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Many nations used people in experiments

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WASHINGTON — The Army refused to prosecute Japanese war criminals after World War II even though they infected POWs with exotic diseases and watched them die.

Their knowledge was thought to be too valuable to the Army's biological warfare program, National Archives records show.

Japan had a special biological warfare unit, code-named Unit 731, in the 1930s and 1940s in Manchuria, China.

Captured soldiers, possibly Americans, were chained to stakes as researchers detonated bombs filled with deadly anthrax, plague and gas gangrene and tracked the spread of disease through their bodies, sometimes dissecting them alive, records show.

When the war ended, Unit 731 led by Gen. Shiro Ishii, was rounded up and questioned by a member of Gen. Douglas MacArthur's staff. The Japanese officers were to be tried for war crimes.

But Lt. Col. Murray Sanders of MacArthur's staff cut Ishii and his officers a deal on orders from MacArthur's office, records show.

When Sanders offered immunity in return for records, Ishii went to his flower garden and dug up "all detailed data ... (and) even promised to furnish various strains of agents," records show.

In addition, 8,000 laboratory slides of human cells infected from the germ warfare experiments were handed over.

The records and slides were sent to Fort Detrick in Frederick, Md., and later shipped to the Army's Dugway Proving Ground in Utah.

They have since disappeared, records show.

Archives records reveal that a Camp Detrick representative, Dr. N. Paul Hudson, who also questioned Unit 731 members, was pleased to learn of Japan's experiments because they justified the Army's own biological warfare program.

It included injecting experimental anthrax vaccines into 91 Japanese POWs, in violation of the Geneva Accords, according to archives documents.

Anthrax is a bacteria that if inhaled or injected in even small doses causes large black skin ulcers, destroys the immune system and kills in 48 to 120 hours. Forty years of research have failed to produce a safe vaccine.

The Army also had a wartime program to test presumably less harmful biological agents on American conscientious objectors.

And its "Project Whitecoat," active in the 1950s to 1973, used volunteers from the Seventh Day Adventist Church.

A 1955 Army memo authorized a cover-up of any deaths from testing biological warfare agents on humans, records show.

"Death certificates are to be filled out in general terms sufficient for the fulfillment of state regulations, but avoiding the naming of the actual agent involved," ordered Col. Tom F. Whayne, chief of the Army's Preventive Medicine Division.

"In hindsight, we've done some pretty despicable things," said Army Lt. Col. Dick Bridges, a public affairs officer in the Pentagon.

Using diseases in wartime is nothing new. In the 14th century, the Tartars tossed plague-infested corpses over the walls of Genoa. The Romans dumped infected animal carcasses in enemy drinking wells, and British soldiers gave American Indians gifts of blankets from a hospital where patients were being treated for smallpox.