

VA Shoots Bearer of Bad News

by Anthony L. Kimery

Two years ago, Johnny Roy, MD, a Veterans Administration doctor in Oklahoma City talked with the *Oklahoma Gazette* about preliminary findings in a unique study which he'd conducted on Vietnam veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange. He told the *Gazette*, which bills itself an "alternative" paper, that a high number of the vets he studied had suffered serious damage to their chromosomes.

After the *Gazette* published an article about Dr. Roy's study on November 20, 1985, editor Randy Splaingard learned that someone connected with the VA had contacted the *Gazette's* printer and asked him many questions about the paper's activities, management, finances, credibility and other matters unrelated to the story.

Shortly after that, Norma Luster, Oklahoma City Veterans Administration public affairs director, contacted the paper wanting to know about its sources for the article, including the doctor's name (which had been omitted).

Luster revealed that unidentified VA officials in Washington had requested an "official, special investigative report" about the *Gazette's* story and sources of information, but would provide no specifics about the motive of the investigation or intended uses of its results.

Vigorously defending VA attitudes toward the Agent Orange problem, Luster accused the *Gazette* of trying to make it appear that "the VA doesn't care about veterans." She said the information the VA sought would not be used in any "criminal reprisals" against the doctor.

Dr. Lawrence Hobson, director of the VA's Agent Orange Project Office in Washington, told the *Gazette* he was "singularly unimpressed with either the story or the doctor's findings."

When Dr. Roy, a urologist at the VA Medical Center in Oklahoma City, first talked with the *Gazette's* reporter, he expressed concern that the VA might retaliate for his releasing study findings which contradict its current posture that exposure to Agent Orange has not harmed any veterans.

Under the Reagan Administration, the VA has been adamant that veterans cannot link any of their illnesses—many of which independent scientists attribute to dioxin poisoning—to exposure to Agent Orange or any other chemicals used in Southeast Asia.

Roy told the *Gazette* the VA had made it clear to him that it does not endorse, much less encourage, studies of the kind he is conducting. He said the VA had strongly discouraged him from performing any studies that might show a definitive link between Agent Orange and damaged chromosomes, a cause of birth defects. Nevertheless, Roy told the paper that he planned to continue his research.

When the *Gazette* reported Roy's allegations about the VA's negative attitude toward his research, Hobson said Roy was "at liberty within the VA to do his own research without regard to the potential for what it might reveal." Hobson conceded, however, that the VA does not support Roy's research in any official capacity.

Although the VA is strongly downplay-

ing the significance of Roy's findings, Dr. Jerry Nida, Oklahoma's deputy health commissioner and chairman of the state's Agent Orange Outreach Committee, told the *Gazette*: "When I first reviewed (his) material, I was astonished." Other peers who have examined the preliminary findings of Roy's study agree.

"We found evidence indicating inordinate abnormalities in the individuals under study," Roy said. Twenty-four of 74 veterans—or 38 percent—known to have been exposed to Agent Orange have damaged chromosomes, the study shows.

"Chromosome aberrations in 38 percent such as is reflected by this study, even preliminarily, is certainly very high," Nida emphasized.

Seventeen of 62 veterans—27 percent—have "abnormal" semen, Roy's study shows, adding that among the general population, "maybe only 15 percent will show abnormalities in sperm analysis."

In reference to offspring, Roy's preliminary study shows that "of 59 individuals providing histories, 36—61 percent—reported at least one child with abnormalities, and in 15—25 percent—more than one child was affected.

"Eleven—19 percent—reported miscarriages and six—10 percent—reported more than one."

In the general population, Roy said, it is expected that one in five children will be born with some sort of birth defect.

So far, few studies such as Roy's has been initiated because of the high cost of performing a chromosome analysis—around \$500 per man.

"But it's obvious this needs to be done," Roy emphasized.

Doctor J. Rodman Seely, director of the Genetic Diagnostic Center at Oklahoma

Persian Gulf

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been said about the hazards facing thousands of sailors who are operating in a hostile war zone.

This emphasis changed somewhat last May when the USS Stark was hit by an Iraqi missile, killing 37 crewmembers and knocking the ship out of commission. While this incident has been scrutinized by the Pentagon and the press (see below), this concern with the safety of Navy personnel has receded in recent months. ON GUARD believes that US military personnel in the region continue to be at great risk and that more lives will be lost in the future. To make matters worse, the political objectives of the entire operation remain as muddled as ever.

In Vietnam, the Pentagon should have learned that a lightly armed guerilla force, taking maximum advantage of local terrain and support, could create havoc for a conventional military force, no matter how superior its firepower or numbers. In the Persian Gulf today, a rough analogy exists. By using one of the simplest forms of naval warfare, floating mines, the Iranians can create serious hazards for ships, no matter how sophisticated their armament.

In addition, the massive arms trade



City's Presbyterian Hospital said three years ago he found "indications of chromosome damage" to an Oklahoma City area veteran who had been exposed to Agent Orange and had fathered two children with birth defects.

More importantly, Seely noted, "there is suggestion" in his damaged chromosomes "of exposure to a clastogenic agent at sometime in his past," implying contamination by a herbicide.

That is an important finding, Roy says, when compared to his study showing an inordinate number of veterans with chromosome damages were exposed to dioxins.

"A link (to Agent Orange) is very clear," he said. "And while my study is a very narrow one, it shows significant aberrations. And yet these other studies say there can be found no deleterious effects visible from Agent Orange exposure," referring to recent studies such as that conducted by the National Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

As Roy put it: "My study does not jive with CDC's."

But, as other authorities have already pointed out, he too noted what are consid-

ered to be major flaws in the CDC study, such as CDC's insufficient testing to ascertain the extent of chromosome damage in the veterans it studied.

"I bet you we're going to find changes—damaged chromosomes—in many veterans known to be exposed to Agent Orange once we do more of these studies. My gut feeling is that we're on to something here, that we'll find more of the same."

Although Dr. Roy's research is continuing at the VA, ON GUARD learned that he "got in a lot of trouble" for talking about his study. Veterans who seek testing for possible chromosome damage have had "a hard time" getting in touch with him at the VA, according to David Carter, a veteran advocate who has been working closely with Roy and urged him to release his findings.

Meanwhile, the VA continues to discredit Dr. Roy's research when questioned about it, although some independent researchers believe that the finished study may be important in determining dioxin's influence on birth defects in vets' children.

which many parties (including White House operatives!) have conducted with both Iran and Iraq has added fuel to what is already a very hot fire. For example, Italian arms merchants recently sold Iran 30,000 mines which US sailors are laboriously searching for throughout the Gulf. Another example: the Silkworm missiles which the Iranians used in October to inflict serious damage on tankers flying the American flag in Kuwaiti waters were originally supplied to the Afghani rebels by the Pentagon. Essentially, US ships are operating in a zone where all the warring parties are armed to the teeth, with the most advanced weapons.

Let's return to the USS Stark tragedy. In September, copies of internal Navy reports on the incident were obtained by the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. They revealed that the Stark's crew lacked both firefighting equipment and training and that this is a common deficiency among Naval vessels in the Gulf. Sailors aboard the Stark had to use sledgehammers and axes (rather than power-tools common to modern fire departments) to cut through metal bulkheads in search of victims. Several sailors died because firefighters lacked adequate breathing equipment. In fact, the Navy concluded that if a tugboat from Bahrain had not helped the Stark crew douse the intense fire, the ship might well have sunk with a much greater loss of life.

In October, Admiral William Rowden told a Congressional panel that a key battle station on the Stark was unmanned at the time the ship was hit by two Iraqi missiles. Apparently, the sailor manning the ship's Phalanx antimissile gun had gone to the bathroom at the time of the attack, leaving no one to operate the radar-controlled weapon. None of the Stark's other guns were used to defend the ship either.

In a number of respects, the Stark tragedy resembles the Beirut disaster of October 1983, in which 241 Marines were blown up as they slept in their undefended barracks. Their commanders, who failed to organize a proper defense, were subsequently shielded by President Reagan who stated, nonsensically, that he alone "bore the blame" for the massive loss of life.

Following the Stark episode, one Navy investigator recommended that the ship's skipper, Captain Glenn Brindel be court-martialled for dereliction of duty. However, others decided (perhaps because they feared that he would implicate other high-ranking officers) that Brindel should be allowed to retire, with full retirement benefits.

The lesson for sailors currently in the Gulf is clear. Commanders will not be held accountable, no matter how negligently they perform their duties. The Pentagon must change these practices before more innocent young GIs lose their lives. □

by Tricia Critchfield

Submarine Instructor Learns Lessons about Nuclear Peril

A Navy instructor who has been training sailors to operate nuclear submarines has decided that he can no longer participate in training which includes the potential use of nuclear weapons.

Petty Officer James O'Keefe, 23, of Larchmont, N.Y. has applied for honorable discharge as a Conscientious Objector citing his opposition to the storage, testing, and planned use of nuclear missiles aboard the USS Ulysses S. Grant.

O'Keefe, stationed at Groton Sub Base, CT., has served in the Navy for five of his six year contract. As a result of his recruiting test scores in 1982, he was sent for two years' training to some of the Navy's most selective nuclear technician schools. He did well in class and was made an instructor for Trident prototypes in Saratoga Springs, NY.

In October 1986, O'Keefe was stationed on the USS Ulysses S. Grant in Portsmouth, NH. "My training had been purely academic until then; so far removed from the reality of the horror of nuclear war. I was satisfied I was doing no moral wrong."

The USS Grant is a submarine carrying Poseidon missiles. James' duties included operating the nuclear reactors which power the missiles and executing chemistry and radiation control in case of any accidents or leaks.

"It was on that submarine that my real training as an efficient killer began. My duties forced me to walk by the missile tubes many times a day. I learned how to help my ship carry out its mission at all costs, that is to launch nuclear missiles at 'enemy' cities, if ordered to do so by the President. I began to realize that these very missiles I was helping to power would literally vaporize the cities' inhabitants—reducing churches, hospitals and schools to ash and rubble! In this type of war there would be no discrimination as to who is



Petty Officer James O'Keefe

"It was on that submarine that my real training as an efficient killer began. I learned how to help my ship carry out its mission; to launch nuclear missiles at 'enemy cities' which would literally vaporize them."

O'Keefe speaks at protest rally at Electric Boat Shipyard, Quonset Pt., R.I. October 24, 1987



killed. If Americans were in that city they'd die too."

One week after filing for C.O. status, O'Keefe was removed from nuclear duty and has since been working in building maintenance and construction at Groton. Naval commanders, however, processed the application improperly (the Chaplain had never received a copy) and O'Keefe's claim was denied.

He was told that he would not be permitted to resubmit a second application or any letters supporting his sincerity. Petty Officer O'Keefe promptly filed an Article 138 against the Commander of Groton charging him with violating the regulations governing the processing of C.O. applications and citing unfairness, in that letters of support were not permitted.

Two days after filing the Article 138, O'Keefe was summoned by the Lt. Commander and told that he could resubmit another application if he dropped the charges. James agreed and told ON GUARD, "Up until I filed the Article 138, they had been ignoring me. I was going to receive orders for sub duty and I would have refused them. Now the Lt. Cmdr. himself is overseeing the process. I feel confident I'll receive C.O. status or they know they'll hear more from me."

Meanwhile, James O'Keefe remains active with several veterans' peace organizations and can be seen at Groton's main gate boldly speaking out as well as distributing ON GUARD and other materials to those who, like himself, wear the uniform of the USN. □

H.E.R.O.

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explode accidentally or intentionally, as by terrorists.

Sources of HERO-inducing electromagnetic radiation include electrical current emitted by: two-way radios, TV and radio transmitters, high-tension power lines, electrical generating and transmitting plants, lightning and electrostatic discharge (ESD).

Describing the defendants' actions as "arbitrary and capricious," the coalition cited the widespread use of a fuse trigger known as an electro-explosive device (EED) as particularly dangerous and a known HERO risk.

The plaintiffs seek an injunction to halt further development, production, assembly, handling, storage, deployment and transportation of weapons containing EEDs, pending an environmental impact statement intended to assess and mitigate the use of EEDs and the overall HERO danger. Further, the coalition demands an immediate fix for the 260 weapons systems, comprising hundreds of weapons, known to be HERO-unsafe.

Navy HERO experts, compiling data from all military branches, have documented 25 HERO suspect accidents through 1980. These include the accidental ejection of a ZUNI rocket warhead across the deck of the USS Forrester in 1967, which killed hundreds, and the explosion of six Thor and Polaris missiles at Cape Canaveral in 1959.

Most recent known HERO accidents include the 1985 explosion of a Pershing II missile motor, as a result of ESD, at Fort Redleg, West Germany, the misfiring of three NASA rockets in June 1987, and the malfunction of an Atlas Centaur rocket in March 1987, as a result of nearby lightning strikes.

The plaintiffs include: Patricia Axelrod, of Key West, Florida; The Natural Rights Center, of Summertown, Tennessee; the National Peace Academy, of Columbus, Ohio; and Thomas K. Seimer, of Columbus, Ohio, former Missile Division Contract Data Manager with Rockwell International. □

—Courtesy of RECON

Victory is Sweet for Sgt. Ferguson

by Tricia Critchfield

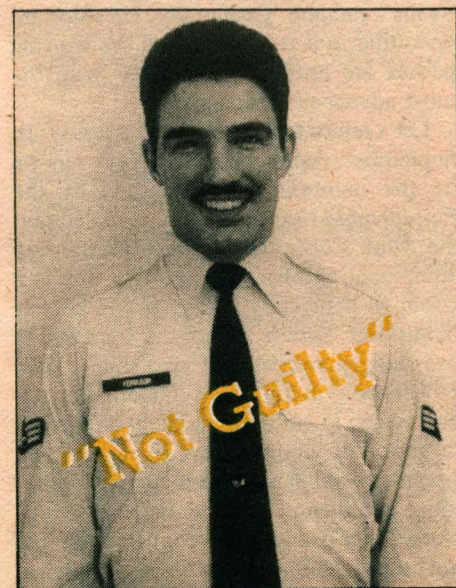
Sergeant Bruce Ferguson, whose case was featured in ON GUARD prior to his trial was found NOT guilty of all charges at a general court-martial conducted at Hanscom Air Force Base, Massachusetts in August, 1987. He was represented during his two-week trial by Attorney Louis Font of Cambridge, Massachusetts, who is counsel to Citizen Soldier. Sergeant Ferguson was tried before a jury of five officers and five enlisted persons. The charges involved alleged use and possession of marijuana and cocaine, introduction of drugs onto a military base, and attempted manufacture of "crack" inside the command post.

The command post is the most sensitive, war-related area on base, and is personally used by the Lieutenant General who commands the Electronic Systems Division which includes Hanscom field and other bases on the East Coast.

Sergeant Ferguson maintained for months prior to trial, including at a Citizen Soldier press conference in Boston that he was being subjected to a retaliatory, trumped-up prosecution because he had submitted a questionnaire up the chain of command highly critical of the commanding general at Hanscom Air Force base and

the general's command post. He had filled out this job-related questionnaire as part of his duties as a "command and control specialist" working inside the command post.

The evidence at trial showed that all prosecution witnesses were either Office of Special Investigation (OSI) agents, or working for the OSI. The prosecution gave the jury a five-page document, written by



Sgt. Bruce Ferguson

OSI agents which purported to be a "confession" made by Sergeant Ferguson. The prosecution also used seven hours of tape recordings made by undercover agents of Sergeant Ferguson's statements to another agent. As the trial progressed, however, the jury learned that the acts that Sergeant Ferguson was accused of committing had been carefully planned and instigated by OSI, or never took place. OSI had worked actively in concert with the command for a period of months to manufacture a case against Sergeant Ferguson.

According to Attorney Font, "This case shows that a military jury of officer and enlisted members can be fair but only if educated by the defense throughout the trial, and only if the command keeps their hands off the jury. Here, by the time the trial was over, the jury knew the whole case was a frame-up."

Sergeant Ferguson, who had been held in service past his date of discharge for trial, and who faced decades in prison if convicted, received an Honorable Discharge. "From the very beginning I knew the charges were made to discredit me and separate me from my friends and family," he said. "It feels wonderful to be vindicated by a military jury hand-picked by the same commanding general I had criticized." □

Collection Number: AG1977

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PUBLISHER:

Publisher:- Historical Papers Research Archive

Location:- Johannesburg

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