

Trawler steamed into germ warfare site and no one said a word

By Ben Fenton

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Winston Churchill's government was prepared to let Blackpool suffer the Black Death rather than admit experimenting with germ warfare, a survivor of a test that went awry said yesterday.

Derek Bellerby was a crewman on the trawler Carella from Fleetwood, Lancs, which in Sept 1952 was the focus of panicked signals from the Admiralty after she accidentally sailed through the site of an experiment with pneumonic and bubonic plague germs.

A decision was taken not to stop the fishermen and give them medical checks, but let them steam on towards their home port and to enjoy shore leave that could have started an epidemic in Britain's most famous seaside resort.

"We knew nothing about it at the time and we sailed home to Fleetwood and I have no doubt that me and my mates went off to have quite a few beers in Blackpool and talk to a few friendly ladies, just like we always did," Mr Bellerby, now 73, but then a 20-year-old fisherman, told The Daily Telegraph.

"It sounds like whoever decided to let us do that rather than tell us what had been going on was ready to let Blackpool get infected with this disease, doesn't it?"

The first detailed examination of the disastrous experiment and the resulting cover-up of Cold War biological weapons research will be broadcast on BBC radio this week after members of the Carella's crew and naval officers who took part in the experiments were tracked down by producer Jolyon Jenkins.

Mr Bellerby, who spent 40 years at sea and retired to Hull, said that before he met Mr Jenkins earlier this year, he had no idea that he and his shipmates had come so close to death.

"After I met the BBC chap I checked my records and I realised that it was on that trip that I had this strange thing where my hair started falling out in clumps."

Hair loss is not a symptom of the plague, but the Ben Lomond, the converted tank landing craft that carried out the experiments, was carrying other, top-secret biological strains as well.

The extraordinary story began on Sept 16, 1952, when the Ben Lomond was reaching the end of a series of tests, codenamed Operation Cauldron, involving strains of plague and brucellosis in an isolated bay 25 miles north of Stornoway in the Outer Hebrides.

For a week before the last tests, in which pneumonic plague germs were to be released and allowed to drift over a pontoon on which cages of monkeys and rabbits had been placed, the wind had been blowing in the wrong direction. In the evening of Sept 16, it changed and the captain of the Ben Lomond decided to begin his trial. One minute before the germs were to be released, the Carella came into view, but Capt Philip Welby-Everard RN decided that there was still time to warn the trawler off.

The plague germs began their wind-borne journey, but repeated danger signals from the Ben Lomond and her escorts to the Carella were ignored and the fishermen travelled within about two miles of the pontoon, passing through the path of the germ cloud 16 minutes after the experiment began.

Capt Welby-Everard calculated that the wind speed was not high enough to carry the bacteria to the Carella, so his first report to the Admiralty was not taken as seriously as his second, in which he re-stated the wind speed as 7-9 mph instead of 6 mph.

This caused the biological warfare specialists at Porton Down to tell the Admiralty that there was a risk of contamination. The matter was dealt with at the highest levels, with the involvement of the First Sea Lord and Rab Butler, who as Chancellor of the Exchequer was deputising for the absent Winston Churchill as Prime Minister. It was considered of the highest "political consideration" not to alert the crew and the nation to what had happened, not least because the scientists were warning that all the rats on the Carella should be killed and the ship fumigated and the Admiralty believed that would be a clear sign that plague was suspected.

So the Carella and her crew of 18 were allowed to go back to port and to put to sea again. A destroyer and a fisheries vessel shadowed her from over the horizon, listening to her radio broadcasts, waiting to see if she called for medical assistance.

"I was very shocked when I first heard that," Mr Bellerby said.

Why the incident happened remains a mystery. Ted Harris, the son of the trawler's skipper, also called Ted, added: "My father was an ex-Royal Navy lieutenant-commander and I am sure he would not have ignored a danger signal like that."

But Roger Welby-Everard, son of the Ben Lomond's commanding officer, said: "I was a submariner in those waters and I have to say that up there the trawlers are a law unto themselves."

Eventually, with the Admiralty and No 10 anxiously waiting for reports, the Carella returned in complete good health to Fleetwood for a second time.

The Admiralty issued orders for all files, except one which is now open in the National Archives in Kew, to be burned and Blackpool's brush with the Black Death was consigned to the silence of official history.

Operation Cauldron will be broadcast on BBC Radio 4 at 8pm on Thursday.

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