

1965

SILENCE IN THE FACE OF NAPALM



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Sometimes, in the face of absurdity, your best defense is silence.

The year was 1965. I was stationed in Gelnhausen, Germany, in Company A, 2/48th Infantry (Dragoons), a part of the 3rd Armored Division.

Since arriving in Germany, the year before, I had gained promotions up two ranks, to Specialist 4th Class (SP4). I was in line to become one of the youngest sergeants, E-5, in our Brigade *IF* I “kept my nose clean” and graduated from the upcoming Non-Commissioned Officer Academy.

Along the way, I had served as Fire Team Leader (even though I wasn’t a sergeant yet) and had an additional duty as Chemical, Biological, and Radiological (CBR) noncommissioned officer (NCO). For that additional duty, I was working long days and reading well into the night. Without formal schooling in CBR, I had to rely on musty manuals written by knowledgeable, but ill-skilled writers trying to explain technical information in layman’s terms.

I had to learn the bursting radius of nuclear weapons, the down-wind spread of those weapons, and memorize formulas for overcoming chemical and biological weapons — both from “friendly fire” and from the enemy. (NOTE: “Friendly fire” is when allied forces shoot or drop ordinance on other allied forces. I guess that knowing it’s “friendly” kills you less!)

Well, anyway, everything was going well in my new job as Assistant CBR NCO. I had given several briefings to both troops and superiors and had written a well-received paper on how to improve our CBR training. Everything was going well *until* that briefing at Brigade Headquarters.

Since our unit's mission was to protect the Fulda Gap against the hordes of Soviet troops assumed to be coming into that area, it became apparent that the US Air Force would be using a large amount of napalm in our defense.

This is probably not the time to discuss how ludicrous it would have been for the Soviets to enter the Fulda Gap — instead of merely by-passing it — but that was a constant conversation among us enlisted members. No one, with the basic training in infantry tactics, would ever be foolish enough to chose slugging it out with a reinforced Infantry Brigade dug in that forest.

But, back to Briefing that almost derailed my career before it even began.

On a Friday, I was assigned to attend a CBR briefing at Brigade Headquarters because our CBR NCO was on leave (vacation) in the States.

The Army had brought in the “big guns” (experts) from the I Corps Headquarters. There was a major from the Army and a Lieutenant Colonel from the Air Force. The Army major wore a dress uniform with 2 rows of medals and CBR Corps insignia. The Air Force Lieutenant Colonel had two rows of medals and some interesting badges. They were imposing, to say the very least.

They were here to address how to improve our CBR training. In a recent inspection, our training records revealed that we were not doing the best job in training. (In those days, if your records were poor, your training was poor. It didn't matter if General Patton had given the class: Bad records equals bad training.) They were here to tell us the “approved solution” to training in CBR.



Figure 1 — Fulda Gap

In part, their briefing contained a brief monologue on napalm and how we were to react to it. It was, obviously, not meant to be a highlight — just a passing topic. It contained something like this:

“Napalm is actually a general term for jellied gasoline. Mixing an aluminum soap powder of **n**aphthene and **p**almitate (hence na-palm) with gasoline produced a brownish sticky syrup that burned more slowly than raw gasoline, and hence was much more effective at igniting one’s target.

This mixture was a big hit with the Allied Forces, who used it extensively in World War II in flame throwers and fire bombs in the latter part of the war. (The incendiary bombs that rained on Dresden, Germany, were probably mostly made with phosphorus, not napalm, but I have not been able to find an authoritative source online describing the incendiary material.) Napalm bombs burned out 40% of the area of Japanese target cities. In the Korean war, 165 gallon napalm bombs were dropped on enemy troops, with very effective “results”.

In fact, napalm cannot be ignited by a match or even a road flare!

Thermite, which burns at $4,532^{\circ}$, is usually used to ignite napalm, which needs a tremendously high, constant source of heat to ignite. A road flare, which will not ignite napalm, burns at $3,632^{\circ}$. A hot forest or structure fire burns at $1,800 - 2,000^{\circ}$.”

The best defense, the officers pointed out, was to get down in a foxhole (a hole dug into the ground) and put your poncho (a plastic, flat raincoat) over your position. The napalm would simply slide right over the plastic material.

“Wait, sir,” I protested, as I stood up, “I have a question.”

“And, who are you?” the Army Major bellowed. Normally, that might have scared me, but I was too concerned to be scared.

“I’m Spec-4 Darry D. Eggleston, Assistant NBC NCO for Company A, 2/148th Infantry.”

“Well, Specialist, what is your question?” the major smiled with a sneer.

“IF Thermite, which burns at 4,532°, is used to ignite napalm, wouldn’t that temperature — if even close to a poncho — melt it? And if it melted hot plastic upon your uniform and uniform, wouldn’t it burn you severely? And wouldn’t that kill you?”

“Just a moment,” the Army major replied.

I sat down.

He and the Air Force LTC huddled for a few moments with our Brigade CBR Officer. The conversation lasted longer than they intended and became quite animated. The audience was beginning to squirm in their seats as the question I had asked began to ignite their imaginations. Murmurs became louder.

The US Air Force LTC stepped from the huddle and waving his hand in a calming motion, stated, “You make a good point, Specialist. Actually, after some reflection, the best course of action is *not* to spread the poncho but to simply crouch down in the foxhole. The aircraft delivering the ordnance is flying at hundreds of miles per hour so the napalm will simply bypass a single hole in the ground.”

He smiled like the Cheshire Cat from Lewis Carol’s *Through the Looking Glass* as he stepped back — quite content with his wit.

“Excuse me, sir,” I said as I arose to my feet again. “Last night, I read in our CBR field manual that one of the by-products of napalm was a tremendous fire. IF I recall correctly from my biology classes, wouldn’t that much heat — I believe you said ‘4,532°’ — suck the oxygen out of the foxhole? How long must I hold my breath until it’s safe?”

I can never describe the shocked look on that officer’s face. His face became flushed and, upon reflection, I’m not sure he wasn’t about to have a heart attack.

He said, “Just a moment...” and the briefing officers reentered into a huddle. The murmuring from the audience became more and more pronounced. Less-than-quiet laughter could be heard.

I felt a hard squeeze upon my shoulder. I looked up to see a very angry Brigade Sergeant Major. His steel gaze penetrated to my gut as he said, “Specialist, may I speak to you — outside?”

I replied, “Certainly, Sergeant Major.” (Like I was really going to say, “No, go away. I’m busy exposing this idiots for what they are.”)

When we got into the hall, he exploded. “What are you trying to do: Embarrass those officers? Are you just insane or are you trying to make a name for yourself as an embarrassment to the entire Brigade?”

Standing at attention, I softly replied, “Sergeant Major, whatever they tell us in there, I’ve got to go back and tell my troops. I, merely, asked questions that *must* be answered. IF I go back and tell our troops to huddle down in your holes, and hold your breath for 20 minutes, and everything will be OK, they’ll laugh me out of the room. I’ll be lucky if they don’t hang me from the fifth story window for being too stupid to be a part of our unit.”

With hands on his hips and using his six-plus foot frame to tower over me, he ordered sternly, “I don’t care about what you are going to do when you get back to your unit. You’re going back into that room. You’re going to take your seat. You are going to take notes — quietly. You are *not* going to ask any more questions. Do you understand, *Specialist?*”

“Yes, Sergeant Major,” I replied.

The Sergeant Major stated, “You can expect that I will be talking to your First Sergeant and you will *not* like what I’m going to tell him. Now, get back into that room and shut up. And, while you’re at it, since today is Friday, you can spend the weekend praying you can keep your current rank through Monday.”

I nodded, turned on my heels, entered the room, and took my seat.

About that time, the Army major stepped from the huddle. Looking at me with the most intensely piercing eyes that reminded me of my Drill Sergeant, stated, "Huddling in your foxhole is your best option. It is important that, when you address your troops, you assure that huddling offers the best alternative. Remember: No US troops have ever been hit with napalm in combat. Any questions?"

Every eye in the audience stared at me; none more intently than the Brigade Sergeant Major's eyes.

I lowered my head and slowly shook it from side-to-side. I knew what he said was a lie. I had just read a startling description of a "friendly fire" dropping of napalm on our troops in some place called Vietnam; but, I remained silent — as I had promised my Sergeant Major.

"Well, thank you for coming today. You're dismissed."

We rose to the position of attention and the briefer's entourage departed.

By the time I returned to my company, a runner came up to me and told me to report to the First Sergeant. He asked me what happened.

I told him, reading from my notes, what an inept briefing I had attended. Using inflections in my voice and doing my best to replicate their tones and statements, I had the First Sergeant giggling and, finally, laughing out loud.

"Eggleston, you will *never* amount to anything in this Army. You'd better become an officer because as an NCO you have to learn not to embarrass officers — no matter how stupid they may be. For now, you keep a 'low profile' and avoid going anywhere near the Brigade Headquarters. IF you see the Brigade Sergeant Major — even in the PX, you go into 'hull defilade' (a hidden position) and avoid him like he was the plague. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, First Sergeant. But what do I tell the men is our CBR policy on napalm?"

He laughed. "Avoid being hit with it and learn to hold your breath." He was laughing uncontrollably as I left the room.

We never talked about that briefing again. Our CBR NCO came back in time to give the CBR Briefing while I was sent away to *Frankfort am Meine* to get some supplies.

Fortunately, I had learned well the adage, "*Never let your alligator mouth overload your hummingbird butt.*"

In the next few month, I graduated at the head of my class in the NCO Academy. As the Brigade Sergeant Major handed me my rolled-up diploma, he acted like he didn't remember me and I wasn't about to remind him who I was.

When I unrolled the diploma, inside it there was a handwritten, unsigned note, "Silence in the face of napalm."

After that, I was promoted to Sergeant, E-5, months before I left for Officer Candidate School; but, that's another story for another time.