

Australia's Shocking War Crimes

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From the Archives: Australian Army uses Soldiers, POWs and Jews in Experiments

Disabled soldiers and Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi Germany were used as human guinea pigs for medical experiments by the Australian Army during World War II.



Victim induced by Army to insert arm into Malaria infested Mosquito box

Giant British and United States drug companies profited from the experiments that involved deliberately infecting 'volunteers' with malaria.

Former human guinea pigs say the experiments permanently damaged their health, but many have been unsuccessful in claiming war service benefits.

Also among hundreds used in the research were soldiers recovering from surgery, illnesses and injuries and an unknown number of German and Italian men recruited for army labour companies from internment camps.

The Queensland-based experiments began in 1943 and continued for six months after the end of the war with Japan. Documents indicate that the work was carried out in Australia because America and Britain were reluctant to risk using their own soldiers.

By April 1946 more than 850 healthy, injured and convalescing men had been used.

Although partly recorded in official war histories, no mention is made of the use of Jewish refugees, alien internees or disabled soldiers, and details of the work were scattered after 1946. These included personal medical files of soldiers and former internees that Australian authorities later said could not be found.

The Age has pieced together details of the unit's work from interviews with former guinea pigs and staff and documents held at the Australian Academy of Science, the Australian War Memorial, army personnel records, the Archive of Australian Judaica at the University of Sydney, international medical journals and the Australian Government Archive.

A six-month investigation by The Age has found that some of those experimented on included

German and Austrian Jewish refugees interned and forcibly sent to Australia by Britain on board the ship Dunera in 1940.

The Dunera men were recruited for the experiment after joining the army's 8th Employment Company, where they were reduced to menial manual work on the docks after being prevented from volunteering for active duty. At least some were used to test a new anti-malarial drug developed by the giant British chemical company ICI.

Official records questioned the ability of an apparently Italian volunteer from a different internee-based labour company to understand English. The volunteer, who "does not speak the English well" was experimented on after the war.

Drugs tested during the experiments were later marketed internationally by ICI and manufactured by the American chemical company Winthrop. When new British and US drugs needed testing, the Australian Army trawled convalescent depots and military hospitals for volunteers.

Records obtained by The Age refer to men with a range of physical disabilities being used, including those with amputated limbs.

The experiments, which continued long after the immediate threat of high malaria casualties in Australian troops in New Guinea had been overcome, involved abnormally intense malaria infections.

Some men were given doses equivalent to being bitten by 13,000 normally infected mosquitoes. The infections were inflicted by using specially bred mosquitoes or giving men transfusions of up to 800cc of infected blood. One man received 35 doses of infected blood.

Other volunteers were given excessively high doses of experimental drugs to test for toxic side effects.

Volunteers have told of continuing health problems, which they say resulted from the experiments conducted at Cairns and Rocky Creek in Queensland between June 1943 and April 1946.

But in many cases requests for disability pensions or gold cards for free medical treatment for health problems allegedly caused by the experiments have been rejected by the Department of Veteran Affairs.

None of those interviewed received follow-up medical checks after they left the army. Some have been told by the army that medical records relating to their roles in the experiments cannot be found.

Documents show American authorities were prepared to use only small numbers of volunteer prisoners in state penitentiaries as guinea pigs for malaria research. British authorities thought it was too risky to deliberately infect its own soldiers with recurring malaria.

One of the Cairns researchers criticised the reluctance of the Americans and British to use their own men as guinea pigs as "shortsighted" after visiting both countries in 1944.

Dr Max Swan, who helped establish the Medical Research Unit in 1943 and worked as a laboratory technician during the experiments, said calculated risks were taken with volunteers, including delaying treatment to allow severe malarial infections to develop.

He said former guinea pigs now deserved greater recognition and war service benefits, either in the form of an ex gratia payment or higher pension payments.

OUR WARTIME HUMAN GUINEA PIGS - AUSTRALIAN SOLDIERS USED BY THEIR OWN GOVERNMENT FOR MEDICAL EXPERIMENTS.

The men who made their way to Cairns from all corners of Australia to act as human guinea pigs in army malaria experiments went for the very best of reasons.

They believed they were helping to win World War II.

And initially they were.

But long after the casualty rates among Australian troops fighting in New Guinea had been dramatically reduced - and for six months after the end of the war - the volunteers kept arriving.

They were there to be used to test American and British experimental drugs. What they were not told was that the American and British authorities were not prepared to put their own troops at risk by deliberately infecting them with malaria.

Exactly how many made the journey to the Australian Army's Medical Research Unit remains a mystery, but is believed to be more than 850.

Records of three years of experiments were taken to London by the head of the unit, Brigadier Neil Hamilton Fairley, after the war. (Hamilton Fairley die in 1966) Other documents were scattered among various federal government and defence departments.

After the war some of the volunteers or their widows wrote to the army asking for medical records of the experiments to use in applications for pensions. They were told that no records of their parts in the experiments were on their medical files.

The Age has pieced together details of the unit's work from interviews with former guinea pigs and staff and documents held at the Australian Academy of Science, the Australian War Memorial, army personnel records, the Archive of Australian Judaica at the University of Sydney, international medical journals and the Australian Government Archive.

Documents show that as the unit's work expanded and the need for guinea pigs grew, increasing numbers of volunteers were found in convalescent depots, where men were recovering from illnesses, injury and surgery.

One report from army headquarters, stamped secret, said: "Owing to the shortage of A class personnel, it is desired to draw...volunteers from convalescent depots. About 100 have already been obtained from depots in southern Queensland, but this source is becoming exhausted. Probably another 200 will be required."

Another report said volunteers included men "not fit for front line duty on account of certain physical disabilities". "Several men with one arm, one leg or one eye missing ... were used," it said.

In the first 12 months of its work, the MRU was involved in a race to find an effective drug to replace quinine, which became virtually unobtainable after the Japanese overran Java.

Malaria took a heavy toll of Australian troops until the unit proved in 1944 that the drug Atebrin, which had been developed by German scientists in 1931, was an effective suppressant if taken regularly.

But the pace of experimentation at the MRU at Cairns and the unit's other station at Rocky Creek in Queensland did not slacken.

Nor was the news of Atebrin's success shared with those courageously volunteering to be human guinea pigs.

Those who took part in experiments after late 1944 have told *The Age* that when appeals were made for volunteers they were told that Allied troops were still "dying like flies" from malaria.

These volunteers were used to test new drugs developed by the Americans and British, who were reluctant to risk deliberately infecting their own troops with malaria.

American research was limited to using small numbers of volunteer prisoners in civilian jails. British research surrounded the use of returned soldiers already suffering from malaria.

"In both countries a short-sighted policy of unwillingness to use service volunteers has seriously curtailed the experimental human material available," one senior Australian researcher reported on his return from a trip to the US and Britain in 1944.

Communiques between Hamilton Fairley and the Australian military mission in Washington show the Americans were worried that the Cairns project might be shut down before the new drugs could be tested.

"The only fear here is that the unit might disband on completion of the Atebrin studies ..." the mission in Washington told Hamilton Fairley in August 1944.

But the fear expressed by the military mission in Washington was short-lived. Australian authorities agreed to allow the Cairns unit to run human trials on two new American drugs, Sontoquine and Chloroquine.

And in early 1945, during a visit to London Hamilton Fairley enthusiastically offered the same opportunity to Britain, where a new drug called Paludrine had been successfully tested on birds.

In August 1944, the Australian military forces adjutant-general in Melbourne notified the headquarters of all state commands of the urgent need for human guinea pigs for the American drugs.

It set allotments for the number of men each state command would have to provide over the coming six months - a total of 160.

"B class men with certain types of defective hearing or vision or those with mechanical disabilities...will be accepted," the instructions said.

In February 1945 Hamilton Fairley messaged one of his subordinates from London that one hundred more guinea pigs should be collected as soon as possible at Cairns because the British "urgently desire" to have the new ICI drug Paludrine tested.

Eventually more than 200 men were used in the Paludrine experiments, including Jewish refugees who had fled Nazi Germany.

"Actually the results on experimentally infected volunteers have come out extraordinarily well, but I hope nobody calculates the cost," Hamilton Fairley wrote to a British colleague in December 1945.

"About 200 volunteers have been used in different capacities to date quite apart from the large number of malignant tertian infections and relapsing benign tertian patients receiving treatment."

In the final weeks of the MRU's work, with the supply of volunteers drying up, the unit's staff used themselves for tests on Paludrine.

ICI took an increased interest in the Cairns experiments between the end of the war and April 1946, when the MRU's work finally ceased.

Paludrine was eventually patented and successfully marketed worldwide by ICI. Chloroquine was marketed worldwide by American drug companies.

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