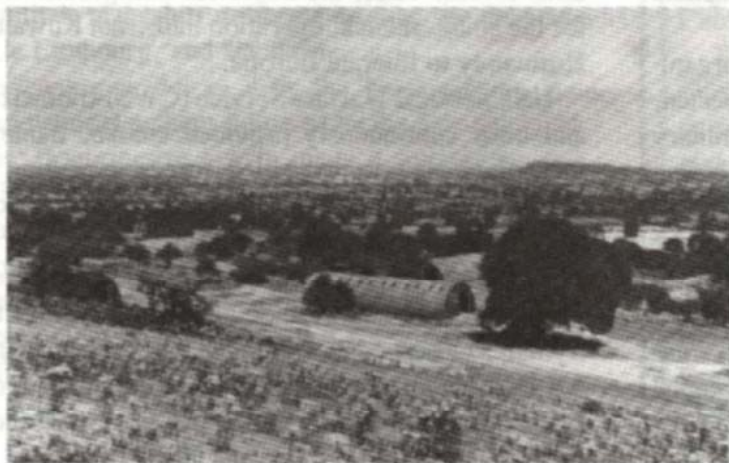
Of the 139 chemical units operating in the European Theater of Operations, undoubtedly the average infantryman's closest contact with the CWS was through the 4.2-inch chemical mortar. A direct descendant of the British-designed World War I Stokes mortar, the 4.2-inch chemical mortar became the "...infantry commander's hip pocket artillery."



Stokes Mortar Firing Gas Shells, World War I.



4.2-inch chemical mortar crew in action.



Chemical Warfare Depot, Loton Deer Park, England.

This is quite a remarkable achievement; until 1942 the mortar's primary mission was to fire toxic agents and smoke munitions. In March 1943 permission was granted for high explosives to be fired by the 4.2-inch mortar. This clearance permitted the combat employment of the 4.2-inch mortar into a new critical role—that of non-gas warfare operations.

The aim of this article is to highlight and commemorate the histories, combat preparations, and combat operations of the four chemical mortar units that had arrived in England by D-Day—the 81st, 86th, 87th, and 92d Chemical Mortar Battalions. These 622-man units and their fellow CWS chemical mortar battalions, doggedly and heroically engaged the enemy across all fronts and often "...saw more action than many infantrymen."

Unit Histories

The 81st Chemical Mortar Battalion was activated on 25 April 1942 at Fort Russell, Texas. One of the better trained chemical mortar battalion units, the 81st conducted unit-level training at a number of sites to include: Fort Russell; the Louisiana Maneuver Area; Camp Johnston (Florida) for amphibious training; Camp Pickens (Virginia); and Camp Bradford (Virginia), for a total of 534 training days (ultimately, the battalion would see action in a total of 336 days of actual combat). Upon completing this stateside training, the 81st was the first mortar battalion to be sent to the European Theater of Operations. Arriving in England on 22 October 1943, the 81st immediately began its additional in-country training.

The 86th Chemical Mortar Battalion was activated on 17 May 1943, at Camp Swift, Texas. Before its departure for the European Theater of Operation, this rapidly assembled unit was afforded 329 total training days on-station at Camp Swift. The 86th arrived in England on 14 April 1944.

The 87th Chemical Mortar Battalion was activated on 22 May 1943, at Camp Rucker, Alabama. The 87th capitalized on a lengthy training period at home station as well as a rotation through the Tennessee Maneuver Area for a total of 303 training days prior to embarking for England. The 87th arrived in England 2 weeks before the 86th—on the 31st of March 1944.

The 92d Chemical Mortar Battalion was activated on 9 February 1944 in England (available records do not indicate an exact location). Unit-level training was conducted in-country from 9 February 1944 through 17 June 1944—128 training days.

Combat Preparations

The Bolero buildup in Britain, commencing in 1942, to arm and provide for the 39-division invasion force (20 American, 14 British, 3 Canadian, 1 French, and 1 Polish division) included the establishment of CWS training facilities and munitions storage depots throughout England. The scale of these operational and logistical demands on the CWS was staggering. The US fighting strength alone doubled during the 6 months between 1 January 1944 (774,000 men) to 1 June 1944—the week before the invasion (over 1,537,000 men).

This heavy concentration of American and British strength and materials in the United Kingdom presented to the Germans an excellent series of targets for vesicant gases. To meet these requirements for the invasion force in general, as well as the four Chemical Mortar Battalions in detail, in-country CWS training schools were organized and chemical storage depots were constructed and stockpiled with CWS munitions.

CWS training operations for non-chemical and chemical US Army units were coordinated under the auspices of the 142-authorized American School Center at Shrivenham. This centralized theater-level center, though not a CWS-specific school, did afford access to better facilities, training areas, and equipment than a single CWS school could achieve.

A separate CWS training division was later established in June 1943 at Cheltenham to provide chemical warfare training for the approximately 375,000 services of supply troops who were responsible for super-

vising all aspects of theater logistics. The 81st Chemical Mortar Battalion, arriving in-country during October 1943, began its additional individual and unit-level training programs with the assistance of CWS training operations personnel stationed at the American School Center at Shrivenham. From December 1943 until April 1944 the 81st participated in a series of exercises at the Assault Training Center in Devonshire as well as maneuvers along the western and southern coasts of England.

The 87th likewise participated in two amphibious training exercises in England during the spring of 1944. As a direct result of these England-based amphibious training exercises, both battalions were temporarily augmented with 125-men detachments to ensure their 48 mortars would be effectively placed into action during the Normandy landings.

The 86th, also located in an assembly area in southwestern England, literally "hit-the-ground-running," conducting a number of combined arms training exercises within local training areas. The 92d, activated in February 1944, had to start its training program "on the move." Mortar range firing was conducted during April-May 1944, culminating in an intensive training exercise with a field artillery group. Neither the 86th nor the 92d were able to complete amphibious assault training (similar to the 81st and 87th) before the invasion, and as a direct consequence did not participate in the D-Day landings.

During the last 6 months of 1943 the CWS, in coordination with the Services of Supply, established chemical sections in a number of general depots to include: Barry, Glamorganshire; Hilsea, Hampshire; Westbury, Wiltshire, and Histon, Cambridgeshire. Chemical sections within the general depots provided procurement, storage, and issue of chemical material to non-chemical and chemical units alike.

The CWS, during November 1943 alone, activated chemical ammunition depots at Shepton Mallet, Somersetshire, and at Loton Deer Park, Alderbury, Shropshire. These facilities, well dispersed throughout the countryside, were well equipped to provide storage and issue of a number of munitions. The Loton Deer Park facility, the largest CWS ammunition storage facility in the United Kingdom, was capable of storing a wide array of incendiary munitions, air force toxic munitions, and ground forces ammunition (to include the 4.2-inch chemical mortar).

It was from these general and ammunition storage depots that all units, to include the four chemical mortar

battalions, received their final contingency stockpiles for the impending Allied attack.

Final combat preparations encompassing in-country training and logistical resupply were now completed; and all units anxiously awaited the signal to assemble the invasion armada.

Combat Operations

The dawn of 6 June 1944 was greeted by the largest fleet of men, material, and equipment ever assembled in the history of mankind. "They came, rank after relentless rank, ten lanes wide, twenty miles across, five thousand ships of every description," wrote one reporter accompanying the invasion fleet.

The 81st and 87th Chemical Mortar Battalions were among the first units to assault the beaches at Normandy on D-Day. The 81st suffered heavy casualties when their transports were sunk en route to Omaha beach. Beachhead operations against determined German defenders resulted in additional casualties to include the unit's battalion commander who was seriously wounded.

Despite these losses, the battalion's mortars were able to fully support advancing units as they "...knocked out machine gun nests, laid screens for the attacks and advances of the infantry, and broke up enemy counterattacks with massed fire." In its 22 months overseas, the 81st fired 212,573 rounds, supported 22 divisions, received 5 campaign credits, and suffered 41 killed in action and 157 wounded in action. Unit records indicate the battalion's personnel received the following awards: 6 Distinguished Service Crosses, 29 Silver Stars, 98 Bronze Stars, 4 Croix de Guerre, 328 Purple Hearts, and Presidential Unit Citations.

The 87th provided direct support to VII Corps units, landing on Utah Beach at H-Hour alongside of the infantry. Within minutes, the battalion's mortars were placed into operation. It was during this phase of the assault that the 87th's mortars were credited with destroying four German 88mm guns (each weighing 5 tons as compared to the 300 pounds of the 4.2-inch mortar). In its 16 months overseas, the 87th fired 184,010 rounds, received 6 campaign credits, and suffered 84 killed in action and 211 wounded in action.

The 86th and 92d Chemical Mortar Battalions joined in the Allied buildup to break out of Normandy in early July 1944. While advancing across Europe, the 86th participated in 10 months of almost continuous combat

firing over 152,000 rounds of high explosive and smoke. Extremely versatile, the unit provided direct support to 21 different infantry divisions of the First, Third, and Ninth Armies. The 86th spent 15 months overseas, received 5 campaign credits, and suffered 39 killed in action and 255 wounded in action. The 92d fired 7,000 rounds, over a continuous 14-hour period, while supporting the 35th Infantry Division's breakthrough at Saint-Lo.

During the 30th Infantry Division's assault against the Siegfried Line, the 92d's mortars provided critical support to units operating only 100 to 1,000 yards to their front. Spending 18 months overseas, the 92d fired 149,502 rounds, received 4 campaign credits, and suffered 42 killed in action and 132 wounded in action.

Summary

The European Theater of Operation order of battle called for 12 chemical mortar battalions to conduct wartime operations. In responding to this requirement, only the 81st, 86th, 87th, and 92d Chemical Mortar Battalions were within the theater in time to provide support for the critical Normandy landings. Reaching the European Theater of Operation only a short time before the commencement of hostilities, these battalions were able to draw extensively upon England's training infrastructure and logistical resources.

Relying heavily upon gained experiences and confidence, these highly decorated units supported every type of ground combat unit while surviving some of the most bitterly contested actions of the war. The final testimony to their combat preparedness was their days in line versus total time in theater ratio— "...a record which is exceeded by few, if any, other organizations in the Armed Forces."

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