

Frederick Post

FREDERICK, MD., MONDAY, NOVEMBER 3, 1969

Press Run Post News 14,100 Total 25,306

THIRTY-TWO

FORT DETRICK: A Biological Warfare As

Symbol Of Crisis

A Deterrent—No. 1

By RICHARD LEBHERZ

"I'd say that the deterrent role of an effective biological warfare program is probably the strongest argument for its existence," says Colonel E. M. Gershater, U. S. Army, Post Commander for Fort Detrick.

"To be an effective deterrent, however, two things must be true. The first is that the program has got to be strong from technological and logistical points of view. What is even more important, any potential enemy must know that we have an effective defense and an effective retaliatory posture. If other nations know what we could do in biological warfare, it will help to keep them honest. And at the same time, it will mean that our investment in time, money and men has amply paid off."

Certainly, as Colonel Gershater has said, one of the principal requirements for a weapon to serve as an effective deterrent is that it must be known to the enemy before-hand. The weapon must be known to the enemy either through previous usage -- say as the atomic bomb was used -- where the effect is a sur-

prise or a threat, or, another less drastic way than Hiroshima -- information about the weapon is released to the public, so that both the public and the enemy will come to understand what that weapon is and what it can do. The most encouraging sign recently in chemical and biological warfare, in America, is the gradual release of this kind of information from the Department of Defense.

For years now, especially after World War II, the high degree of secrecy on the part of the Department of Defense has been all-important with respect to chemical and biological warfare. This attitude was helpful in some ways, but harmful in others. This secrecy allowed suspicion to grow among the public throughout the United States. One heard, or one knew, or one suspected, for instance, what was going on in chemical and biological research at various Army posts throughout America, but one did not know for certain what that research was all about. Therefore, confused rumors were able to spread uncontrollably as fast as biological clouds are alleged to be capable of spreading over a countryside.

The men who run our government, from Presidents to Senators, to Congressmen, and yes, even members of the Department of Defense, have access to Fort Detrick. Instead of attending briefings in the Pentagon, or reading reports about BW, any one of them can come directly to Detrick, and obtain information first-hand from scientists who know what they are talking about, but not until now has the public had this opportunity. A few Congressmen and other officials have visited Fort Detrick, but some of the Post's most vociferous critics have not. While it is true that only a few senior Defense officials have as yet ever visited the Post, they are Colonel Gershater says, informed on a regular basis of the research and development program carried on there.

It might be interesting to note, however, that recently while the Secretary of Defense has been reported to advocate certain restrictions in the biological program, several years ago, government medical officers from the White House consulted with Detrick scientists regarding the protection that would be required, including immunizations, both for high government officials, and the President's family, in the event of active biological operations directed against this country.

But the fear and uncertainty still remain.

In explanation, Dr. Arnold G. Wedum, Director of Industrial Health and Safety at the Post, offers this hypothesis: "Man has an instinctive fear of disease, because fear of illness comes down to him from his earliest history." As Dr. Wedum speaks, you can visualize the time when men lived in caves. How perplexing it must have been for them when one member of the tribe took mysteriously ill, sickened and died, even worse when it happened to a number of people. During this entire time, there was no weapon to be seen, no enemy to be killed. There was only a possibility of an evil spirit on the loose. "I believe it is an avowed, ingrained fear," continues Dr. Wedum. "You see, a man can understand a bullet going into his flesh, or a lance sticking in his leg, because he can see what is attacking him. But a germ he cannot see, a germ he cannot fight against directly, and I think that is one of the main reasons why there is such a fear of biological warfare in this country and throughout the world."

Yet, there is another reason, besides the moral reaction, which is possibly uppermost in the public's mind in attempting to eliminate biological warfare.

That the War Department, during World War II, was able to develop the A-bomb in strictest secrecy and explode it full-blown over Japan, Americans, the whole world knew and did not forget. It was principally this realization, and yes, this suspicion, which placed an added burden on the development of both chemical and biological warfare in this country, and for years, up to this very day, this added burden has never been completely lifted. Now, there is more new and open information being released through scientific journals, and in the press -- some of it correct, and some of it not -- about nerve gases, about the alleged uncontrollability of bacteriological warfare, about soldiers acting as human volunteers in scientific experiments. Perhaps these releases ought to be accepted for what they are, a healthy sign that chemical and biological warfare have maybe reached a plateau they have been seeking. Rather than explode these fearful and deadly weapons against humanity one day without any foreknowledge, information about them is slowly being released currently to the general public.

Yet, even so, in today's world and, in particular the United States, Congress, and even the United Nations (where, by the way, many nations who are secretly working on bacteriological warfare would achieve a victory if America ceased its research), the released unclassified information about these weapons has been received in some quarters as a threat, instead of a revelation of what this country has been researching and perfecting in the way of chemical and biological warfare for our National defense.

The United Nations Security Council has recently published a pamphlet, "Chemical and Biological Weapons and the Effects of their Possible Use." This publication gives detailed descriptions of the various gases and bacteriological weapons and recommends, as any sane and healthy organization should, that this pursuit be ended by all nations, since the very evidence of this type of warfare is a threat to the human community.

But the obvious significance of what the United Nations may have overlooked in its strong reaction is the fact that these

means of warfare already exist among nations. They are in our midst. They are detailed so graphically, not only as to their composition but also as to their operational use, that this knowledge in itself can and may act as a deterrent to other nations throughout the world. Banning atmospheric testing of atomic bombs is one thing, believes the Department of Defense trying to banish chemical and biological warfare is another. Atomic bomb testing in any country in the world, we would eventually know about, because it is almost impossible to conceal. Chemical and biological warfare testing or production in any country -- even a small one -- would not necessarily come to our attention, because it is easily hidden.

Fort Detrick is under the overall control of the Department of Defense. There are some who work there who feel that the Department has, by keeping their work so classified, worked against its own best interests. The secrecy that has been associated with the post in the past makes everything they do suspect to the

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public, even when they are developing and researching new vaccines (including some that are already in use today) in order to save lives now and in the years to come. This is true whether we are in a war or not. It is perhaps for this reason that the gates of Fort Detrick are beginning to swing more widely open toward the world than has been true in the past.

Apparently, the years of study and research, of comparing intelligence reports obtained from other nations, by whatever means, has paid off. As a result, this country has become much more knowledgeable of the capabilities and limitations of chemical and biological warfare, and therefore need not unduly fear the great risks of technological surprise by an aggressive enemy. (Indeed, it might currently be more afraid of its precarious position in the American community.) This lessening of fear or tension at Detrick, this desire to report candidly to the public on its research and development efforts, should be understood in his recent light. Scientists in the biological warfare research program are trying to free themselves of some of the extra burden, that onus they have borne since 1943, and are slowly coming out into the open.

The threat of chemical and biological warfare is obviously here whether we like it or not. It is here in our midst just as strongly as the shadow of the H-bomb. We can try to ignore its existence, but the reality of it will not go away. We must learn to live with the threat of this new type of warfare, as we have had to learn to live with the H-bomb and saturation conventional bombing. But we must learn to live with it prudently.

The forces that shape the crisis at Fort Detrick, that make it what it is today -- a symbol of crisis -- are the same national forces and influences that shape the world we live in, that make Vietnam what it is, another symbol of crisis, in the American way of life, and life throughout the world.

It would be wrong, and it would be more than short-sighted of us as Americans, to look on research and development of biological warfare here in his country as pertaining to us alone, as being a means of warfare developed uniquely by us in this world. This is absolutely not so. There is strong reason to believe that at least 13 countries, including the Soviet Union, several of the NATO countries, and others, are conducting biological research programs of some magnitude. They all have their "Fort Detricks" tucked away, working on their own investigations.

The process that Detrick has gone through to learn about biological warfare, they have also gone through. They, too, have practiced rigorous secrecy, and they still do. The necessity for extreme caution in handling and controlling laboratory experiments has been as demanding to them as it has been to Fort Detrick's personnel.

There is no morality on a battlefield, so the saying goes, there is only expediency. The first thing any general (or nation) must jettison on a battlefield is his sense of what is moral and what is not. As the general stands before a map and says, "put this company in there, and one in there, and another over there," he is talking in terms of units, of figures, not in terms of human beings or morality. There are many who believe that since the atom bomb was exploded, followed by the development of the H-bomb, the entire world has become one

huge, potential battlefield.

Nations that used to require months to visit can be visited in a few hours. Whether we like it or not, whether we will admit it to ourselves and our peers or not, man has entered a new, limitless, fearful epoch -- the age of survival. Morality, some say, has become a luxury man can no longer afford, for the whole world has suddenly become more vulnerable, and many feel that the future is not bright unless we are willing to come to terms with the new conditions under which we live.

Isn't it odd now we have taken the trouble to go half-way across the world to Vietnam to learn this lesson? We say we went into this ancient country for moral reasons, for moral commitments. Yet we may have to abandon it not only for moral pressures, but for a very realistic reason, survival. Yet while we explain our strategic reasons for withdrawing from Vietnam, to keep the Communist expansion from spreading throughout Asia (as if most of it hasn't already succumbed), there are some who deplore this country's development and research in chemical and biological warfare, just as if the Communists have not and are not pursuing this same area inside the "Fort Detricks" that exist in their countries. Isn't this an inconsistency that does not make sense?

What we may hear from Detrick personnel, we can assume that if we visited other nations, and their chemical and biological warfare posts, we could also hear there. What we can see at Detrick, we could see there, too. Only, nowhere else of late do we hear of other nations opening up their gates or inviting the press inside. This should give us pause.

"Some people," exclaims Colonel Gershater, "think we release far too much information to the press, or print far too many results of our experiments in scientific journals." But can the Department of Defense, one wonders, ever release too much about its chemical and biological warfare programs to the public, if they are to act as a deterrent to our enemies?

Because of the Department of Defense need for what has been termed "supersecrecy," in its early beginnings at Fort Detrick, a certain suspicion has clung to its work, and along with the work, a certain taint, unfortunately, has rubbed off on its scientists, its engineers, its personnel, and its research. Indeed, this suspicion has been very hard on the morale of the many who work there.

If one believes the press, and the TV, and rumors, one would have to enter Fort Detrick with the mental image of Army officers inside the Post, rubbing their hands together gleefully, waiting to take their latest scientific discovery and turn it on the enemy, (whoever he might be at the time). One can imagine from the popular press stories that there are scientists inside sitting in the midst of their spotlessly clean laboratories, cultivating a new germ with a sadistic grin on their

lips. Pictures of human beings being used against their will as "guinea pigs" come to mind.

Therefore it is so anti-climatic to find that in the end, the Army officers, the scientists, the researchers inside Fort Detrick are essentially talented, professional, intelligent, experienced human beings, who believe themselves to be, above all else, exceedingly patriotic. They go to church on Sundays. They make mistakes. They also make discoveries.

If the Fort Detrick personnel are different, it may be because they are quite aware that the world has become much smaller. They are certainly aware of the pitfalls and the unreliability that infect human behavior. If anyone is conscious of the age of survival that many historians say we are in, it is these men. And if there is one area supposedly off-limits for them to talk about, that area is morality. So it comes as quite a shock, when first off, Colonel Gershater brings the subject up in his office on the Post.

"Any professional soldier who has seen war at first-hand, as I have," he says, looking very serious through his glasses, "is pretty well convinced that all wars are immoral... Most of us saw enough misery and suffering both during and after World War II to convince us forever that war is a nasty, miserable business. But until every nation is ready to bend all its swords into ploughshares, it is just a matter of na-

tional prudence to keep our powder dry, and to be prepared to defend our country." He leans back in his chair, his dark eyes alive with intensity.

"After all," he continues, "a bullet is no more or less moral than a germ. A bomb or a torpedo is no more or less moral than a pathogenic spray. And there certainly isn't anything moral about a Vietnam punji stake, but have you ever heard the dissenters protesting because the Viet Cong are using it against our soldiers?"

A punji stake, he tells me, is a rudimentary, primitive weapon made by the Viet Cong. The stake is sharpened to a point, then buried in the ground. When stepped on, even with thick GI soled shoes, the point is often able to penetrate and pierce the foot. The point is covered with human feces, and infection is virtually certain to set in. Bacteriology on a jungle basis, but to the victim just as serious. Yet even a primitive punji stake, to a GI, can act as an effective deterrent.

Since Colonel Gershater firmly believes that the principal justification for a biological research and development program is its ability to act as a deterrent (Detrick's research is mainly in biological areas, not in chemical, as is often mistakenly assumed), he was asked to discuss it a little more extensively.

"Well," he begins, "in 1941 it was known by our intelligence service that both the Germans and the Japanese had been developing chemical and biological warfare. When Fort Detrick was established here in 1943, we were starting literally from scratch. We had to learn a great deal very quickly, and in secret. We were at war, and we did not know if the enemy intended to employ the nerve gases or biological warfare that they had been working on. Thank God they didn't! We would not have been adequately prepared.

"So, try to picture what we had to face then. First of all, our scientists had to ask themselves this question: what kind of microorganisms could the enemy use against us? What kind of nerve gases could he use against us? Furthermore, we had to ask ourselves, how could we defend ourselves and counteract their microorganisms and their nerve gases?"

Somewhere along in there, the idea of breeding new forms of germs came into consideration. The idea of having a germ isolated by our own scientists, one that the other side did not know about, offered some military possibilities. Pathogens were induced into producing more potent toxins than some that were already known.

"We not only had to have weapons to confront our enemies offensively," he goes on to explain, "but we had to have a solid defense as well. If we were going to have to bring our weapons up against an enemy, he is forced to ask himself not only 'all right, what are they bringing up against us?' but also -- if he intends to survive very long -- 'what can they do to hurt us in retaliation?' If he knows, for instance, that we have positive means of protecting our armies from their weapons, he obviously will think twice before beginning an offensive against us."

The hope of biological warfare, then, is that these potentially harmful microorganisms will act as a deterrent and help prevent general war, much as the atomic bomb has done. Who would dare be foolish enough to assault a nation which has equal capabilities to retaliate? This is essentially the main line of reasoning that the Department of Defense has pursued and is continuing to pursue in its program. Since the United States did drop the atomic bomb on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, other nations might readily believe that we might not hesitate to drop chemicals or germs on an enemy. We have already shown our willingness in a national crisis to make that hard choice.

"There is another factor about biological warfare that makes it even more dangerous," says Colonel Gershater. "Biological warfare is not nearly so expensive to research and develop as, say instance, the hydrogen bomb. We know that a number of small countries are carrying on research in CBW. It is a weapon that smaller countries could develop and use if they chose to do so, while only the bigger, richer nations can afford the luxury of hydrogen bombs.

"So what are our alternatives in the future?" questions the Post Commander, sitting back comfortably on the chair. "There are those who have suggested that our nation's defense does not truly need a biological research program. They claim that

it is a form of warfare alien to traditional American restraint in the use of force. Fortunately or unfortunately, we cannot rely on other nations to respect this same tradition. While honest differences of opinion may well exist about our national policies, other nations will undoubtedly do what they believe to be in their own national interest. It would simply be unwise for any nation to give up unilaterally the defense options that may be critical at some future date, in exchange for international agreements that are and can be very easily broken."

He suddenly sits up straight. "Biological research differs significantly from nuclear research," he explains. "Elaborate and hard-to-conceal facilities and procedures are normal for nuclear research and development programs, but not essential for biological research and testing. Many biological agents can be produced in quantities that are not insignificant in just a well-equipped hospital laboratory or in a brewery, or for that matter, even in a home kitchen."

"No," he stands up suddenly, "no. . . it is absolutely not in our best national interests for us to abandon our research program and to have to rely on either all-out nuclear response or abject surrender as our only possible replies."

In an editorial in the Washington Post entitled, "Against Biological War," October 22, 1969, it states: "Defense Secretary Laird is not only supervising his department's review of chemical-biological warfare policies. He is doing something much more rare and commendable: changing his mind. From contending that the United States must make CBW preparations to deter a Soviet threat, he has reportedly moved to the position that this country should stop producing biological warfare agents altogether."

And then in the same editorial: "Chemical warfare is different. Such a well informed critic of CB policies as Representative Richard McCarthy notes that where biological weapons are strategic, chemical agents are for tactical use." (One wonders if he is talking about everyday DDT, while forgetting about the deadly nerve gases that the Germans perfected during World War II.) "Mr. McCarthy would retain a retaliatory CW capacity but would abandon BW. BW," he said in a weekend speech, "can be employed by the smallest nation -- therefore we have an interest in banning its use."

It is precisely because small nations can research and develop biological warfare that we cannot afford to cease our defense against it. And does the Congressman truly believe that if we say we will cease, those smaller nations will do so, also?

The question that must now be asked is this: Should we accept the judgment of Defense Secretary Laird, who has obtained his information from briefings and official reports, or are we to believe Congressman McCarthy, who has never spent a day at Fort Detrick, and has never conferred with any of the scientists who research and develop the microorganisms he is discussing so authoritatively? (He obviously knows very little about deadly chemical weapons).

Are we ever going to put some faith and confidence in the scientists and professional researchers who have been working at Detrick for 26 years in the area of biological defense? Are we ever going to listen to the only men who have had the direct experience and responsibility, to provide the necessary answers? Because, in the end, those men are the only ones who have potentially risked their lives in order to identify the answers so essential to the defense and security of our country.

(Part II - Project Whitecoat, will appear on Thursday, Nov. 6.)