

US Army Technical Escort Unit

—DOD's hazardous materials handlers

By CPT Victoria A. Kost-Swinson

During the period of 5 January 1993 to 2 February 1993, the United States Army Technical Escort Unit distinguished itself while executing an emergency response munitions recovery mission at Spring Valley, Washington, DC, *Operation Safe Removal*. The Technical Escort Unit was on site within hours and swiftly established itself as a key player in the recovery effort, interfacing closely with local law enforcement agencies, disaster preparedness and emergency medical response teams. Using rudimentary tools coupled with hard work and steadfast determination, the unit quickly and safely began unearthing a myriad of World War I era suspect chemical munitions. Unit personnel worked long and arduous hours and safely excavated, assessed, stored, packaged and transported, and/or destroyed a total of 147 munitions items and a great amount of scrap munitions and components. The unit performed this tedious task without incident while thrust under the intense scrutiny of local and national news media and a weary public. The professionalism, superb technical knowledge and dedication displayed by unit members were outstanding." [Army Superior Unit Award, General Orders Number 12, dated 13 May 1993.]



SSG Wayne Danjou (in the hole) and other Technical Escort Unit personnel at the burial pit at Spring Valley.



Jim Major and Kim McGhee, Technical Escort Unit personnel, pack HE munitions for transport to AP Hill for destruction.

Operation Safe Removal was the Department of Defense's (DOD) first service response force operation. Working closely with Military District of Washington personnel, the Technical Escort Unit (TEU) spearheaded both the emergency response phase and *Operation Safe Removal*. TEU's participation in this mission ensured the successful completion of a potentially disastrous operation.

The Unit

TEU is a one-of-a-kind DOD asset. Aligned under the Chemical and Biological Defense Command, the unit is configured as a battalion. The unit's 130 members include an equal mix of chemical and explosive ordnance disposal soldiers and Department of the Army civilians. Its headquarters and three detachments are at Edgewood area, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Maryland. A fifth detachment is

located at Dugway Proving Ground, Utah. Its sixth detachment is located at Pine Bluff Arsenal, Arkansas.

The unit's mission is one of the most diverse and unique in the military. TEU is a specialized chemical operations unit responsible for joint service, worldwide response for technical escort and recovery, stabilization, movement and disposal of lethal chemical agents, munitions, and related materials.

The unit is responsible for emergency response to Chemical Accident/ Incident Response Assistance operations in support of the DOD. In addition, TEU is one of the few assignments in the Army where chemical and explosive ordnance disposal soldiers work with real chemical agents and munitions on a regular basis, in forms ranging from a one-ton storage container to a one-milliliter glass vial.

The Past

TEU was established 20 January 1943 as the Guard and Security Division of the Chemical Warfare Service. Its original home was Camp Sibert, Alabama. The unit's initial mission was to conduct chemical munitions movements during World War II. TEU moved to Edgewood Arsenal in 1944. By the end of the war it had become the United States' focal point for decontamination, demilitarization, and disposal of thousands of tons of unused and captured chemical agents and munitions.

Mr. Earnie Bryant, a former TEU sergeant major who now works for the unit as a DA civilian, recalls some of the missions in which he participated. "I remember going out on these ships full of rounds encased in concrete 'coffins.' We'd rig 'em with explosives [the ships], and get on another boat and watch 'em go down. We had to stay until we were sure all the 'coffins' sank...some of them would come back to the surface." He conducted these operations off the coast of New Jersey.

Mr. Billy Russell was assigned to TEU in the late sixties and again in the early eighties. He remembers doing open pit burns of all kinds of agents "back before the EPA was such a hassle." He participated in sea dumps off the coast of Okinawa in the late sixties and "did lots of escorts." In addition, Mr. Russell participated in *Operation Redhat*, the movement of chemical munitions from Okinawa to Johnston Atoll. It was the first large-scale move of chemical munitions to the atoll. The Weteye bomb movements from Denver, Colorado, to Tooele Army Depot, Utah, in 1980 and 1981 were the last major munition moves for TEU for some time.

The Present

The unit underwent a major change in 1989. Up until then the unit was predominately military, the only civilians were on staff. In 1989 DA directed that the unit civilianize, due



Thomas Swinson packages rounds at Spring Valley, Washington, DC.

involved with site remediation projects—evaluating sites to assess the extent, if any, of chemical contamination and conducting clean-up efforts.

As TEU became more involved with site remediation efforts, it became more influenced by local, state, and federal environmental regulations. The unit's mission equipment changed to comply with the additional regulatory guidance. Similarly, the unit's training requirements changed. Today, members of TEU must achieve and maintain the technical competence to run a gas chromatograph/mass spectrometer and be versed in Occupational Safety and Health Act and Resource Conservation and Recovery Act regulations, in addition to their technical escort training. They receive comprehensive environmental sampling training as well.

Operation Safe Removal allowed TEU to demonstrate its newly acquired capabilities on a grand scale, under the watchful eye of a nervous public. As described above, TEU rose to the occasion and shined. Although *Operation Safe Removal* ended 2 February 1993, TEU remains involved with the clean-up efforts at

Spring Valley. The service response force operation and follow-on mission provided a fitting entrance for TEU into its new line of work.

The Future

In the early years of the chemical warfare program, research, development, testing, evaluation, and training occurred at sites all over the United States. Seven thousand of these formerly used defense sites exist. DOD has the responsibility to remediate these sites, over 200 of which could contain unexploded chemical munitions or material.

As DOD's hazardous materials handlers, TEU plays a big role as subcontractors determining the extent of possible chemical surety material contamination on these sites. Unit personnel conduct sampling, air monitoring and recovery operations; they are already involved in extensive monitoring operations at Dugway Proving Ground and Tooele Army Depot, in addition to the operation at Spring Valley.

This year TEU will be the main contractor on a remediation site in Ogden, Utah. It will be the ultimate

test of the unit's adaptation to its ever-changing role in the DOD. The unit continues to respond to chemical surety material emergencies, but formerly used defense sites initial investigations and remediations fill a growing portion of the unit's workload.

The Technical Escort Unit began as a security force to protect America's arsenal of chemical agents and munitions. Today the unit works to clean up those very sites where the materiel they once guarded was used. TEU's mission continues to change as the international and national chemical weapons climate changes. Whatever mission may arise, TEU will answer the call. The two Department of the Army Meritorious Unit Citations and three Army Superior Unit Awards that TEU earned during its first fifty years attest to the unit's expertise and proficiency.

References

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CPT Victoria Kost-Swinson was assigned the US Army Technical Escort Unit from July 1991 to April 1994. She spent two years as an escort detachment executive officer and commander and one year as the unit's supply officer. She participated in numerous planned and emergency responses (both CONUS and overseas), conducted two site remediation projects, and led chemical agent escort missions regularly. Her first tour of duty was with the 2d Infantry Division in Korea, as the chemical officer in an attack helicopter battalion. Currently, she is stationed at Fort McClellan, Alabama.