

NAPALM Newsletter

WHAT IS NAPALM?

It is a highly flammable sticky jelly made by adding to aviation gas a chemical compound of aluminum naphthenates and palmitates. These thickening substances, developed in 1944-45 under contract to the Chemical Warfare Service, cause the flaming jelly to adhere to its target, whether structures or human bodies.

Recently, a new thickener has been discovered—polystyrene—which produces a more adhesive type of napalm known as Napalm-B. This new napalm, which United Technology Center plans to manufacture in Redwood City, contains 50% polystyrene, 25% benzene, and 25% gasoline.

The polystyrene is made by Dow Chemical at Torrance, California. Chemical and Engineering News, March, 1966, reports that the forthcoming use of polystyrene in Napalm-B will be so great (25 million pounds a month) that the normal industrial supplies will be over-strained.

HOW WAS NAPALM USED IN WORLD WAR II?

As an incendiary bomb, napalm was found to be able to create a firestorm which could not be quenched by any kind of equipment, if dropped on a city having at least 25% of the space covered by roofs. Although napalm was used in flame-throwers in Pacific island combat, it was designed and used primarily as an anti-city weapon.

According to Maj. Gen. Alden H. Waitt, chief of Chemical Warfare Service during World War II: "Sixty-six of Nippon's war centers with . . . 20 million population received more than 100,000 tons of incendiaries in 15,000 sorties. More than 100 square miles were burned out in five major cities, while incendiary destruction amounted to about 40% in the urban areas involved. . . ."

HOW IS NAPALM USED IN VIETNAM?

The cities of South Vietnam are along the coast and all are in government-controlled areas. In the Viet Cong areas, there are only thatch-roofed villages and small groups of huts where peasants live and where guerrillas make brief stops for food and rest.

A typical napalm raid on this kind of target was described in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of February 9, 1966, by a reporter who flew as a passenger in a carrier-based Phantom II F4C:

Our Phantom stood on the bomb-deck, being loaded with two fat cylinders painted red and each



NAPALM AT WORK:
A peasant at Sonu. He covers burnt body of his son, May 11, 1965

"In front of us a curious figure was standing a little crouched, legs straddled, arms held out from his sides. He had no eyes, and the whole of his body, nearly all of which was visible through tatters of burnt rag, was covered with a hard black crust speckled with yellow pus. A native woman by his side began to speak, and the interpreter said, 'He has to stand, sir, he cannot sit or lie.' He had to stand because he was no longer covered with a skin, but with a crust-like cracking which broke easily." R. Cufforth, BBC, London

marked "1000-lb. firebomb"—otherwise napalm, the most popular bomb in Vietnam, because it's both cheap and deadly: a mixture of low-grade jet fuel and gelignite which sticks to anything it touches and burns with such heat that all oxygen in the area is exhausted within a split second. Death is either by roasting or suffocation.

He describes the blinding attack from 35,000 feet over the Mekong Delta, an area of rice paddies:

The whole delta tipped onto its side, as the speedometer needle flickered up over 700, and my head was heavy as a great stone. I tried to grab the sides of my helmet to stop it lolling onto my shoulder, but found I could not even move my hands.

With a terrible emptiness in my gut, we flattened out over the target, with the trees racing past the wings, and I had a glimpse of three thatched huts burning along the edge of some water. Then I closed my eyes, and could not open them again until we were several thousand feet up. Below,

the trees and huts were blotted out by a cloud of nauseous black smoke.

On the second run I managed to hold my eyes open. As we pulled out through the smoke, I saw the second napalm bomb a couple of seconds after it had burst. A ball of brilliant flame was rolling out across more than 200 feet, swelling like a great orange cauliflower, until the black smoke closed in again, and we were climbing high and away from it all.

After returning, "I asked the commander about the target":

"Well, we don't rightly know for sure," he said, soaping himself down: "You can't rightly see much at those speeds . . . But most times you can reckon that whatever moves in the Delta is VC."

Although this is the typical napalm raid in Vietnam, napalm is at times used in combat. But because it is such an inaccurate weapon, sometimes the results are those described in the UPI article "Napalm Sears GIs" (*Chronicle*, November 17, 1965).

I was sitting in a command bunker, a mound of dirt screening us from Communist snipers, looking at the wounded in the aid station just a few yards away. There was a lull in the bitter fighting between the troops of the United States First Cavalry Division and a north Vietnamese regiment here near the Cambodian border.

Suddenly, I felt a searing heat on my face. An American fighter-bomber had misjudged the Communist positions, and dropped a load of napalm.

The flaming jellied gasoline, impossible to shake or scrape off once it hits the skin, splashed along the ground in a huge dragon's tail of fire less than 25 yards away.

Screams pierced the roar of the flames. Two Americans stumbled out of the inferno. Their hair burned off in an instant. Their clothes were incinerated.

"Good God!" cried Colonel Hal Moore, commander of the First Battalion. Another plane was making a run over the same area. The colonel grabbed a radio. "You're dropping napalm on us!" he shouted. "Stop those damn planes." At almost the last second, the second plane pulled up and away, its napalm tanks still hanging from the wing.

It was an hour before a medical helicopter could get into the area and tend to the two burned men. One GI was a mass of blisters, the other not quite so bad. Somehow his legs had escaped the flames. But he had breathed fire into his lungs.

A medic asked me to help get the men into the helicopter when it arrived. There were no litters. Tenderly, we picked the soldiers up. I held a leg of the most seriously burned man. I wasn't tender enough. A big patch of burned skin came off in my hand.

The most effective use of napalm in Vietnam is in part of the campaign to terrify peasants in Vietcong-controlled areas to move into American-controlled areas. Our pilots "are given a square marked on a map and told to hit every hamlet within the area" (*Washington Post*, March 13, 1965). This "strategic bombing in a friendly, allied country" kills "significant numbers of innocent civilians . . . every day in South Vietnam" (*New York Times*, September 5, 1965), "ten civilians for every VC" according to Special Forces officers (*Newsweek*, March 14, 1966.)

The deliberate policy of "forcing large numbers of peasants to move from their ancestral homes in Vietcong-dominated areas to Government-dominated areas" is accomplished largely by aerial bombing and is "a major reason that 730,000 people fled into refugee camps" in 1965 (*New York Times*, January 2, 1966). The systematic destruction of the hamlets in Binh Dinh province is described in a long article in the *San Francisco Chronicle* of February 15, 1966. Among the five-thousand refugees who flocked from a cluster of hamlets, many were wounded:

Most of the wounds are the simple type inflicted by shell and bomb fragments, but others are the gruesome variety caused by napalm. One distraught woman appeared at a field medical station holding a child in her arms whose legs had literally been cooked by napalm. The child is not expected to live.

But even when the targets are actually troops, and not villagers, it is still the civilians who suffer most from napalm:

As the communists withdrew from Quangngai last Monday, U.S. jet bombers pounded the hills into which they were headed. Many Vietnamese—one estimate was as high as 500—were killed by the strikes. The American contention is that they were Viet Cong soldiers. But three out of four patients seeking treatments in a Vietnamese hospital afterwards for burns from napalm were village women.

(*New York Times*, June 6, 1965)

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