

LSD Fatality

Is Linked to Detrick Unit

By Bill Richards

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FREDERICK, Md., July 10 — Like Chinese boxes, the super-secret biological and germ warfare research and development program that the U.S. Army conducted for years at Fort Detrick here contained secrets within secrets.

Before being phased out during the early 1970s, the program employed 1,685 persons, most of them civilians, who worked in the shadows of the Catocin Mountains on bacteriological research projects that are still classified secrets today.

One whitewashed cinder-block laboratory, Building 459, was the home of the program's Special Operations Division, described by a military spokesman as "a program within a program," also classified. About 50 bacteriologists and biological chemists worked under an Army colonel in Building 459 in research on disease agents as deadly as the bubonic plague.

Within Building 459, in the most secret project of all, a handful of researchers were entrusted with a contract let to the Special Operations Division in 1953 by the Central Intelligence Agency.

No one mentioned the CIA's name — even among themselves, according to one member of this group—and no one in the group really knew what any of the others was doing in his work on the contract. But one of the substances the group was studying for the CIA was LSD.

Periodically, according to a member of the group, the researchers on the CIA contract met to confer in out-

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of-the-way spots in western Maryland and West Virginia. It was at one of those gatherings in 1953 that a CIA agent slipped LSD into the after-dinner drink of Dr. Frank Olson, according to sources here.

The experience left Olson, who was known to his colleagues here as an outgoing, friendly man and a brilliant researcher, emotionally shaken and led to his apparent suicide when he jumped or fell from a 10th-story hotel window in New York, according to the account given by his wife and children at their press conference here today.

Olson's family said they believed he was accompanied to New York to see a psychiatrist by a CIA agent, Robert Lashbrook, and two of Olson's colleagues from the Special Operations Division at Fort Detrick.

Sources here familiar with the project said in interviews today that one of the Special Operations researchers who went with Olson to New York was Vincent L. Ruwet, 59, then Olson's supervisor and now a bacteriologist for Micro-Biological Associates in Bethesda, Md.

The sources said that Ruwet was, along with Olson, among those Special Operations researchers who were given LSD without their prior knowledge at the

meeting with the CIA in 1953. After the incident and Olson's death were mentioned, but without Olson's name, in the Rockefeller Commission report on the CIA's domestic activities, Ruwet confirmed the story and Olson's part in it to Olson's family last month, according to the sources.

Ruwet refused to confirm or deny this tonight, but he said he sought legal help from the Army today after learning that his name was connected with the LSD incident and that the Olson family was planning to sue the government over Olson's death.

"I'm seeking legal counsel for advice, not because I've done anything wrong," said Ruwet, who was an Army colonel at the time of the LSD incident. He retired from the Army after serving nine years ago as commander of the entire germ warfare installation at Fort Detrick.

"I believe I'm almost certain to be called either for the defense or for the government," Ruwet said. "I asked the Army to provide me with legal counsel as a retired officer. I'm not going to spend my hard-earned money on this."

Ruwet said his family was close to the Olson family and that he has spoken about the LSD incident with several members of the Olson family. He refused, however, to provide any information about the Special

Operations Divisions activities or about the events that led up to the Olson's death.

Other sources familiar with the project said here today that the CIA contract was so secret that members who were working on various aspects of it did not even discuss their work with each other, which was unusual in the close-knit Special Operations Division.

One of the former researchers on the project said they were experimenting with, among other things, the production of a gas that could be laced with LSD to immobilize an enemy force.

"Most of the work the Special Operations group was doing was defensive in nature," said the former researcher, who is now retired. "But this part obviously could have been offensive or defensive in nature."

Several former members of the project said Olson's death had never been adequately explained to them and that a number of rumors surrounded the New York trip.

"We were all shocked," said Dr. Joseph J. Stubbs, a bacteriologist who was a close friend of Olson. Stubbs said he did not previously know of the LSD incident, despite his friendship with Olson.

"I still can't believe that he committed suicide the way they said," said Stubbs. "It's like it's coming out of the blue now. I never heard anyone talk about LSD after Olson's death and I still

think there's something odd about this.

"We were all baffled by it," said Stubbs. "We couldn't look back on any reason why he did it. But we were not trained to understand that sort of thing."

According to the Rockefeller Commission report, the Olson family was told that his death had resulted from "circumstances arising out of an experiment undertaken in the course of his (Olson's) official duties for the United States government."

As Olson's superior, Ruwet said it was his job specifically to notify the family of the death. He declined, however, to say what he told the Olson family in 1953.

Ruwet said today Olson's death definitely resulted from a suicidal or accidental fall from the hotel window. "From the information that I am aware of," he said, "I can definitely say that there was no evidence of foul play in Olson's death and I think I'm in a position to say that confidently."

Following the dismantling of the U.S. biological warfare program, Fort Detrick was converted for use by a cancer research center and other Army uses. Building 459 is now being readied for use by the U.S. Army Medical Bioengineering Research and Development Laboratory, which an Army spokesman said develops medical support equipment like prosthetic devices and materials for Army field hospitals.