My Experience as a U.S. Army CBRN Officer

By Captain Anthony S. Portuesi

What are my purpose and mission in life? What vision do I have for myself and for the legacy I leave for others? What major values will help me get there? Why have I been called to serve?

Let me tell my Army story. My family immigrated to the United States from Italy in or around 1940. My paternal grandparents—my beautiful grandmother (Nonna) from Rome and my eccentric grandfather (Nonno) from Sicily—came to the United States with little but worked extremely hard. My maternal grandparents emigrated from Naples, Italy, where they came from low-income families. Searching for a better life in the United States, all of my grandparents understood the meaning of service and sacrifice. Ultimately, this had an enormous impact on their grandchildren. My inspiration for service to my country came from my maternal grandfather—Peter Vacarro, who served honorably in World War II; and as a result, I have always felt a calling to military service.

I grew up in a lower- to middle-class household with a twin brother and a younger brother. My brothers and I were loved fervently and equally. We didn't have all of the nicest toys, but my parents taught us the values of hard work, discipline, dedication, and perseverance in pursuit of our goals. Throughout the early stages of my life, I become accustomed to family and friends who continually sacrificed for one another.

My twin brother Jonathan and I did nearly everything together when we were young. Twins can be competitive with each other, but our competitiveness proved to be healthy because we both ended up becoming commissioned officers in the U.S. Army and leading younger generations of Soldiers.

I have served in all types of Army organizations, from combined arms battalions in the armor arena to the world's most elite special operations raid force. The mentorship that I have sought out not only from my superior officers but also from my noncommissioned officer counterparts has been critical, given their vast wealth of knowledge and experience. Having served with special operations forces and the 75th Ranger Regiment, Fort Benning, Georgia, I know what it means to be a servant leader and to sacrifice for the greater good. I was recently selected for the Functional Area 40 Voluntary Transfer Incentive Program (Space Operations) with the personal end goal of fulfilling a childhood dream of mine and becoming an Army astronaut. Realizing that most—if not all—of those selected as astronaut candidates possess doctorate degrees, my planned course of action for this career path involves becoming a doctor of medicine. I have always had a passion to help and coach others, and I truly believe that I can have a positive impact on the community. Therefore, my leadership in this field would immensely serve the community. But it is not all about me.

I have always wanted to lead others because I know what it takes to overcome adversity. The most important lesson that I have learned throughout this journey called life is that you must always know your version of "why." I have had the privilege of leading the Soldiers of the 75th Ranger Regiment, and their stories resonate with many—including me. Ultimately, if you can tell Soldiers why what they're doing is important, then they will follow you.

What would I do if I knew that I could not fail? As I continue to evaluate my life goals, I ask myself this question every day. Throughout my time outside the Service as well as in the military, I have been told that I could not do something because of some preconceived notion that someone had of me. However, the fact that one person—or even many people—writes me off does not mean I that I cannot succeed. My number one goal in life is to avoid being a "statistic." How can I take what I am now and become better than I was yesterday? I realize that to become truly extraordinary, I must be able to sacrifice who I am now for what I will become as I meet my new goals. I believe that this approach is the difference between failure and true success in any profession—particularly in our profession of arms.

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populations would become a target for chemical weapons must be considered—and these crucial aspects will save military and civilian lives.

Urban battlefields hold a special place in the U.S. Army history; 100 years ago, the U.S. Army established military dominance across European cities. Although the way we fight urban battles has been molded by the contemporary age, the daunting threat of chemical weapons remains eerily familiar and frighteningly effective.

Endnotes:

[1]*Geneva Protocol of 1925*, Britannica.com, 1925, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Geneva-Gas-Protocol>, accessed on 2 May 2023.

[2]1972 Convention on the Prohibition of Biological Weapons, International Committee of the Red Cross, 1972, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/1972-convention-prohibition-bacteriological-weapons-and-their-destruction-factsheet>, accessed on 2 May 2023.

[3]1993 Chemical Weapons Convention, 21 May 2021, <https://www.icrc.org/en/document/1993-chemical-weapons-convention>, accessed on 2 May 2023.

[4]Steven Nelson, "Biden: U.S. Response to Russian Chemical Weapons in Ukraine 'Would Depend' on Use," *New York Post*, 24 March 2022, <https://nypost.com/2022/03/24/biden-us-response-to-russian-chemical-weapons-in-ukraine-would-depend-on-use/>, accessed on 12 April 2023.

[5]Henry A. Kissinger, "Force and Diplomacy in the Nuclear Age," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 34, No. 3, 1956, p. 349, <https://doi.org/10.2307/20031169>, accessed on 12 April 2023.

[6]Becky Little, "How Opioids Were Used as Weapons During the Moscow Theater Hostage Crisis," *History*, 25 May 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/opioid-chemical-weapons-moscow-theater-hostage-crisis>, accessed on 12 April 2023.

[7]"Ukrainian Town Told to Shelter After Shelling Causes Ammonia Leak at Chemical Factory," *The Guardian*, 21 March 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/mar/21/ukrainian-town-told-to-shelter-after-shelling-causes-ammonia-leak-at-chemical-factory>, accessed on 28 April 2023.

At the time this article was written, Captain Roan was the commander of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 307th Engineer Battalion. He holds a master's degree in engineering management from Missouri University of Science and Technology at Rolla.

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My peers and I have reluctantly become accustomed to the not-so-desirable assignments that a CBRN officer can have. These "undesirable assignments" usually involve completing the monthly unit status report, serving as the additional duty guru, or performing pretty much any job that is not within the scope of a CBRN officer. However, these assignments give CBRN officers the distinct advantage of becoming true "generalists" within their organizations. They quickly learn all of the ins and outs of the organization and represent the continuity required when senior leaders and command teams transition in and out. And if you find yourself questioning your decisions as a CBRN officer, you are not the only one because I too have had those reservations from time to time. However, you are the sole person responsible for your career; and usually, all you need to do is ask for what you desire. I would have never been able to lead a cavalry scout platoon as a young lieutenant or attend the Ranger Assessment and Selection Program if I had not made my goals and desires known. But those goals and desires were never for personal gain. I knew that I had joined the Army because I wanted to be a leader and to have a positive impact on others' lives—and the best way to do that was to be placed outside of my comfort zone. All of the assignments that I have sought out have done just that for me.

So, what is the "so what" of this article? How can we solve the Army's recruitment and retention problem? By highlighting my experiences as an officer in the U.S. Army, maybe—just maybe—I can positively affect the way a few of my peers and others think about joining the Service or change their outlooks regarding their current career paths. My stories may be of assistance to someone who is thinking of joining the armed forces. Many of my peers/superiors and I know that we can effectively contribute to future generations of Service members and truly have an impact on the entire organization by telling our Army stories. The experiences of those of us who make up the less than 1 percent of the population of the United States that serve in the military can have a lasting positive impact on the Soldiers and Families who come after us, and we can "be all we can be." Our legacies are made up of the stories and memories that others will relate. We are charged with being servant leaders in order to steward our profession.

Captain Portuesi is a student at the Captain's Career Course, U.S. Army CBRN School, Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri. He holds a bachelor's degree biological sciences and a minor in entrepreneurship and innovation from the University of Maryland, Baltimore County, and a master's degree in environmental management and policy from the American Military University.