

Huge Germ-War Arsenal Awaiting Orders to Close

By William Terry
Special to The Washington Post

PINE BLUFF, Ark., Nov. 26 — Rising like a colossal gravestone near a corner of the Pine Bluff Arsenal is a windowless, seven-story building where even the most casual visitor winds up showering himself with germicidal soap.

It is called the Pilot Plant DBO — for direct base of biological operations — and it has been the hub of a massive U.S. germ and biological weapons program begun in the early 1950s.

Officials here are waiting for orders on when to start dismantling the operation in light of President Nixon's plan to eliminate the nation's stockpile of bacteriological weapons.

"We have no plans at this time," Col. Clyde L. Friar, commander of the arsenal, said today. "It will be (Secretary of Defense Melvin R.) Laird's job and that of the Department of Defense to come up with the procedures . . ." They will spell an end to some 600 jobs.

Tucked away in a 15,000-acre wilderness about 10 miles northwest of Pine Bluff, the DBO section at the arsenal has, since 1953, had the assignment of manufacturing and stockpiling the munitions of germ warfare.

The deadly cultures are kept in incubators in the pilot plant; so-called "finished weapons systems" are stored in many of the 278 "igloos" scattered across about half of the post.

Steel-reinforced vaults, the igloos look like hulking tornado shelters covered with four feet of soil and grass. They are used to hold the weapons for shipment to staging depots.

Under Glenwood C. Achorn Jr., and an elite corps of scientists, DBO workers here have reportedly busied themselves over the years producing and multiplying germ cultures such as anthrax, tularemia, Q fever, rickettsia (which causes Rocky Mountain spotted fever and typhus) and various toxins such as botulin and rattlesnake poison.

Others chores include loading biological agents in "shells" and conducting experiments on the mice and guinea pigs housed in the arsenal's three-story "animal farm."

Col. Friar would not comment on what steps may be used to dismantle the operation: whether the germs and toxin would simply be allowed to die slowly in the igloos or whether they would be destroyed by fire.

In any event, the program here was proceeding at a rapid clip until recently when Col. Friar told newsmen that a "curtailment" had been ordered on all shipments.

Much of the work has been concentrated in laboratories within the "hot" area of the Pilot Plant rooms containing "highly infectious materials." These are located in the building's

three-story basement and in some rooms above ground.

The biological agents are enclosed in glass containers called "bio cabinets"—all equipped with built-in arm protectors and gloves. Despite all this, anyone entering a spot where "live" germ cultures are kept must be inoculated.

Booster shots, Col. Friar said, are also required from time to time by the staff doctor and nurse assigned to guard against infection.

Beyond that, special precautions are taken simply upon entry into the Pilot Plant, whether the visitor is headed for a "hot area" or not. Guests are handed sterilized Government clothing, told to take off wrist-watches, eyeglasses, rings and the like, and finally required to shower with germicidal soap upon leaving.

Not all of the work done here will come to an end. Besides biological weapons, the arsenal has been heavily engaged in making chemical munitions such as white phosphorous rocket warheads, grenades and smoke-screen bombs.

The arsenal also maintains some stocks of chemical and nerve gas weapons which President Nixon did not order eliminated.

These include VX, a nerve gas so lethal that a single drop on the skin can cause death in seconds, and BZ, a chemical agent that produces violent and irrational behavior.

Col. Friar described the arsenal's work in biological warfare as similar to that of

a subcontractor in a production-line operation. He said all work on "cures," anti-toxin and immunization is done at Fort Detrick, Md., which also creates the biological cultures.

Pine Bluff has a different role in the network. A hypothetical example:

The government gets intelligence information that a foreign nation is conducting experiments with a deadly new germ or toxin called ABC. Scientists at Fort Detrick are then told to create an ABC culture.

This done, it is then sent to Pine Bluff where experiments are made to see if ABC can be multiplied in the laboratory, under what conditions it will flourish, and under what circumstances it will die.