

The evidence of US nerve gas use in Operation Tailwind

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The rebuttal by Oliver and Smith can be accessed directly at <http://www.freedomforum.org/fpfp/specialprograms/tailwind.contents.asp>, and readers who wish to explore the subject in more detail can do so.

Their document constitutes a closely argued analysis of the report prepared by Floyd Abrams and David Kohler for CNN, demonstrating that it is Abrams and Kohler, and not the producers of 'Valley of Death,' who start from a preconceived premise and select facts and quotations--with a considerable amount of distortion--to fit the desired conclusion.

They examine in great detail the testimony of two of the principal witnesses, Admiral Thomas Moorer, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff at the time of Operation Tailwind, and Lieutenant Van Buskirk, the de facto field commander who called in nerve gas strikes on North Vietnamese troops in order to clear a landing zone for helicopters flying in to rescue his force.

Moorer confirmed both that nerve gas was used in Tailwind and that the purpose of the raid was to kill a group of defectors--he believed 15 to 20--who had been located in Laos by US intelligence. (The official US position remains that there were only two defectors among the more than five million men and women who were sent to Vietnam).

Oliver and Smith cite unpublished transcripts and notes of their discussions with Moorer, who not only was interviewed several times, but reviewed a transcript of the entire program before it was broadcast and indicated his satisfaction with its accuracy. Another major source, a former high-ranking military officer who refused to be identified, also reviewed the transcript beforehand, giving the broadcast far more credible confirmation than most media reports on secret military operations.

Even in the aftermath of the broadcast, when the military-backed campaign against the program got under way, Admiral Moorer initially declined to sign a statement faxed to him by Pentagon press secretary Kenneth Bacon denying that he had confirmed the use of nerve gas in Tailwind. Moorer signed the statement only after crossing out 'confirm' and substituting 'authorize,' emphasizing that he was aware of the use of sarin but that the decision to use it was made by lower-ranking officers.

Oliver and Smith also quote extensively from transcripts of interviews with Van Buskirk, refuting the claims of CNN officials that it was Oliver rather than the former commando who first suggested that poison gas had been used in Tailwind. In his first phone conversation, Van Buskirk told of seeing Vietnamese soldiers 'laying down to die' after they were hit by 'lethal war gas.'

Some of his own men were affected as well, despite having gas masks and additional atropine (the antidote for sarin). Their symptoms were those of exposure to nerve gas, not tear gas. As Van Buskirk described it: 'My unit puked their brains out. We all got amoebic dysentery. Everyone's nose ran and all this mucous started coming out of everyone's nostrils. Lots of enemy started having seizures.'

Much of the attack on the credibility of the broadcast has consisted of a smear campaign against Moorer and Van Buskirk. While the 87-year-old Moorer has been portrayed as all but senile, Oliver and Smith describe him as a witness with excellent recall, adding, 'If the authors of the AK [Abrams-Kohler] Report have any evidence at all that suggests that Admiral Moorer is mentally infirm or feeble, they should abide by the same standards they espouse in the AK Report and come forward with it. Otherwise, they should not seek

to discredit him with this type of insinuation, which has taken on a life of its own in the press.'

Another canard in wide circulation is the statement that Van Buskirk admits to suffering from repressed memory syndrome. Oliver and Smith trace this allegation to a *Newsweek* magazine reporter, Evan Thomas, who introduced the term in a question to Van Buskirk and claims to have gotten an affirmative response. Van Buskirk denies this claim vehemently, saying that he has not previously spoken of the use of nerve gas in the Vietnam War because he had been sworn to operational secrecy.

Oliver and Smith note that the Abrams-Kohler report suggests that far more use should have been made of the testimony of Captain Bill McCarley, the field commander of Operation Tailwind, who now denies the use of nerve gas. The reporters point out that McCarley was wounded early in the operation and Van Buskirk became acting commander. More importantly, they cite a statement by McCarley that he was willing to lie about every aspect of Operation Tailwind, even to deny that he had led a unit into Laos, nominally a neutral country in 1970, in keeping with the Army special forces doctrine of deniability.

Oliver and Smith cite two significant exchanges with high-ranking officers who now are at the forefront of the right-wing uproar against the 'Valley of Death' broadcast.

April Oliver spoke with Major General John Singlaub about the general practice of targeting defectors from the US military:

Q: So what are your options when confronted with defectors?

A: You are reaching a logical conclusion. I would certainly hate to risk men's lives by going in and capturing them. It would be easier to go in with firepower and kill them.

Singlaub later added, in a telephone interview in April 1998: 'It may be more important to your survival to kill the defector than to kill the Vietnamese or Russian. Americans can use the fact that they are Americans with their accent and knowing on the radio what to do. That can be damaging.'

Singlaub is now one of the most vociferous in demanding a complete purge of CNN, including the firing of Peter Arnett, the internationally-known reporter who narrated the 'Valley of Death' broadcast.

Oliver also met with former National Security Adviser and Secretary of State Alexander Haig in his office. By Oliver's account: 'He did not deny such a mission with poison gas was possible, but said it would not be an approved mission. He said we would never get anyone in this town to admit it. We invited him to say that on camera and he responded, 'Hell, no.'"

One final detail gives a sense of the pressures now being brought to bear to suppress this exposure of the US use of nerve gas. Oliver and Smith describe this response to a call March 23 to one veteran of the Studies and Operations Group, the elite unit that carried out Tailwind.

'If you are working inside SOG then you know about all kinds of crazy things. But there has been a telephone tree warning broadcast about you. We were told if you called not to talk about the gas. But I thought that was off the wall. I am an old man. I don't have secrets. You are doing a public service by trying to get the truth.'

See Also:

Why did CNN retract its nerve gas report? A closer look

[16 July 1998]



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