

# British germ bomb sprayed trawler

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THE crew of a British trawler was accidentally doused with plague germs during abortive Anglo-American attempts to develop a 'biological bomb' in highly secret experiments which have never been made public.

The spectre of mass deaths and a major scandal were averted in the summer of 1952 only because of the ineffectiveness of 'Operation Cauldron,' the code-name for the experiments carried out by the Royal Navy.

Inquiries by *The Observer* show that Britain decided after the war to continue biological research, passing its discoveries to Canada and the US, which alone could afford to manufacture weapons.

Last week, this newspaper presented detailed evidence, based on documents, to the Ministry of Defence. After studying the secret archives, the MoD said the files were still so highly classified that it had decided 'at a high level' to make no comment.

There appear to be three reasons for Whitehall's efforts to continue to hush up the details of Operation Cauldron:

- Britain has never admitted it continued work on biological weapons after the war;
- The accident, hushed up at the time, was caused by Royal Navy incompetence and the then Chief of Naval Staff destroyed most of the files;
- When an MP attempted to question the Government in 1979 about rumours of the experiment, Francis Pym—then Defence Secretary—gave a categorical reassurance which our informa-

## Exclusive

tion now shows to have been incorrect.

The plague tests, involving experiments on live monkeys, were authorised by General Kenneth Crawford, who, as head of munitions supply, chaired the chiefs of staff committee on biological warfare.

They were organised by Dr David Henderson, the head of Porton, the germ warfare establishment in Wiltshire, with a staff of 50 scientists.

Dr Henderson had personally overseen the contamination of Gruinard island in Scotland during the war, while developing an 'anthrax bomb'. (Gruinard is still contaminated, 40 years later.)

A 4,000-ton tank landing ship, the Ben Lomond, was converted into a floating laboratory and moored off Cellar Head on the Hebridean island of Lewis from June until mid-September 1952.

Cages of monkeys were sprayed with bacilli on a pontoon moored off-shore.

The logs of the Ben Lomond and its support ships were released under the 30-year rule.

These logs not only disclose the nature of the tests, but—what has never been admitted—that it was a joint Anglo-US-Canadian operation. Lieutenant Commander McNulty of the US Navy is recorded as taking part in the trials.

Just as spraying began in one of the final experiments, Navy officers were horrified to see the 400-ton Fleetwood trawler Carella rounding a nearby

island, ignoring the notified safety zone.

Bound for Iceland, she steamed straight into the path of the cloud of plague bacilli. Pneumonic plague takes about six days to incubate, but then kills within three or four days.

A destroyer was dispatched from the Clyde, 400 miles south, with a supply of vaccine, and ordered to stay over the horizon, tuned to the Carella's frequency.

If it picked up distress calls, the Navy was to steam up and board the trawler. The destroyer's doctor would be given the serum and told the reason for its use. A Department of Health emergency officer was also sent to the trawler's home port, Fleetwood.

By good luck, it turned out that the aerosol plague droplets dispersed over very short distances. It made the system ineffective as a weapon, but saved the trawler's crew.

US documents make clear the tripartite programme was not merely defensive, as Britain later claimed. At a joint conference in Canada in 1958, the US chemical corps minuted that 'it was agreed . . . studies should be continued on aerosols . . . all three countries should concentrate on the search for incapacitating and new-type lethal agents.'

In 1979, the Western Isles MP, Donald Stewart, questioned Mr Pym about the rumours in the Hebrides about the 1952 trials. Mr Pym wrote back on the advice of officials: 'I can assure you . . . they did not impinge in any way on the general public.' There is no reason to think he had any idea of the truth. MoD officials now find the trawler accident particularly difficult to explain.