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### **5263059, Army secret surfaces: Deadly chemicals at sea**

Posted by fighttotheend on Fri Nov-04-05 09:48 AM

Millions of pounds of unused weapons of mass destruction were dumped in oceans before Congress banned the practice in 1972. The threat is still out there, and may be growing.

By John Bull

First of a two-day series

A clam dredging operation off the coast of Atlantic City, N.J., in 2004 pulled up an old artillery shell.

The long-submerged, World War I-era explosive was filled with a black, tar-like substance.

Bomb disposal technicians from Dover Air Force Base in Delaware were brought in to dismantle it. Three of them were injured, one hospitalized with large, pus-filled blisters on his arm and hand.

The shell was filled with mustard gas in solid form.

What was long-feared by the few military officials in the know had come to pass: Chemical weapons that the Army dumped at sea decades ago had finally ended up on shore in the United States.

While it has long been known that some chemical weapons went into the ocean, records obtained by the Daily Press of Newport News, Va., show that the previously classified weapons-dumping program was far more extensive than has ever been suspected.

The Army now admits in reports never before released that it secretly dumped 64 million pounds of nerve and mustard gas agent into the sea, along with 400,000 chemical-filled bombs, land mines and rockets and more than 500 tons of radioactive waste either tossed overboard or packed into the holds of scuttled vessels.

A Daily Press investigation also found:

These weapons of mass destruction virtually ring the country, concealed off the coasts of at least 11 states: six on the East Coast, including New Jersey and Maryland, two on the Gulf Coast, and in California, Hawaii and Alaska. Few, if any, state officials have been informed of their existence.

The chemical agents could pose a hazard for generations. The Army has examined only a few of its 26 dump zones, and none in 30 years.

The Army can't say exactly where all the weapons were dumped from World War II to 1970. Army records are sketchy, missing or were destroyed.

More dump sites probably exist. The Army hasn't reviewed records from the World War I era, when ocean dumping of chemical weapons was common.

"We do not claim to know where they all are," said William Brankowitz, a deputy project manager in the U.S. Army Chemical Materials Agency and a leading authority on the Army's chemical weapons dumping. "We don't want to be cavalier at all and say this stuff was exposed to water and is OK. It can last for a very, very long time."

A drop of nerve agent can kill within a minute. When released in the ocean it lasts up to six weeks, killing every organism it touches before breaking down into its nonlethal chemical components.

Mustard gas can be fatal. When exposed to seawater it forms a concentrated, encrusted gel that lasts for at least five years, rolling around on the ocean floor, killing or contaminating sea life.

Sea-dumped chemical weapons may be slowly leaking from decades of saltwater corrosion, resulting in a time-delayed release of deadly chemicals over the next 100 years and an unforeseeable environmental impact. Steel corrodes at different rates depending on the water depth, ocean temperature and thickness of the shells.

That was the conclusion of Norwegian scientists who in 2002 examined chemical weapons dumped off Norway's coast after World War II by the U.S. and British military.

Overseas, more than 200 fishermen over the years have been burned by mustard gas pulled on deck. A fisherman in Hawaii was burned in 1976 when he brought up an Army-dumped mortar round full of mustard gas.

Although it seems unlikely the weapons will begin to wash up on shore, last year's discovery that a mustard gas-filled artillery shell was dumped off the coast of New Jersey was ominous for several reasons.

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