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Chairman Calls White Phosphorous Legitimate Military Tool

By Donna Miles
American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Nov. 30, 2005 – White phosphorous is a legitimate military tool, but U.S. forces have been highly judicious about using it to avoid harming civilians, Marine Gen. Peter Pace, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told Pentagon reporters Nov. 29.

Pace defended use of the substance, which U.S. forces use primarily as a smokescreen, to mark targets or to flush enemy combatants out of protected positions. "It is well within the law of war to use those weapons as they are being used for marking and screening," he said.

U.S. troops used limited white phosphorous munitions against legitimate targets during Operation Al Fajr in Fallujah, Iraq, last year, defense officials confirmed. However, officials refuted recent news reports that U.S. forces have used the substance as an incendiary weapon. White phosphorous can cause serious burns if it comes into contact with skin.

U.S. forces have never used white phosphorous to target innocent civilians, officials said, and have taken great pains to avoid doing so.

Just as with any other weapon, troops use a variety of factors to determine the appropriateness of using white phosphorous, explained Air Force Maj. Todd Vician, a Pentagon spokesman. These include the target vulnerability and location, available munitions, and the potential risk to civilians and friendly forces, he said.

"No armed force in the world goes to greater effort than your armed force to protect civilians and to be very precise in the way we apply our power," Pace said.

"A bullet goes through the skin even faster than white phosphorous does. So I would rather have the proper instrument applied at the proper time as precisely as possible to get the job done in a way that kills as many of the bad guys as possible and does as little collateral damage as possible," the chairman said. "That is just the nature of warfare."

White phosphorous was commonly used during the Vietnam War, where it garnered the nickname, "Willie Pete" among troops.

Biographies:

[Gen. Peter Pace, USMC](#)