Britain: cover-up of chemical warfare tests on servicemen exposed

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An inquest on November 15 returned a verdict of unlawful killing on the death of a young British airman who unsuspectingly underwent military nerve gas tests 51 years ago.

Ronald Maddison, a Royal Air Force engineer from Consett, County Durham, died after having drops of the nerve agent Sarin dabbed on his arm at the Porton Down chemical warfare testing facility in Wiltshire in 1953, when he was 20-years old.

After a hearing which lasted 64 days, the inquest jury ruled that Maddison had been unlawfully killed by the "application of a nerve agent in a non-therapeutic experiment." The unanimous verdict, which came after years of pressure by campaigners, was greeted with cheers and tears of joy by veterans who had been subjected to similar experiments.

Hundreds of Porton Down veterans believe their subsequent ill health may have been a result of their exposure in trials. Relatives of some who have since died believe the tests may have led to premature deaths.

During the hearing in Trowbridge, a succession of servicemen said Maddison did not know that he was going to be exposed to the Sarin nerve gas and had volunteered to take part in research to find a cure for the common cold.

The hearing was told how at 10.17 a.m. on the morning of May 6, 1953, Porton Down scientists had applied the liquid nerve gas on to the arms of Maddison and five others in a sealed gas chamber. After 20 minutes, Maddison complained that he was feeling ill. Soon after he slumped over the table and was carried out of the chamber and taken to Porton's hospital, where he died at 11.00 a.m.

The inquest examined what steps Porton took to ensure the safety of the human "guinea pigs", but was supposed to take into account the differing "ethical climate" of the early 1950s and the "paranoid pressure" generated by the Cold War.

Professor Sir Ian Kennedy is a leading expert in medical ethics, who had been commissioned by the Ministry of Defence (MoD) three years ago to conduct an as yet unpublished survey of the human experiments. He said: "In my view there were trials that went too far. They were beyond the bounds of what was ethically permissible despite the imperative of the Cold War."

Maddison's family insists that he and other military personnel were tricked into taking part in what they believed were harmless experiments.

The jury rejected the MoD's insistence that all the servicemen who were tested at Porton Down were told beforehand that they were taking part in nerve gas experiments.

The new inquest heard evidence from an ex-army ambulance driver, Alfred Thornhill, who was called to help Maddison:

"He was convulsing and foam was coming out of his mouth. Then he was taken into the medical centre where there were scientists and medical people. They just threw him on to the bed and gave him a big injection. It was a terrible atmosphere—they were all panicking. They couldn't handle what they were looking at."

The court heard that Sarin was used on Maddison despite the fact that the same type of test had resulted in the "near-fatal" poisoning of another volunteer, army serviceman James Kelly, nine days earlier.

Sarin tests continued in a mobile gas chamber after Maddison's death, despite a government ban that was endorsed by the then prime minister, Winston Churchill. In an oddly chosen phrase, Dr Paul Rice, currently a researcher at Porton Down, said his predecessors there had acted in "reasonably good faith" in the 1950s.

Relatives of Maddison are now calling for compensation from the MoD. Lawyers believe that the verdict of unlawful killing in his case could clear the way for other service personnel to sue the MoD. Up to 550 ex-servicemen who claim they too were duped into submitting to tests are said to be considering legal action. The multiple claims could run into the millions of pounds.

After the verdict, Alan Care, the Maddison family solicitor, said, "We have got justice. After 50 years, his family has finally found out that he was unlawfully killed by the state. This verdict is unprecedented. Now there must be a public inquiry for all the veterans who attended Porton Down."

Lillias Craik, Maddison's sister, told the *Guardian* newspaper that she wanted an apology from the MoD. "Ronnie didn't have a life, they took it away from him," she said. "They took a special part of our lives away and they have said nothing about it ever since."

The inquest into Maddison's death was the second to be held. An investigation into the case by Wiltshire police was held after appeals by the Maddison family. Lord Chief Justice Lord Woolf—England's most senior judge—subsequently quashed the original verdict of death by misadventure in 2002, saying that a new inquest was needed in the interests of justice.

The current inquest, which began in May, heard allegations from lawyers representing Maddison's family that the original hearing had been rushed through in secret on the instructions of the government of the day.

David Masters, the Wiltshire coroner, told the hearing that efforts were made to shroud the original inquest in secrecy. Masters said he had to negotiate with the Pentagon in the United States to have documents released, although some would still be read by the jury behind closed doors.

Following World War II, there was a policy of sharing information about nerve gas experiments between the British, US and Canadian governments. Documents relating to these experiments are still classified as "sensitive" over 50 years later.

It is thought that Maddison was one of over 3,000 men from the armed forces who were exposed to nerve gas at Porton Down between 1939 and 1989.

The Porton Down research and testing facility has undergone many organisational alterations and name changes in its nearly 90-year history, but it has always functioned as a test base to provide the British military with a lead in any potential chemical or biological warfare situation. Its

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scientists work with the deadliest known disease agents, including bubonic plague, anthrax and the ebola virus. Porton Down has been home to many secret projects and experiments, whose real scope and intentions were rarely explained to those on whom they were tested. Today the facility, which sits among 7,000 acres of Wiltshire countryside, still employs military volunteers to research chemical and biological attacks and their effects.

It was opened in 1916 as the Royal Engineers Experimental Station, in response to the German Army's use of the deadly mustard gas in the French trenches. Initially made up of a few cottages and farm buildings scattered on the Downs at Porton and Idmiston, by 1918 the original buildings had become a large hutted camp with 50 officers and 1,100 other ranks. Studies during World War I concerned the dissemination of chlorine and phosgene and, later, mustard gas. In May 1917 the focus for anti-gas defence and respirator development had moved from London to Porton Down.

Chemical weapons, including chlorine, phosgene and mustard agents, killed over 90,000 during World War I.

In 1919 the War Office set up the Holland Committee to consider the future of chemical warfare and defence. By 1920, the Cabinet agreed to the Committee's recommendation that work should continue at Porton Down and from that date a slow permanent building programme began, coupled with the gradual recruitment of civilian scientists. By 1922 there were 380 servicemen, 23 scientific and technical civil servants and 25 "civilian subordinates."

By 1925 the civilian staff numbers had doubled. Also during the 1920s large-scale experiments involving thousands of volunteers began. The Porton Down facility was renamed the Chemical Warfare Experimental Station in 1929.

In 1938, with the rapid deterioration of international relations and the drift towards another war in Europe, the UK government authorised the development of offensive chemical warfare research and development. After the outbreak of war, a secret group was set up at Porton Down in 1940 to investigate biological warfare.

During World War II, Porton Down carried out research into anthrax, with which the Scottish island of Gruinard (which became known as "death island") was contaminated during tests. In 1942, a small army of factory girls was employed to pack five million cattle cakes contaminated with anthrax spores into boxes to be dropped on Germany's fields, but the operation was abandoned before it was to be staged. There were also plans to drop anthrax on six German cities.

Although no army used chemical weapons in Europe (chemical weapons were used with horrific effects by Japanese forces in China) during World War II, thousands of military personnel took part in trials at Porton Down, and as the war ended, volunteers began participating in nerve-agent trials there—a practice that was to continue until 1989.

In the mid-1950s, the British government officially renounced offensive biological and chemical warfare. But it was during this period that Maddison participated in chemical experiments at Porton Down. In 1957, stocks of chemical weapons were destroyed, while biological warfare programmes were designated as defensive.

In the 1960s Porton Down scientists released bacteria along the Northern Line of the London Underground. The results show that the organism dispersed about 10 miles. Similar tests were conducted in tunnels running under government buildings in Whitehall. During the same period, the drug LSD was being tested on soldiers at the facility to investigate its "tactical battlefield usefulness."

Over the past decade, gradually released classified files have revealed that from the end of the war to the late 1970s the MoD, primarily by using Porton Down, turned large parts of the country into a giant laboratory to conduct a series of secret germ warfare tests on the public.

Many of these tests involved releasing potentially dangerous chemicals and micro-organisms over vast swaths of the population. Over 200 such covert experiments are believed to have taken place between 1949 and 1979.

One report reveals that military personnel were briefed to tell any "inquisitive inquirer" that the trials were part of research projects into weather and air pollution.

According to official propaganda, the tests were designed to help the MoD assess Britain's vulnerability if the Soviet Union were to have released clouds of deadly germs over the country. In most cases, the trials did not use biological weapons, but alternatives which scientists believed would mimic germ warfare and which the MoD claimed were harmless. However, families in areas of the country where test are now known to have taken place and who have children with birth defects, physical handicaps and learning difficulties are demanding a public inquiry.

A chapter of one released report, "The Fluorescent Particle Trials", reveals how between 1955 and 1963 planes flew from northeast England to the tip of Cornwall along the south and west coasts, dropping huge amounts of zinc cadmium sulphide on the population. The chemical drifted miles inland, its fluorescence allowing the spread to be monitored. In another trial using zinc cadmium sulphide, a generator was towed along a road near Frome in Somerset where it spewed the chemical for an hour.

While the government has insisted the chemical is safe, cadmium is recognised as a cause of lung cancer and was classified as a chemical weapon by the Allied Powers during World War II.

In another chapter, "Large Area Coverage Trials", the MoD describes how between 1961 and 1968 more than a million people along the south coast of England, from Torquay to the New Forest, were exposed to bacteria including e.coli and bacillus globigii, which mimics anthrax. These releases came from a military ship, the Icewhale, anchored off the Dorset coast, which sprayed the micro-organisms in a 5 to 10-mile radius.

The report also reveals details of the DICE trials in south Dorset between 1971 and 1975, which involved US and UK military scientists spraying massive quantities of serratia marcescens bacteria into the air, with an anthrax simulant and phenol.

Similar bacteria were released in "The Sabotage Trials" between 1952 and 1964. These were tests to determine the vulnerability of large government buildings via the huge network of tunnels running 100 feet below central London—some of which connect to war rooms and "citadels" where the political and financial elite of Britain would apparently retire in the event of a nuclear attack.

In recent years, the MoD's own scientists, while reviewing the safety of these tests, suggested that the elderly or people suffering from breathing illnesses may have been seriously harmed if they inhaled sufficient quantities of micro-organisms.

In 1989, the US and Soviet Union reach agreement on the destruction and non-production of chemical weapons. The nerve-agent trials at Porton Down officially ceased the same year.

In 1992, Dr Wouter Basson, (variously described as Dr Death and apartheid's Mengele) a brigadier in the chemical and biological weapons section of the South African army, who is alleged to have experimented on human captives, sent one of his subordinates Dr Brian Davey, to Porton Down. After some stonewalling, the MoD admitted that Davey had "briefed scientists at Porton on some details of the South African work on defence against chemical and biological weapons."

In 1999, Wiltshire Police began a four-year investigation into the human experiments at Porton Down following a complaint from veteran Gordon Bell, who was there nearly 50 years earlier.

Since 2001, the Porton Down facility has been known as the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory (DSTL). Asked in October 2001 whether tests were still being carried out on the British public, Sue Ellison, spokeswoman for DSTL Porton Down, said; "It is not our policy to discuss ongoing research."

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The possibility of biological warfare trials in public places was ended after the 1970s, in part due to governments coming under pressure from an increasingly skeptical public. However, with the ensuing hysteria over chemical/biological attack created by the present Labour government following the September 11 attacks in New York, a resumption of mass experiments cannot be ruled out.

Interestingly, in direct contradiction to much of the prevailing commentary on possible chemical/biological attacks on metropolitan centres, most of the Porton Down experiments showed that biological attacks, although feasible, would be difficult to mount. There are many obstacles to overcome, such as producing the germs in sufficient quantities, storing them safely, and delivering them efficiently.

Britain's chemical weapons production is a highly lucrative business that has allegedly sold and provided manufacturing assistance (often in contravention of the none too stringent international law on chemical weapons) to countries including Israel, Iran, Sudan, Libya, Cyprus, India, Kenya, Kuwait, Malaysia, Nigeria, Oman, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Singapore, Slovenia, South Africa, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Tanzania, Thailand, Turkey, Uganda and Yemen, as well as building chemical plants in countries such as Iraq (See: "Thatcher backed British firm in building 'chemical weapons' plant in Iraq").

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