

The Nerve Gas Story

The report which follows was written by James Polk, of the Associated Press, after a visit to a nerve gas plant at Newport, Ind. A shorter version went out on the regular A.P. wires, and this longer one was distributed in the Indiana area, no doubt because of the "local angle." This is the report as it appeared in the Vincennes Sun-Commercial on April 22, 1964.

Under the headline, "Nerve Gas: The Story Behind the Story," Laurence Barrett wrote in the New York Herald-Tribune (April 22) that in exchange for the privilege of being able to visit the sensitive facilities—after waiting since late 1962 for approval of his request—Polk was required to submit his story for censorship. He quoted Assistant Defense Secretary Arthur Sylvester as saying it was "common" for the Pentagon to make such arrangements with reporters. In the case of Polk's story, Barrett said, it was rejected immediately—but the A.P. sent it out anyway. Sylvester said, "It was our fault," but he would not say what it was that made the story objectionable. Barrett speculated that "the Pentagon was simply opposed to publication of a story that emphasized American production of a weapon the use of which is widely regarded as dirty pool."

By James Polk

NEWPORT, Ind. (AP)—In a cloistered complex of buildings on a hill in western Indiana, the United States brews and bottles one of war's deadliest weapons.

The killer chemical which emerges from the plant's ovens and chilling chamber is nerve gas.

A stealthy assassin, it is odorless, tasteless and virtually invisible. A drop, breathed or soaked into the skin, can be fatal.

At the end of this unique assembly line laced with 40 miles of pipes, the nerve gas is poured into rockets, land mines and artillery shells—destination secret.

The facility, housed in a former atomic energy installation now known as the Newport Chemical Plant, is the nation's major supply center for this lethal lady-in-waiting.

The plant has now been in operation 24 hours a day for three years. Details on the gas are curtailed behind security requirements, but one plant official describes the center's product as "hundreds of times more toxic" than any commercial chemical.

An Army publication says only that the gas can "cause death within four minutes." Less than a minute's exposure can kill, according to a congressional report.

The same Army handbook adds that the nerve gases are so potent that, delivered only on a small scale, their effects can approach that of nuclear weapons.

"This stuff here was originally developed as an insecticide," says a vice president of the FMC Corporation, which operates the plant under a government contract.

The chemicals which form the nerve gas are mixed and boiled in a plumber's nightmare of pipes, furnaces, pumping towers and reaction vats. At one point, the product looks like frozen milk.

In a separate building, the short-range rockets, along with other munitions, are assembled and explosive charges are attached. The nerve gas is pumped into the rockets by automatic equipment in a sealed compartment.

The device fills the rocket, x-rays it to measure the contents, rinses and dries it, and checks for leaks. If escaping gas is detected, a bell rings, lights flash and the machine splashes the rocket with purple paint.

From Newport, the rockets and artillery shells are shipped into what is termed "normal Army supply channels" by Lt. Col. William J. Tisdale, the officer in charge at the plant. He will say no more.

"Everything we have here we would like for the public to know, but we don't want the Russians to know," Tisdale says.

The nerve gas, a label which also covers liquid forms, is dispersed in a spray when the rocket is exploded. It paralyzes and kills by attacking the body's cholinesterase, a key substance in transmitting nerve signals for muscles to expand.

When this fluid is crippled, muscles

continue to constrict and the body strangles its own vital organs. There is an antidote, atropine, if injected quickly, but the gas gives no warning until it has struck.

Manufacture is inexpensive. The Newport operation spends about \$3½ million annually—less than the cost of one jet bomber.

The U.S. operates other chemical production facilities at Edgewood, Md.; Pine Bluff, Ark., and Denver. Technicians are working on more widely publicized psychochemicals which can cause panic or complete uncoordination of the senses without killing.

But unlike the nerve gas brewed at Newport, these chemicals are still in the research stage, according to Lt. Col. Paul E. Ross, of the Army's New York Procurement District.

The 300 civilian FMC employes who make the nerve gas come largely from nearby towns and cities in a 30-mile radius north of Terre Haute, Ind. The plant is the largest single economic contributor to Vermillion County, where it is located, and adjacent Parke County.

The site was chosen in part because of a pinched employment situation in the area. "There are more skilled and unskilled workers in this area than there are jobs," says Tisdale.

The workers are hardly different from the guy next door with a job in a shoe factory, even though they must survive a battery of tests ranging from FBI inquiries to mental attitude and

psychological exams. Probably the toughest test is the medical one — workers must be "almost perfect" physically. Tisdale says.

FMC, a worldwide company with products ranging from water softeners to cherry pickers, runs the plant with the Army looking over its shoulder and making checks on the chemical concoction.

From State Road 63, three miles south of the county seat of Newport, the plant at first looks like an abandoned infantry camp with aging yellow wooden barracks near the fences. But the jungle of pipes, looking like a giant children's playground maze, strikes a more somber note.

Inside the 10-story concrete tower which embraces the final stage of the chemical process, workers don gas masks and airtight suits to check equipment and take samples every 90 minutes.

When they come out, the testers must pass through three showers and undergo blood checks periodically to detect any minute exposure.

On the ground floor of the tower, an 8-foot-high panel — splattered with gauges, recording graphs and green, red, blue and yellow lights—keeps up an incessant survey of the innards of the mixing tanks.

Most of the waste gases are burned. The rest is buried in a granite-lined natural reservoir more than a mile underground. Safety is a paramount concern at the plant.

The center includes a complete hos-

pital with a nine-man staff. Ten per cent of the operating budget is spent on safety. There has never been a plant fatality, and workers have logged as much as a year without even a minor injury.

Chemical warfare can be traced as far back as ancient Sparta when warriors used sulphur fumes in the siege of an enemy city. In World War I, both sides used 32 kinds of poison gases. The United States was working on three more when the war ended.

The Germans invented the three basic nerve gases, tabun, sarin and soman, prior to the onset of World War II. Hitler had a complete factory in operation, although the gas was never used, for unknown reasons. Both the United States and the Soviet Union drew upon the German discoveries for their present nerve gases.

A Senate foreign relations subcommittee report issued in 1960 quoted an Army general as estimating that one-sixth of the Soviet arms stockpile consists of chemical weapons.

Contrary to popular thought, the United States is not bound by any treaties forbidding the use of nerve gas. And none of the workers at Newport, from the electrician mounting rocket fuses to the medical technician taking blood tests, knows whether the gas will ever be beckoned to the battlefield.

Tisdale describes the Newport operation simply as "a race to stay ahead of any aggressor so he won't be tempted."