

Plague Case At Ft. Detrick Hushed in '59

By Bill Richards

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During a 1959 summit conference at Camp David, Md. between President Eisenhower and Russian Premier Nikita Khrushchev, Army biological warfare officials were scrambling to cover up the discovery of an outbreak of pneumonic plague less than 10 miles away at Ft. Detrick, a former Army senior officer said yesterday.

The discovery of the disease in a young soldier stationed at Detrick during the period of the summit conference was hushed up for weeks and its coincidence with Khrushchev's visit to the Maryland presidential retreat was never made clear, the former Army official said.

William Tigertt, who commanded the medical unit at Detrick from 1954 to 1961, said in an interview that the plague case was known at the highest levels of the Army.

"That case was very deliberately shut up for several weeks," Tigertt said, "and I'm not sure that Eisenhower or Khrushchev ever knew of it."

The soldier, Ralph L. Powell, who was also a lifeguard at a local public pool in Frederick, complained of feeling ill early in the morning, Tigertt said. "By 5 p.m. we had identified the disease and had him in the hospital," he said.

The plague case—the only one ever to occur at the Army's biological warfare headquarters at Frederick—was quickly cured by doctors there, Tigertt said. The soldier who contracted pneumonic plague, he said, was released from the base hospital about three weeks after being stricken with the disease.

Tigertt said the plague case was of pneumonic type, rather than bubonic—or the infamous "black" plague. Pneumonic plague attacks the respiratory system, while bubonic plague attacks the gland system, Tigertt said.

The disease is most easily transmitted, he said, in a cold dry climate and by personal contact, thus making it unlikely that it could have been spread easily during the late September visit by Khrushchev.

Tigertt said that in 1956 the base hospital at Detrick was handling between 25 and 30 cases of various exotic diseases that were spread from the laboratories and experimental animals to military and civilian workers at Detrick.

pretty much under control," Tigertt said, "and by 1964 there was almost nothing for the doctors in the hospital to do."

Virtually all the problems with disease cases came from civilian and military employees at the base, he said, and not with about 200 volunteers who were kept at the base hospital and deliberately inoculated with various strains of disease. "We were always right on top of the volunteers," Tigertt said "and knew exactly what was going on there."

The Army released the names late last week of three Frederick men who died from diseases they contracted while working at the biological warfare installation at Detrick.

Tigertt said that in one case a review board investigated the handling by Detrick military doctors of one of the deaths. The investigation was conducted after electrician Joel Willard died in 1958 of anthrax, Tigertt said.

A former bacteriologist at Detrick, who asked that his name not be used, said yesterday that the review board was commissioned because of the decision by Tigertt and other Detrick doctors to forego the administration of penicillin during Willard's illness.

Tigertt acknowledged yesterday that he could not recall that Willard ever received penicillin, one of the medicines ordinarily used to counteract anthrax. Instead, he said, the doctors decided to use other antibiotics on Willard, who died five days after the first signs of the disease.

"We weren't sure of what it was he had at first," Tigertt said. "If the man had been working in the anthrax laboratory we probably could have handled it differently."

A fact sheet on the three deaths that was released last Friday by the Army showed that three days before Willard's death blood samples taken by the doctors showed that he had anthrax.

Tigertt said yesterday that he could not recall details of the finding of the review group. "I may not have agreed with what they found, though," he said. No reprimand was administered to the doctors for the handling of Willard's case, according to Tigertt.

In another development, Maryland health secretary Dr. Neil Solomon announced yesterday that he has appointed a three-member team in his department to investigate possible irregularities in the treatment, disease reporting and death certificates of persons connected with the secret experiments at Ft. Detrick.

"In the event that the study indicates evidence of illegal actions, proper authorities will be so notified," Solomon said.

Tigertt, who retired from the Army in 1972 as a brigadier general and who now teaches at the University of Maryland Medical School, said that among the diseases that employees caught were Q fever, tularemia and Venezuelan equine encephalitis.

Several of the cases reached the critical stage before doctors at the hospital were able to reverse them, he said.

"We were able to get things