

“THE YELLOW FEVER PLOT” Germ warfare during the Civil War

By Lawrence Segel, MD

Over three million Yankees and Rebels fought during the American Civil War (1861-65) with 618,000 casualties. It was a battlefield holocaust revealing the 19th century’s inability to provide medical care to mass victims of war. Yet, contrary to popular belief, most soldiers died of disease rather than battle wounds. Two out of every three soldiers succumbed to infections, such as measles, mumps, diarrhea, pneumonia and typhoid fever – not bullets, shrapnel or the bayonet. Physicians should not be surprised. After all, it was the last large-scale conflict to be fought without the knowledge of the germ theory of disease. Despite this ignorance, Confederate desperation would lead allegedly one medical practitioner to embark on a campaign of deadly biological warfare.

The alleged villain behind the “Yellow Fever Plot” was a Kentucky physician, Dr. Luke Pryor Blackburn. In April 1864, a yellow fever epidemic attacked Bermuda, and threatened to disrupt the lucrative Confederate-run trade conducted from the island. Dr. Blackburn, renowned for his treatment of yellow fever epidemics in



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Mississippi and Louisiana, was dispatched to help the victims in Bermuda. Unbeknown to most, the real purpose of his visit could hardly be construed as a mission of medical mercy!

A Sinister Plan

A Union consul in Bermuda, Charles Allen, claimed he had learned the true reason for Dr. Blackburn's visit was to procure clothing from yellow fever victims for shipment to northern American cities. The sinister plan was to produce a yellow fever epidemic that would seriously cripple

the Yankee war effort. The Confederate government was supposedly behind the funding for Blackburn's escapade. After Lincoln's assassination in 1865, hysteria reigned and this conspiracy came to light. After a series of witnesses were examined, the Bureau of Military Justice issued an arrest warrant for Dr. Blackburn.



One informant, a nurse who had worked with Dr. Blackburn in Bermuda, stated she had seen him take sweat-laden woolen shirts from yellow fever patients and pack them in shipping trunks.

Godfrey Hyams, a Confederate double agent, testified he had been hired by Dr. Blackburn to deliver five trunks of contaminated clothing from Canada to Boston, Philadelphia, Washington and Norfolk. This clothing was sold to clothing merchants. Hyams also claimed Dr. Blackburn had a small valise filled with elegant shirts destined for President Lincoln.

Caught, Branded & Acquitted

Dr. Blackburn, while on a visit to Montreal, was arrested on the charge of violating Canada's Neutrality Act, since the distribution of the "yellow fever trunks" allegedly originated in Canada. Although the evidence was circumstantial, the Canadian papers branded the alleged plot as an outrage against humanity. Northern American newspapers labeled Dr. Blackburn a hideous devil and called the plan one of the most fiendish plots ever concocted by the wickedness of man. Despite public out-

rage, Dr. Blackburn was acquitted of the Canadian charge due to the lack of clear proof that the trunks ever touched Canadian soil. Surprisingly, the U.S. government took no further action and the Confederate War records mysteriously disappeared.

Germ Warfare through the Centuries

Dr. Blackburn's plan for biological warfare was ingenious, but not unique. Contrary to widely held belief, biological warfare is not a 20th century development. Two thousand years ago, Roman soldiers fouled many of their enemies' water supplies by throwing dead corpses and animals into the wells. In 1346, the Tartars catapulted plague-infested bodies into the siege-city of Kaffa. Not only did this allow them to capture the city but, according to some scholars, set off the bubonic plague epidemic (1347-51) that swept across Europe killing twenty-five million people. Three hundred years later, during the French and Indian War, the English offered smallpox-exposed blankets to the Indians believed to be loyal to the French.

Dr. Blackburn's actual selection of yellow fever as his biological agent of choice was based on the fact that it had been a particularly deadly 19th century disease. Through its fatal reputation, yellow fever had acquired various deadly epithets, such as "The Scourge of American Cities" and the "American Plague." These nicknames were well earned. For example, a severe epidemic in Philadelphia in 1793 killed 10% of the city's population. Another outbreak decimated New Orleans in 1853. The disease



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itself is characterized by fever, arthralgia and headache. More severe forms also present with chills, projectile vomiting of blackened blood, abdominal pain, dehydration, jaundice and intestinal hemorrhage. The bloody vomiting and jaundice gave the disease its two popular names — “The Black Vomit” and “Yellow Fever.”


Faulty Plans, Disproved Theory



Luckily for the Union, Dr. Blackburn’s plot was based on faulty science. The actual transmission of yellow fever was not elucidated until 1900. Major Walter Reed and his assistants, James Carroll, Aristides Agramonte and Jesse Lazear, members of the U.S. Army Yellow Fever Commission, occupied Cuba after the Spanish American War of 1898. Through volunteer experimentation, along with an incentive of a \$100 gold piece, they determined that the transmission vector for the

virus was the *Aedes aegypti* mosquito. Major Reed’s work destroyed the notion that the disease could be transmitted by direct contact with infected people or contaminated objects (fomites), such as blankets, clothing or luggage. The so-called Fomite Theory of yellow fever transmission was, therefore, disproved. In retrospect, Dr. Blackburn’s yellow fever conspiracy was pure folly and doomed from the beginning.

Secrets to the Grave

Following the Civil War, Dr. Blackburn returned to practice in Louisville, Kentucky. Fittingly, he would help to treat the yellow fever epidemic of 1878. He was a popular man in the state, elected Governor from 1879-1883, and became noted for his prison reform. And, what of the past conspiracy attempt? Dr. Blackburn would remain silent about the plot, save for one comment of denial many years later when he stated the plot was too preposterous for intelligent gentlemen to believe. For those who believe it isn’t so preposterous, there is a final irony. Etched on his Kentucky gravestone is “Luke Pryor Blackburn – the Good Samaritan.” 

General References

1. Bioterrorists in the Civil War. Sons of Union Veterans of the Civil War Newsletter. November 2001; p. 3
2. Fact or fiction? A Nation Divided Newsletter. 2000; 1(4):1-2.