

Australian sailors en route to the Gulf refuse anthrax vaccine

Terry Cook
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Last month, news emerged that dozens of Australian sailors in transit to join the US military buildup in the Persian Gulf refused to be vaccinated against anthrax. While the immediate reason appeared to be fear that the vaccine may have terrible side effects, the sailors' stand reflects disquiet within the armed forces over the impending war against Iraq and deep suspicion regarding information issued through official channels.

The first word of the sailors' action surfaced on February 11, on the eve of the largest antiwar demonstrations in Australia's history and amidst mounting global condemnation of Washington's criminal war preparations.

Media reports put the number refusing to be vaccinated at about 51, but it could have been far higher. During the following days, the government would not confirm how many were involved, saying only that the number "was fluid". Naval authorities have now acknowledged that 11 sailors who declined the vaccine were airlifted back to Australia. Three of them served on the HMAS Kanimbla, which sailed for the Gulf on January 23 amid considerable government-orchestrated flag waving. The other eight sailors served on the HMAS Anzac and HMAS Darwin.

Worried about the issue becoming public on the eve of a further military deployment, the Howard government attempted to keep the situation under wraps. It only came to light when Able Seaman Simon Bond, an engineer on the Kanimbla, put himself on the line and agreed to be interviewed on February 11 on ABC television's *7:30 Report*. Bond was one of the sailors sent home.

Bond told interviewer Tracy Bowen that he and a number of other sailors refused to be inoculated after reading about the vaccine's possible side effects, and about Gulf War syndrome, in material emailed to him by a concerned family member. He said that many sailors were also apprehensive about being required to sign a consent form before being inoculated, fearing it would affect their right to seek compensation for future health problems that may be caused by the vaccine.

Explaining his decision to go public Bond said: "All my

mates are still on board the Kanimbla and they've still got concerns about this [the vaccine] and there's nothing they can do about it. I am in a unique position to help. I feel an obligation to do that."

According to Bond, even though the vaccination was supposedly "voluntary," he had been put under pressure by ranking officers to agree to it. He claimed that the Kanimbla's engineer had warned him that he would be permanently removed from his home base in Sydney and sent thousands of kilometres away to Perth, and that he could face further "administrative" action. This included notations on his personal documents that would jeopardize his continued service in the navy.

Asked by the interviewer if he had taken the warning as a direct threat to his naval career, Bond replied: "Bloody oath I did! If that's not saying if you don't take the injection were going to stuff you over, then I don't know what is." That a wider campaign of intimidation by naval authorities was underway was confirmed by the mother of another sailor who had refused the vaccine. She told the *7.30 Report*: "They [those refusing the vaccine] are getting a roasting from other navy members that they are cowards."

While maintaining pressure on the sailors to comply, the government attempted to play down the damning revelations. On February 12, Australian Defense Force chief General Peter Cosgrove denied before a Senate Estimates Committee hearing that there had been "unfair pressure" on those refusing the vaccine and claimed the number had been reduced by "sympathetic discussion". He acknowledged, however, "there will be pressures for young people who choose not to stay with their colleagues".

A sample of that pressure appeared on February 15, when the *Daily Telegraph's* Michael Duffy picked up on the cowardice theme and, from the safety of his desk, penned a particularly foul piece. "Our ships will be in the Gulf, and mums and dads of military personnel will naturally worry about their children's safety. There will be talks about the unpleasant side effects of incoming bullets. No problem—John Howard will phone Saddam Hussein and

arrange a quick truce so Qantas can bring home more heroes.”

Facing increasing concern from sailors’ families, the government was at pains to explain why military personnel were not informed that the vaccinations would be required until the ships were well underway. Minister of Defense Senator Robert Hill claimed that the delay was necessary to allow time for educational material on the vaccination program to be prepared, while Cosgrove declared that advance inoculations were not possible because “it would have been inappropriate to vaccinate defense personnel who might not have been deployed”.

Both claims are patently false. It is now common knowledge that the Howard government committed to the US war on Iraq months ago, holding detailed discussions on the composition of the forces to be deployed with US Deputy Secretary of State Richard Armitage during his visit to Australia in December last year.

The government decided to delay the inoculations after discovering that around half of the 16,000-strong British force sent to the Gulf refused the anthrax vaccination and feared a similar development here. If opposition had erupted while the sailors were still in Australia, it could have blown the lid on the government’s clandestine preparations to dispatch them to the US-led operation. Concerned about growing anti-war sentiment, Prime Minister Howard had decided to inform neither parliament nor the general public about the deployment until the last minute.

Moreover, both the government and the military top brass calculated it would be easier to pressure reluctant sailors into accepting the vaccination once they were in transit and away from family and friends.

There is no question that the Howard government is prepared to compromise the long term health and safety of its service personnel for its own political ends. The anthrax vaccine is administered in three doses over a four-week period, but the first dose was not given to sailors until February 5. Since the vaccine is not fully effective for at least six weeks, it is possible that Australian troops could be operating in a war zone before being fully protected. While there is no evidence that the Iraqi regime has supplies of anthrax any longer, or the capacity to wage biological warfare, the United States certainly does. And the Bush administration has already made clear it is prepared to use any military means, including nuclear weapons, to achieve its ends.

In addition, the vaccine has not been subjected to any extensive testing. On February 13, Defense Minister Hill claimed that: “Commonwealth health authorities say the vaccine is safe and I accept their advice”. Desperate to head off further political fallout, Hill offered to be vaccinated,

were he to travel to the Persian Gulf sometime in the future.

Some infectious diseases experts in Australia claim there is no evidence the anthrax vaccine is unsafe, but most concede there has been insufficient research carried out. Anti-vaccine web sites insist that among the vaccine’s long-term effects could be sterility, multiple sclerosis, diabetes, asthma, Crohn’s disease, thyroid cancer and breast cancer.

Speaking on the ABC’s *AM* radio program on February 14, Australian Medical Association President Dr Kerryn Phelps said she did not think there was enough data in the medical press to “convince medical practitioners in Australia of the safety and efficacy of this vaccine”.

The sailors’ decision to reject the vaccine was backed by the Australian Gulf War Veterans Association. The association’s president David Watts said there were strong suspicions that vaccinations given to troops in the first Gulf War may have caused long-term health problems. He also expressed his concern that Australian military forces were being deployed prior to the release of a \$4 million study by Monash University into the mental and physical health of Gulf War veterans. He believed the research would shed light on the effects of different types of vaccines.

Further developments suggest the level of concern among military personnel about the nature of the impending war and what they may be called upon to do. On February 15, just four days after the controversy over the anthrax vaccinations became public, Hill issued a statement assuring Australian troops they would not be required “to directly kill civilians”.

This extraordinary comment immediately followed an equally extraordinary public announcement by General Peter Cosgrove that he would personally support any serviceman who refused to fire on civilians. The very fact that the defense minister and the chief of the defense forces admit the possibility that Australian troops could be ordered to murder civilians speaks volumes about the criminal and brutal character of the war being prepared by the US and its allies.



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