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Mystery illness blamed on depleted uranium

By Deborah Hastings
Associated Press

NEW YORK — It takes at least 10 minutes and a large glass of orange juice to wash down all the pills — morphine, methadone, a muscle relaxant, an antidepressant, a stool softener. Viagra for sexual dysfunction. Valium for his nerves.

Four hours later, Herbert Reed will swallow another 15 milligrams of morphine to cut the pain clenching every part of his body. He will do it twice more before the day is done.

Since he left a bombed-out train depot in Iraq, his gums bleed. There is more blood in his urine and stool. Bright light hurts his eyes. A tumor has been removed from his thyroid. Rashes erupt everywhere, itching so badly they seem to live inside his skin. His joints ache. Migraines cleave his skull.

There is something massively wrong with Herbert Reed, though no one is sure what it is. He believes, but cannot convince anyone caring for him, that the military's new favorite weapon has made him terrifyingly sick.

In the sprawling bureaucracy of the Department of Veterans Affairs, he has many caretakers. An internist, a neurologist, a pain-management specialist, a psychologist, an orthopedic surgeon and a dermatologist. He cannot function without his stupefying arsenal of medications, but they exact a high price.

"I'm just a zombie walking around," he says.

NONSTOP SUFFERING

Herbert Reed is an imposing man, broad shouldered and tall. He strides into the VA Medical Center in the Bronx. His hair is perfect, his shirt spotless, his jeans sharply creased. But there is a limp. It is the only sign that he is extremely sick.

Sleep offers no release. He dreams of gunfire and bombs and soldiers who scream for help. He never gets there in time.

At 54, he is a veteran of two wars and a 20-year veteran of the New York Police Department. He says he was in perfect health before serving in Iraq.

According to military guidelines, he should have been trained about the risks of depleted uranium, and about ways to avoid prolonged exposure to its toxicity and radioactivity.

'IT'S ALL IN YOUR HEAD'

Reed believes depleted uranium, also called DU, has contaminated him. He now walks point in a vitriolic war over the Pentagon's arsenal of it — thousands of shells and hundreds of tanks coated with the metal that is radioactive, chemically toxic and nearly twice as dense as lead.

A shell coated with depleted uranium pierces a tank like a hot knife through butter. As tank armor, it repels artillery assaults. It also



Herbert Reed, 54, says he has required an arsenal of medicines since being exposed to radioactive depleted uranium while serving in Iraq with the 442nd Military Police out of New York. Taking so much medication, he says, makes him feel like "just a zombie walking around."

MARY ANN CHASTAIN | Associated Press

leaves behind a fine radioactive dust with a half-life of 4.5 billion years.

Depleted uranium is the garbage left from producing enriched uranium for nuclear weapons and energy plants. The U.S. has an estimated 1.5 billion pounds of it, sitting in hazardous-storage sites across the country. Meaning it is plentiful and cheap as well as highly effective.

Reed says he unknowingly breathed DU dust while living with his unit in Samawah, Iraq. He was medevaced out in 2003 because of herniated spinal discs. Then began a series of symptoms he'd never experienced in his previously healthy life.

At Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington, D.C., he ran into a buddy from his unit. And another and another. They began to talk. "We all had migraines. We all felt sick," Reed says. "The doctors said, 'It's all in your head.' "

Then the medic from their unit showed up. He, too, was suffering. That made eight sick soldiers from the 442nd Military Police, an Army National Guard unit of mostly cops and correctional officers from the New York area.

But the medic knew something the others didn't.

Dutch marines had taken over the abandoned train depot, dubbed Camp Smitty, which was surrounded by tank skeletons and unexploded ordnance. They'd brought radiation-detection devices. The readings were so hot, the Dutch set up camp in the middle of the desert rather than live in the station ruins.

"We got on the Internet," Reed said, "and we started researching depleted uranium."

Then they hired a lawyer.

DIFFERING TEST RESULTS

Reed, Gerard Matthew, Raymond Ramos, Hector Vega, Augustin Matos, Anthony Yonnone, Jerry Ojeda and Anthony Phillip all have DU in their urine, according to tests available only overseas.

In December 2003, their samples were sent to Germany, where they were analyzed by a Frankfurt professor who developed a DU test with Randall Parrish, a professor of isotope geology at the University of Leicester in Britain.

The veterans, using their positive results as evidence, have sued the Army, saying officials knew the hazards of DU but concealed the risks.

The Department of Defense says DU is powerful and safe.

Four of the highest-registering samples from Frankfurt were sent to the VA. The results came back negative, Reed said. "Their test just isn't as sophisticated," he said.

The VA's testing methodology is safe and accurate, the agency says. More than 2,100 soldiers from the war have asked to be tested; only eight had DU in their urine, the VA said.

The term "depleted uranium" is linguistically radioactive. Simply utter the words, and heads shake, eyes roll, opinions are yelled from all sides.

Steve Robinson of the National Gulf War Resource Center, which helps veterans with various problems, says: "The Department of Defense takes the position that you can eat it (DU) for breakfast and it poses no threat at all. Then you have far-left groups that ... declare it a crime against humanity."

An estimated 286 tons of DU munitions were fired by the U.S. in Iraq and Kuwait in 1991. An estimated 130 tons were shot toppling Saddam Hussein.

At the other end are conspiracy theorists and Internet proselytizers who say using such weapons constitutes genocide.

There are several studies on how DU affects animals, though their results are not, of course, directly applicable to humans. Military

research on mice shows that DU can enter the bloodstream and come to rest in bones, the brain, kidneys and lymph nodes. Other research in rats shows that DU can result in cancerous tumors and genetic mutations, and lead to birth defects.

Iraqi doctors reported significant increases in birth defects and childhood cancers after the 1991 invasion.

DU can contaminate soil and water, and coat buildings with radioactive dust. In 2005, the U.N. Environmental Program identified 311 polluted sites in Iraq. Cleaning them will take at least \$40 million and several years, the agency said.

Fifteen years after DU was first used in battle, there is only one U.S. government study monitoring veterans exposed to DU. Just 32 soldiers are in the voluntary survey.

It will take years to determine to what extent DU affected soldiers from this war. After Vietnam, veterans, in numbers that grew with the passage of time, complained of joint aches, night sweats, bloody feces, migraine headaches, unexplained rashes and violent behavior; some developed cancers. It took more than 25 years for the Pentagon to acknowledge that the corrosive defoliant Agent Orange was linked to those sufferings.


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RADIOACTIVE WEAPONS

An estimated 286 tons of depleted uranium munitions were fired by the U.S. in Iraq and Kuwait in 1991. An estimated 130 tons were used in the 2003 invasion of Iraq. DU, a chemical toxin, is about 60 percent as radioactive as natural uranium.

War workhorses that use radiated ammunition

M-1 ABRAMS TANK Up to 120mm shell	BRADLEY FIGHTING VEHICLE 30mm canon	A-10 WARTHOG 30mm canon
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In armor

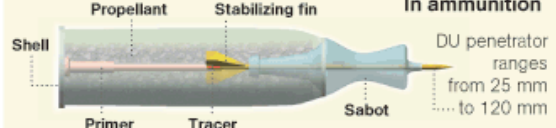


Depleted uranium armor
1.6 times as dense as lead

Inner layer of steel

Outer layer of steel

In ammunition



Propellant Stabilizing fin DU penetrator ranges from 25 mm to 120 mm

Shell Primer Tracer Sabot



Rounds fired by Abrams tanks contain about 9 pounds of DU

Sabot falls away

Dart sharpens as it penetrates armor or structure

Tracer can track trajectory

Small bits of DU ignite, causing secondary explosions

Sources: U.S. Army; GlobalSecurity.org Associated Press

Back

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