

# GI Guinea Pigs

## Book review

Coquilles St. Jacques (Peter Werbe)

1981

a review of

*GI Guinea Pigs: How the Pentagon Exposed Our Troops to Dangers More Deadly Than War* by Michael Uhl and Tod Ensign. Playboy Press, 1980, 256 pp., \$6.95

This account of the exposure of GIs to the atomic tests of the 1950s and the toxic herbicides in Vietnam is a teeth gritter of a story—both from horror and from anger.

Part One of *GI Guinea Pigs* employs a series of personal accounts from GIs who witnessed the above ground nuclear blasts at the Nevada and Bikini Atoll test sites to trace the effects the radiation exposure had on the soldiers. In those years, when the U.S. was also banging the nuclear war drums and atomic confrontation with the Soviet Union seemed just around the corner, a combat readiness for troops seasoned in “tactical” nuclear weapons seemed essential to the Pentagon.

The Nevada testing grounds, some 60 miles from Las Vegas, was the scene of numerous atomic detonations, many of which had American G.I.’s placed as close as 2,000 yards from ground zero. The intent was to both gauge the effects of the blast on humans (“guinea pigs,” is indeed, an apt phrase) and also, as one officer put it, to dispel the “unjustified awe in the minds of soldiers about the A-bomb...”

Tactical nuclear strikes on North Korean and Chinese positions during the Korean war were under serious consideration at the time and the military wanted to see the reaction of men in a simulated combat situation. Even though the affects of radiation poisoning were well known to government authorities through the aftermath of the totally unjustifiable World War II bombings of Japan (See “Hiroshima: First Shot of World War III,” FE #285, August 1977) the dangers to the observers were minimized and even ridiculed. After the blasts, decontamination procedures amounted to what you see in the accompanying photo—being swept off with a broom, or in “bad” cases, Tide soap was employed for a wash-down.

The tests soon became history as the atmospheric test ban went into effect in the 1960s, but suddenly, incredibly high incidences of cancer began to crop up among Nevada residents and the GIs who had been present at the test sites.

The government reaction was to be expected: denial that the cancer epidemic was related to the testing, and the refusal to grant service-related disability payments to the men and their families who were being decimated by cancer.

The ex-GIs have organized pressure groups, lobbied Congress, and begun law suits but their efforts to date have not resulted in much. It is an era officialdom wants swept under the rug.

Part Two of the book covers the exposure to the deadly compound Agent Orange of thousands of U.S. troops during the campaign to “defoliate” the Vietnamese country side which lasted for almost the duration of the war. Exposure has resulted in marked increases in cancer, birth defects in offspring, skin diseases, psychological problems and a host of other congenital problems. However, since some of the same lethal chemicals are being used

today on public highways, the government has made every effort to deny the effects that were cropping up were connected to contact with Agent Orange. It was through the determined efforts of the authors of this book, and the organization they founded—Citizen Soldier—that the first work was done to expose the complex of chemical industry and government lies which attempted to cover-up the tragedy.

Citizen Soldier helped coordinate the first gathering of statements and information from the exposed soldiers and finally helped prepare the massive class-action lawsuit filed against the government. These cases are still pending in the courts, and although the government has given token recognition of a “problem” existing, it still maintains its policy of denial and sandbagging, hoping the whole thing will just go away.

A final note: if the U.S. soldiers involved over ten years of spraying suffered such a multitude of problems as a result of only minor exposures to the chemicals, what must be the effect on the residents of the region—the Vietnamese—who were the direct and continuous targets of the killer sprays? Only the word genocide comes to mind.

Military technology at the service of the state is nothing new in the annals of warfare nor is the callous willingness to sacrifice the common soldier for its needs, but the modern epoch has brought about the same process which has leached into civilian life as well. In the two cases chronicled, it was not just the immediate effect of war and battle that each soldier faced, but an insidious lingering after effect, as well. “It’s all safe,” the A-bomb observers were told, as were the GI herbicide handlers, by self-assured experts. These were the same “experts” who gave their assurances about DDT, x-rays, PBB, thalidomide, DES, and a host of other products being a wonderful and beneficial boon only to find out later their deadly properties.

Then, hands are thrown up, “How could we ever have been so foolish back then?; but now these current products; they’re perfectly safe!”

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Fifth Estate #307, November 19, 1981

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