

H-Net Reviews

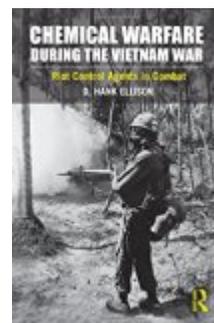
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

D. Hank Ellison. *Chemical Warfare during the Vietnam War: Riot Control Agents in Combat*. London: Routledge, 2010. 216 pp. \$125.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-415-87644-5; \$32.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-415-87645-2.

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Commissioned by Margaret Sankey



Chemical Warfare during the Vietnam War addresses the controversial topic of using chemical agents in war, particularly tear gas. D. Hank Ellison was an infantry soldier later commissioned as an officer in the Chemical Corps. He has extensive experience with chemical equipment and chemical agents, and has been an instructor at Michigan State University training students in the safe handling of hazardous materials. He is very credible.

The author states his goals in the introduction. These are to discuss the history of riot control agents in combat, from the standpoint of international agreements, as well as the weapons and tactics used. He will evaluate how effective these agents were and whether their use could lead to use of lethal chemical agents. Ellison accomplishes this in a brief, but comprehensive text.

The “prelude” chapter notes that the first chemical agents used in Vietnam were herbicides to destroy vegetative cover for Viet Cong guerillas. This began with tests in 1961 that proved this would be a useful tactic, but Washington worried that widespread use would lead to charges that the United States was violating international agreements on chemicals weapons. There was consensus that herbicides were not covered by the agreements. In 1962 Washington approved providing herbicides to the South Vietnam government, but limited American involvement to technical advice. Also in 1962 Washington decided to approve providing riot control agents to the South Vietnamese army, grenades containing the tear agent CN and vomiting agent DM. Both were considered nonlethal and not covered by international agreement. Both were commercially available and in the U.S. military inventory. Anxious to avoid communist propaganda

charges, the United States banned use of these chemical agents by American forces.

The number of American forces in Vietnam expanded dramatically in 1965, but no change was made in use of chemical agents by those forces until Marines began operations around Qui Nhon. These involved searching areas from which the Viet Cong raided Marine bases and harassed civilians. Unaware of the ban on use of riot control agents the battalion commander responsible for this mission decided to use tear gas to root out Viet Cong in caves and tunnels in the region. The tear gas used was CS, which had replaced CN as more effective. This was Operation Stomp, and it began on September 5. It was a success and resulted in the capture of seventeen Viet Cong and rescue of three hundred civilian hostages. It did, however, generate a controversy when press observers noted the violation of U.S. rules of engagement. The Marine colonel who authorized use of CS faced charges, but discussions about the incident ended with his exoneration and the approval of tear gas as a nonlethal weapon.

The next three chapters, “Tunnels,” “Escalation,” and “Niches,” describe the initially cautious U.S. approach regarding tear gas and its eventual widespread use. In late September the secretary of defense authorized a single use of CS in military operations to evaluate effectiveness. The International Red Cross had scheduled a conference that would address the use of riot control agents, so there was pressure to use CS quickly. The United States selected an area twenty-five miles northwest of Saigon, the “Iron Triangle,” as the target area. The Viet Cong had extensive tunnel complexes there from which they launched attacks. U.S. forces only used two CS grenades