

Records reveal germ warfare tests conducted in southern Britain

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The government releases most official documents in Britain to the Public Record Office after 30 years. To find a document you must search among the hundreds of catalogues listed by government departments. Each one has a title, usually a few words, such as "1938 Note on Russia", or "Aerial bomb trials". Either you know what you are looking for or you guess.

Sometimes a diligent researcher unearths a document and brings it to a wider audience. This seems to have happened with half a dozen reports about outdoor germ warfare trials in the 1960s. They have names like "The survival of E.coli in fresh air -- A comparison of results", or "A massive cross-wind line release of bacteria".

The authors were scientists employed by the Microbiological Research Establishment (MRE), part of the Ministry of Defence's secret Chemical and Biological Defence Establishment site at Porton Down in southern England. If anyone asked what they were doing, the scientists were instructed that, "the only permissible answer is that you are sampling atmospheric pollution for meteorological research. A persistent questioner may be viewed with suspicion".

There has been growing controversy since the reports were first mentioned in the press in February 1997, particularly in the southern coastal counties of Dorset and Devon where most of the trials took place. Pressure from local residents and representatives led to the release of further reports earlier this month. They show that the tests were much larger than previously admitted, affecting 1 million inhabitants in an area 30 miles by 150 miles. These tests continued into the 1970s and involved the US military.

In some of the trials a ship, the *Icewhale*, fired "massive quantities" of bacteria inland. The reports show that on each of 32 occasions, it pumped up to 550

litres of concentrate containing billions of bacteria into the air as a fine mist. Scientists used sensors on land to try and detect the mist as it passed by. Similar trials took place using an aircraft.

In 1997 the Conservative Party Minister of Defence, Michael Portillo said the bacteria, "were judged to present no risk to public health". Pauline Chudley, head of communications at Dorset Health Authority, said in September 1997 that they had no knowledge of the trials. "All these germs are found normally in the environment and would not have been considered as capable of causing illness," she added. The Labour Party repeated the same message. Dennis Healey, Labour Minister of Defence at the time, says he did not know about the tests. Current Armed Forces Minister John Reid said, "The scientists who carried out the trials concluded at the time that they in no way posed a threat to public health".

Despite these reassurances, and a traveling exhibition mounted by the Ministry of Defence, Trevor Jones, leader of Dorset County Council said there are still more questions than answers. He repeated calls for a public inquiry.

A number of questions remain:

Were there any environmental and public health consequences associated with such a massive exposure to bacteria?

Noreen Hall has been campaigning for years over health problems in her childhood village of East Lulworth. The village, set in the heart of the testing area, housed 22 families at the time of the trials. She has found out that since the 1960s, 16 women have had miscarriages, some of them up to three. Five children were born severely disabled and five had learning problems.

The Health Authority is carrying out an investigation

but says there does not appear to be a "cluster". John Howard a farmer at Wool, a village nearby lost a dozen cattle in the 1960s. Results of samples sent to Porton Down indicated a virulent strain of E.coli was responsible. Another local person, Colin Hoskins, who also worked on the *Icewhale*, now suffers from skin ulcers.

Why did the MRE stop using live E.coli 162, which officials say was harmless to humans, halfway through the tests?

One secret report says that, "to avoid the problems and limitations associated with the release of live vegetative bacteria (E.coli 162) into the atmosphere", inactivated *Serratia marcescens* was used instead. Live *Serratia marcescens* was blamed for deaths and injuries when the US military used it in similar tests in San Francisco in the 1950s.

How safe were the bacterial concentrates?

The scientists at Porton Down had to design a special spray for the aircraft to prevent corrosion of the aircraft's alloy skin. Another report says that in order "to prevent the spread of contamination from the ship, a changing hut was installed on the jetty in the dockyard in which all MRE personnel working on the ship kept a complete change of outer clothes and footwear".

Did the scientists carry out safety tests apart from the standard toxicity experiments on rats? Did they consider the long-term implications for reproduction?

Were further secret tests carried out?

There are reports of other tests taking place. Gerard Ashton, for example, is one of 300 human "guinea pigs" trying to sue the Government over experiments in the 1950s using the nerve agent, Tabun. Some of them suffer from impotency, breathing problems and high blood pressure.

The released documents reveal how the British armed forces have been able to test potentially harmful substances on an unwitting civilian population. Moreover, despite the claims that such tests were for purely defensive purposes, it is impossible to conceive of a situation where germ warfare is used in anything other than an offensive capacity.

By the end of the tests Britain and its allies knew that bacteria covered in oil attached to thin spidery "microthreads" survived longer and large particles penetrated into the lungs more easily. They had also developed sophisticated spraying equipment and the

techniques to grow vast quantities of bacteria in a short time.



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