

Burn, Baby, burn!

The following was Sam's draft for a column that was never apparently published.

By Sam J Niver, T/Sgt. CWS

Sometime in 1944, as the Chemical Warfare section of the 51st Air Service Group stationed in Assam, we received a shipment of napalm. Along with it came orders and instructions to fill and prepare bully tanks as bomb for fighter planes to use in Burma.

We had never heard of napalm and hadn't the foggiest notion about with it was. Someone in the high echelon of the brass had decided that since it must be a chemical, it should be in the hands of the Chemical Warfare service.

The instructions were fairly simple:

Take a 55-gallon steel drum with two bung holes in one end and one in the other end. Using a large funnel, pour in a measured amount of the powdered napalm and fill the drum with high-octane aviation fuel. Close up the drum and roll it on the ground to mix. Attach the air hose from a compressor to one end of the drum and run a hose from the other end to the mouth of a belly tank. Kick up the compressor and, *voila* – the jelly-like mixture flows smoothly into the belly tank. Attach a phosphorus grenade to the mouth of the tank and you've got a great fire bomb.

They told us they had tested the things on goats in concrete bunkers at Florida's Eglin Field, and the heat sucked out all the oxygen and suffocated the animals.

But we discovered quickly

that there was one small hitch to the procedure. The napalm – a dry mixture of a form of synthetic rubber and other chemicals – looked exactly like corn meal and had some of the same characteristics. Like your mother's Cream of Wheat, it tended to get lumpy.

When we started to fill the tank, a nice big lump would block the outlet and we would be forced to kick up the air pressure. When it got up in the vicinity of 350-360 PSI, there would be a resounding "Whump," and the end would blow out of the drum. The highly flammable goop splattered all over everything and everyone nearby.

The advantage of napalm is that it sticks where it hits and burns with fierce intensity. Luckily, there was never a spark around to ignite our spillage.

We tried various mixing routines to solve the problem, having little success. Then one of our guys, Pvt. Dan Yanez, a former sheet-metal worker, has a brilliant idea. He took a 15-inch piece of 2-1/2-inch steel pipe and cut a hole in the side about halfway up. To that hole he welded a 6-inch piece of pipe at an angle to create a figure "Y."

The next time out, we put the Y joint directly into the mouth of the belly tank and poured the powder down the straight part while pumping the gasoline in from the side. The swirling action mixed the stuff beautifully! The new system worked to perfection and eliminated the drums and

compressor completely.

Throughout these exasperating trials and failures, we had an old colonel who came over from area HQ to watch. He wore an old wide-brimmed, WW I campaign hat and drank countless cups of coffee as he wandered around and generally made a nuisance of himself.

Sometime after the project ended, we learned that he had put in for and received the Legion of Merit for "developing" our new process!

Pvt. Yanez made corporal.

During the course of our work, we had occasion to see wing-camera films of our handiwork at use. It was highly effective. In one instance, the pilot came in at tree-top and released his tank in a clearing as two enemy soldiers ran into a big warehouse. The tank hit, skipped and followed the two into the building where it blew the whole thing skyward in flames.

The planes we loaded were fat-bodied P-47s, and when the tank was suspended it was just three inches above the ground. The airstrip runway was steel mesh and quite uneven. On more than one occasion, sparks flew as a plane took off. Those flyers were brave men!

During and after the Viet Nam war, there was a lot of agitation in the States about the use of napalm as an "uncivilized" weapon. Forgive me, but I didn't know there were civilized ways to kill a man. I can't believe that burning of suffocating is a worse way to die than from a piece of shrapnel in the gut.