KATUSAs play pivotal role in combined DECON Exercise

Soldiers with the 50th Chemical Support Group, Republic of Korea Army and the U.S. 23rd Chemical Battalion work side-by-side during a recent Chemical Decontamination Exercise.

Story and photos by Pvt. Han, Won-jong

The 50th Chemical Support Group, Republic of Korea Army, and the U.S. 23rd Chemical Battalion joined together for a chemical decontamination exercise, recently at the 50th Homeland Reserve Div. Compound in north Daegu.

What was unique about the combined exercise was most of the soldiers performing the tasks for the U.S. Army were Korean. This is because the 23rd Chem. Bn. is comprised of more than 60 percent KATUSA soldiers.

Their main job is to perform decontamination procedures, but they also serve as administrative clerks, company supply clerks, maintenance soldiers, and drivers.

"I hope to experience more combined decontamination exercises," said Sgt. Kim, Kyoo-nam with the 23rd Chem. Bn. "When a chemical agent is present, we allied forces have to decontaminate it, and make the terrain habitable. This training builds a well-organized collaboration between the two militaries. To maximize the joint efforts in defending the ROK, both forces need to assist and support each other."

Although this training procedure was carefully planned out beforehand, in terms of combined training there were differences. "Decontamination equipment (United States and Republic of Korea) works differently," said Sgt. Lee, Yong-han, 23rd Chem. Bn.

M12's, equipped with a customized spray bar attachment designed by the 23rd Chem. Battalion, spray the ground during the decontamination process.

A soldier give direction to the driver as a fellow soldier washes his vehicle down with a decontamination solution (water was used for the exercise).

That didn't stop them from working as a team.

"Korean and U.S. decontamination teams go into action together. The U.S. decontamination trucks spray the ground to make it habitable. After the terrain gets cleaned, vehicles go through a ROK decontamination shower to free them from any contaminants they may have picked up from the operation," Lee explained.

A big benefit to having KATUSA soldiers was the ability to communicate.

"Communication is crucial at all times during an exercise," Lee said.

"KATUSA soldiers can also function as interpreters and can adapt to any language barrier when a problem occurs. We deal with big trucks, pumps, and chemical agents. There can be an accident even before you know it. My primary concern is the safety of my soldiers."

The 23rd Chem. Bn. motto, "Two Joined as One," reflects the spirit of the teamwork, readiness and confidence in each soldier, which are things Sgt. 1st Class Walter Koski, the noncommissioned officer-in-charge of the exercise, never doubts.

"I think the relationship is great! One of the things I tried to do when I got to Korea was take a KATUSA NCO and actually use him as an NCO," Koski said. "Right now my 2nd Squad Leader is KATUSA Sgt. Lee, and my 3rd Squad Leader is a KATUSA corporal.

"Sgt. Lee called me up during the exercise and said we had a problem with one of our M12, decontamination apparatus. One of the M12s had been switched out by the motor pool and didn't have the right connection at the end of the hoses to go to the front of the truck," Koski explained.

"He caught the problem, and by the time I got to the motor pool, he had another truck dispatched, with numbers on the truck, and was pulling that truck out of the motor pool heading for the water point to get it ready to roll out. If he sees something wrong, he executes and gets it squared away."

KATUSA soldiers provide friendship to both countries, and mutual support for the leadership. After spending the day in full MOPP gear, all soldiers were ready to breathe in fresh air.

"There could be many responsibilities to complete my tasks," said Lee, "however, experiencing today's exercise gave me confidence and a sense of achievement for being a KATUSA soldier."