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Viewpoint: Use sense, not duct tape

By Joe Baker, Senior Editor

Now that we've all had our fun with the Duct Tape Follies, perhaps it's time for some common sense facts about chemical, biological and nuclear weapons.

Some words of wisdom are offered by Sgt. First Class Red Thomas (Retd.) of Mesa, Ariz. SFC Thomas is a weapons, munitions and training expert.

Here is what he has to say about the claims being put out about these weapons: "Forget everything you've ever seen on TV, in the movies, or read in a novel about this stuff; it was all a lie. These weapons are about terror; if you remain calm, you will probably not die. This is far less scary than the media and their "experts" make it sound."

Sgt. Thomas said chemical weapons are classed as nerve, blood, blister and incapacitating agents. "Contrary to the hype of reporters and politicians, they are not weapons of mass destruction," he said. "They are 'area denial' and terror weapons that don't destroy anything."

Thomas, in a general statement posted on the Internet, went on to say: "When you leave the area, you almost always leave the risk. That's the difference; you can leave the area and the risk; soldiers may have to stay put and sit through it and that's why they need all that spiffy gear."

Sgt. Thomas points out these weapons are not gases, but vapors or airborne particles and must be delivered in an amount sufficient to kill or injure. "This stuff won't work when it's freezing, it doesn't last when it's hot, and wind spreads it too thin too fast. They've got to get this stuff on you or get you to breathe it for it to work. They also have to get the concentration of chemicals high enough to kill or wound you."

He added: "What I hope you've gathered by this point is that a chemical weapons attack that kills a lot of people is incredibly hard to do with military grade agents and equipment, so you can imagine how hard it will be for terrorists. The more you know about this stuff, the more you realize how hard it is to use."

One thing we've heard a good deal about is nerve agents. We have these in our homes, according to Thomas. Bug killer is a nerve agent. They all work the same way, by messing up the nerve signals the

body uses to function. It works best if it is inhaled.

“Your best protection is fresh air and staying calm,” Sgt. Thomas said. The symptoms of these agents are sudden headache, dimming vision, runny nose, drooling, breathing difficulty, tightness of the chest, nausea, stomach cramps, and twitching of skin exposed to the liquid.

If you are in a location and experience these symptoms, you may also note the smell like new mown hay, green corn, fruit or camphor. Move out of the area immediately. Should you get something on your skin that looks like molasses or corn syrup, blot it or scrape it off and away from yourself with anything disposable. These agents work based on your body weight.

“Remember,” said Sgt. Thomas, “they (terrorists) have to do all the work. They have to get the concentration up and keep it up for several minutes while all you have to do is quit getting it on you and stop breathing it by putting space between you and the attack.”

Blood agents, he said, are cyanide or arsine. They inhibit the blood’s ability to carry oxygen to the body’s tissues. This kind of attack is much like a nerve agent assault. If you smell bitter almonds or garlic where there should not be such odors, get away from the area. Symptoms of these agents are blue lips, blue under the finger nails and rapid breathing. “Fresh air is your best individual chance,” Thomas said.

Then there are blister agents. This is really nasty stuff, like mustard gas. “It’s almost impossible to handle safely and may have delayed effects of up to 12 hours,” Thomas said.

If you suffer large, painful blisters for no apparent reason, do not pop them. If you do, be sure not to get the liquid on any exposed skin because this stuff will spread. Sgt. Thomas declared: “Soap, water, sunshine and fresh air are this stuff’s enemy.”

Additionally, he said: “You’re more likely to be hurt by a drunk driver on any given day than be hurt by one of these attacks. Don’t let fear of an isolated attack rule your life. The odds are really on your side.”

Finally, there are the nuclear devices. These are the only true weapons of mass destruction. Their destructive elements are heat, blast, electromagnetic pulses and radiation.

Thomas advises: “If you see a bright flash of light like the sun, where the sun isn’t, fall to the ground. The heat will be over in a second. Then there will be two blast waves; one out going, and one on its way back. Don’t stand up to see what happened.”

Thomas said these weapons probably will be low-yield devices that will not level a city. They will be, at most, one kiloton bombs, the equivalent of 1,000 tons of TNT.

“If you live through the heat, blast and initial burst of radiation,” he said, “you’ll probably live for a

very, very long time. Here's the real deal: flying debris and radiation will kill a lot of exposed people within a half-mile of the blast. Under perfect conditions, this is about a half-mile circle of death and destruction, but when it's done, it's done."

Electromagnetic energy emitted by such bombs will fry every electronic gadget for a considerable distance, cell phones, computers, ATMs and much more.

Thomas said we only need worry about three kinds of radiation: ionizing radiation—subatomic particles moving at the speed of light. They strike your body cells, destroying the nuclei and keep going; alpha and beta particles, these are stopped by your skin or clothing; avoid inhaling contaminated dust, and you should be safe from them; and finally, gamma rays. These are the worst. It takes a lot to stop them and also takes a lot of them to do you damage.

Bottom line: "If you're clean of person and home, you eat well and are active, you're going to live (barring a nuclear hit)." Sgt. Thomas reiterated that these weapons are intended to cause panic, terror and to demoralize. If we deny the terrorists that result, they will not be so willing to use them.

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