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Depleted uranium: war hazard?

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BALTIMORE (December 28, 2002) —

Dr. Doug Rokke has a disturbing habit of laughing when he should probably be crying.

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He laughs when he talks about battlefields contaminated with radioactive waste. He can't stop laughing when he talks about what he claims is a massive government cover-up. And he keeps laughing when he talks about his health problems, which he attributes to deliberate Army negligence, and which will likely kill him.

Talking to Rokke on the telephone is disturbing enough without him laughing about such horrors. A strange echo accompanies every utterance. When this bizarre sound is pointed out to him, Rokke says he isn't surprised: he claims his phone has been tapped for years.

It may be tempting to dismiss Rokke as a crank or a conspiracy theorist, but Rokke is 35-year-veteran of the U.S. Army, and he isn't just a disgruntled grunt. Rokke ran the U.S. Army's depleted uranium project in the mid-90s, and he was in charge of the Army's effort to clean up depleted uranium after the Persian Gulf War. And he directed the Edwin R. Bradley Radiological Laboratories at Fort McClellan, Ala.

Yet if you type Rokke's name into a search engine on any military website, you will draw a blank, as if he doesn't exist.

If you read through hundreds of pages of government documents and transcriptions of countless government hearings regarding the military use of depleted uranium, not once will you come across his name.

That is more than a little unusual, since Rokke and his team were at the forefront of trying to understand the potential health and environmental hazards posed by the use of depleted uranium, or DU, on the battlefield.

"We were the best they ever had," Rokke claims. He's not bragging. He's laughing again.

The use of DU in combat is a fairly new innovation. It was used for the first time in the Persian Gulf War as the crucial component of armor-piercing, tank-busting munitions.

These munitions are tipped with DU darts that ignite after being fired. The shells are so heavy and hot that they easily rip through steel.

"It's like taking a pencil and pushing it through paper," Rokke said.

This uranium "pencil" then explodes inside its target, creating a deadly "firestorm."

As an anti-tank weapon, "these things are great," Rokke said. They enable U.S. troops to quickly take out enemy tanks at long-range.

According to the Web site of the Deployment Health Support Directorate, DU is "a by-product of the process by which uranium is enriched to produce reactor fuel and nuclear weapons components."

In other words, DU is low-level nuclear waste. According to the same Web site, DU can also contain trace amounts of "neptunium, plutonium, americium, technitium-99 and uranium-236."

A total of 320 tons of DU munitions were fired during the Gulf War. Rokke's job was to figure out how to clean up U.S. tanks, the unfortunate victims of "friendly fire," which had been blown apart by DU rounds.

After years of this kind of this work—in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and on practice ranges in the U.S.—Rokke reached a conclusion in 1996.

He told the Army brass that DU was so dangerous that it had to be banned from combat immediately.

That conclusion, Rokke said, cost him his career.

'Contamination was all over'

Burning tanks, burning oil fields, charred bodies.

This was Kuwait after the Gulf War. Rokke had a mission—clean up U.S. tanks contaminated with DU.

What Rokke found terrified him.

"Oh my God is the only way to describe it," Rokke said. "Contamination was all over."

Rokke and his crew were measuring significant levels of radiation up to 50 meters away from affected tanks: up to 300 millirems an hour in beta and gamma radiation, and alpha radiation from the thousands to the millions in counts per minute (CPM) on a Geiger counter.

"That whole area is still trashed," he said. "It's hotter than heck over there still. This stuff doesn't go away."

His team took three months to clean up 24 tanks for transport back to the U.S.

The Army, Rokke said, took another three years to fully decontaminate the same 24 tanks.

But the contaminated tanks weren't the only problem.

Within 72 hours of their inspections, Rokke and his crew started getting sick.

But they continued with their work. They went back to the U.S. to perform tests on Army bases. They deliberately blew up tanks with DU rounds, then ran over and jumped on the tanks while they were still burning. They videotaped the uranium-oxide clouds pouring out, and they measured the radiation being thrown off.

In the past decade, Rokke said 30 men out of 100 who were closely involved in these operations dropped dead.

Rokke's lungs and kidneys are damaged. He believes that uranium oxide dust is permanently trapped inside his lungs. He has lesions on his brain, pustules on his skin. He suffers from chronic fatigue syndrome. He has reactive airway disease, which means he can't stop wheezing and coughing, and experiences a loss of breath when he exercises. He also has fibromyalgia, a condition that causes chronic pain in his muscles, ligaments and tendons.

The VA tested Rokke for uranium levels in his body in 1994. He got the results back two and a half years later. His urine had 5000 times the amount of permissible uranium.

After years of fighting with the VA, Rokke said he managed to get a 40 percent disability, but there is no official acknowledgement that his illnesses were caused by his work with DU.

The Army and the Pentagon continue to insist that DU is safe. Rokke says they know better, because he gave them the proof. He said they can't find evidence of DU's dangers because "they're looking for the wrong stuff, and they're using the wrong procedures."

The problem with DU, he said, is the stuff that's given off when a round is fired. The projectile begins burning immediately, and up to 70 percent of it oxidizes. This aerosolized power—uranium oxide—is the really dangerous stuff, Rokke said, particularly when it is inhaled.

Rokke insists that he and his men were wearing protective equipment—or equipment they thought would protect them. But their face masks were capable of straining out particles of 10 microns or larger. That's as big as the DU particles get, according to the Army and the Pentagon.

Rokke, however, insists that he has measured particles as small as .3 microns, and that scientists at the Livermore laboratories have measured them as small as .1 micron.

Thus these safety precautions, which are still in place now, are utterly useless, he said.

'I'm a warrior and a patriot'

About one quarter of the 700,000 troops sent to the Persian Gulf War have reported some sort of Gulf War-related illness, and Rokke is convinced that DU has something to do with it, along with the host of other chemicals to which troops were exposed, including low levels of sarin gas, smoke from oil fires, countless

pesticides as well as anti-nerve gas tablets which troops were required to ingest.

If Rokke is right about the dangers of DU, why does the Department of Defense continue to use it and insist that it is safe?

"When you go to war, your purpose is to kill," Rokke said, "and DU is the best killing thing we got."

Rokke believes that the U.S. military is putting more emphasis on firepower than on the health and safety of its own troops.

He received a memo in the early 90s he says proves his theory.

Dated March 1, 1991, the memo was written by Lt. Col. M.V. Ziehm at the Los Alamos Laboratories in New Mexico.

"There has been and continues to be a concern regarding the impact of dU [sic] on the environment. Therefore, if no one makes a case for the effectiveness of dU on the battlefield, dU rounds may become politically unacceptable and thus, be deleted from the arsenal," the memo reads. "If dU penetrators proved their worth during our recent combat activities, then we should assure their future existence (until something better is developed) through Service/DoD proponency. If proponency is not garnered, it is possible that we stand to lose a valuable combat capability. I believe we should keep this sensitive issue at mind when after action reports [sic] are written."

The meaning of this memo is quite clear, Rokke said. Since DU munitions are so effective, they must continue to be used in combat, regardless of the environmental or health consequences.

The other issue is financial, he said. If the true effects of DU were known, cleanup costs would be absolutely staggering.

DU contaminated areas extend much farther than the Persian Gulf battlefields. Rokke said DU is regularly used in practice maneuvers in the U.S., namely in Indiana, Florida, New Mexico, Massachusetts, Maryland and Puerto Rico. Then there's Kosovo, where DU rounds were used to take out Serbian tanks.

As the U.S. stands on the brink of another war with Iraq, Rokke said he wants to make sure the American public fully understands that this war will be far worse than the last one, and that numbers of troops sickened by DU is likely to be much higher.

Rokke insists he is no pacifist.

"I'm a warrior and a patriot," he said. Given a verifiable threat against the U.S., "I would go to war in a heartbeat."

But he said that he is speaking out for the good of American troops, and for anyone, including Iraqi troops and civilians, who could be exposed to DU.

"Am I pushing for peace today? Yes, I am," he said.

Before a war with Iraq can even be contemplated, Rokke said, DU has to be removed from every arsenal in the world.

In order for that to happen, however, the Pentagon would have to admit that Doug Rokke is right, and that would come at a price that no one has even imagined. But money can't restore the lives of those that Rokke says have died from DU, and money isn't going to get the uranium oxide out of his lungs. There are people at the Pentagon who understand all this, Rokke claims, and that he deems unconscionable.

"I hope God slam-dunks their butts, because this is absolutely criminal," he said.

Posted December 30, 2002 3:58 PM

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