

Before "bioterrorism" became a household word, the US military had people to stop the malevolence. Lora Mitchell slips under the radar to fix the disheveled sentinel program. She unravels the statistical confusion, and discovers a genocidal plan to kill millions.

Lab Rats & Hens

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The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil...but because of those who look on and do nothing.
- Albert Einstein

“I’m retired,” Lora argued.

“Not anymore.”

“I have a dog, a home, and a quiet life - I’m retired.”

“You have a week left in your ‘retirement’. I’ll check back with you then.”

Lora hung up the phone, and cursed. A week later, she was working at a local hospital.

Three worldwide (pandemic) outbreaks of influenza occurred in the 20th century: in 1918, 1957, and 1968. All three were informally identified by their presumed sites of origin as Spanish, Asian, and Hong Kong influenza. The 1918 flu pandemic killed a startling 40 to 50 million people around the world.

In 1976 came the Swine flu. With concern for a pandemic, vaccines were widely distributed. Twenty-five people died of the malady, but hundreds died from the vaccine. After reports that the vaccine was touching off neurological problems, the government suspended the program, having inoculated 40 million people for a flu that never came. It was an incident that fueled public distrust for medical alerts.

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LAB RATS & HENS

L. S. Dusty Miller

Winter 1990 - 1991

For two years, Iraq had accused Kuwait of diagonally drilling into their oil-rich fields. The old tempest renewed, and in 1990, Hussein invaded Kuwait. Ignoring the many deadlines of the UN to leave, Hussein annexed the small country.

Before Lora could settle into her job in Florida, the United States was drawn into “Desert Storm”. In two weeks, the U.S. forces in Iraq numbered over 500,000. Lora went back to Maryland.

Iraqi Scud missiles, along with much of the rest of its military equipment, came from the Soviet Union. Agencies in the U.S. military were concerned with the specter of chemical or bio-weapons.

Lora knew the intelligence was good – the weapons recovered at Grenada were Soviet-made, and had identical chemical footprints.

Unit commanders were put on the look-out for depots and possible use of the unconventional weapons. Tons of confiscated materials were isolated, earmarked for special handling, and sent to the military labs for identification.

In order for hospital labs treating certain diseases to watch their quality control, there were biochemicals and actual cultures of the bugs kept in inventory. Watching over the order requests took a global effort of cooperation. A young lieutenant assigned to Lora’s team made a shocking discovery. Someone was ordering an abundance of botulin toxin, anthrax, and cholera. It wasn’t going to Iraq – it was shipped to different places in Japan.

To confirm the finding, Lora’s team worked overtime for two months. After corroboration, they sent the alarming information through the chain of intelligence and co-ops. With

the overload of work coming from the Gulf War, Lora forgot about indulging her curiosity by tracking the results.

Intelligence agencies hunted the acquisition of the bio-hazardous bugs to members of a cult calling themselves the Aum Shinrikyo. The cult laboratory for toxin production was operational, but by the time Japanese officials located and stormed the warehouse, it had been abandoned. The more disturbing news was that the hazardous materials were never recovered.

There were many discussions between Lora, her boss, Dr. Peterson, and the depleted military Bio-Terror task forces. Peterson's sober warning of resurgence included a caution – "The renewal of Aum Shinrikyo's genocidal efforts may manifest as a small attack, a trial, using a remote location, and a small amount of either toxin, or biological agent."

He went on, "Vigilance - watching for increased occurrences of unusual illnesses in a singular location, or several simultaneous locations, may provide the only warning we will have before the global event."

In less than two months, "Desert Storm" ended. There were some 148 battle deaths and 347 non-battle deaths of U.S. service members. Later, the diagnosis for "Gulf War Syndrome" was coined. It was considered an anomaly attributed more to psychological disorders, than a physical cause. The symptoms were varied and vague, covering everything from migraines, chronic fatigue, and intestinal problems to neurological deficits and poor muscular coordination. Congressional pressure increased efforts to determine the cause of the syndrome.

Intelligence had gotten better at chemical detection, and they recovered some 6,000 155-mm mustard rounds and several

hundred 122-mm sarin/cyclo-sarin nerve-agent-filled rockets at a single depot in Iraq.

Lora could see the similarities in chemical footprints from Grenada. Her team worked with others to determine if there were Multiple Chemical Sensitivity (MCS) combinations, as well as any biological toxins or organisms that would cause such varied, low-grade symptoms in the veterans.

She was intrigued by descriptions entered on several patient charts. Skin infections were reported that started as small, raised bumps, like an insect bite. Within a day or two, the bumps developed into fluid-filled blisters with a black center of dying tissue, surrounded by redness and swelling.

That isn't a blister agent, Lora thought. At first she considered bubonic plague-type agent, but there was only one or two of the buboes ever found on a single patient. It looked like the physical trademark of another unusual, but familiar disease...*Anthrax*.

Lora read more specifics on the military use and trials of the vaccine. It was reported to be particularly painful when administered, and often caused a severe local skin reaction that lasted for weeks. Although it was FDA approved, it never went through the large scale clinical trials, in comparison to most all other vaccines in the United States.

She shared her findings with the team, and sent the report to Dr. Hammond, at USAMRIID. It was an unpopular discovery that stayed buried for almost two years, until more Congressional pressure brought it to light.

In a routine screen of the many artifacts brought back from the conflict, Lora was fascinated by an intact piece of pottery. After it was cleared of contaminants, she wanted to get permission to send it to a museum for dating. The hieroglyphs were very old...too old for the urn to be in such good condition.

Either it was a fake, or it had been well-preserved in a controlled environment.

It was also possible that it was a recent unearthing. Bomb craters revealed some interesting things. It had to be processed with care. The U.S. had an obligation to declare it, and return the find to its rightful nation.

Under special hoods and protective gear, Lora did the test collection and swabbing of the urn herself. She marked the chain-of-custody forms, and took photographs. There was a small amount of fluid in the jug, and she extracted off a portion for analysis. Lora would never know that the precautions she'd taken to protect the ancient vessel, had worked to protect her.

It was another week before she returned to Florida. In her office, she read the intelligence report updates. A small article caught her eye. "Death and Ruin in Halabja". She scanned through it, and then read it again. With foreboding, Lora dashed down to the technology department, and requested everything the analysts could find on their computers about the event. She went to see her boss.

Jack Peterson was at his desk, peering at a chart of tiny characters under lighted magnification.

"You'll go blind." Lora smiled.

"Lora, how are you?"

"What on earth is that?" Lora asked about the chart.

"We have some new codes found on canisters. Some are for classifications of real ugly bugs." He pointed to the chart. "We found this symbol on a canister at the Port of Tampa."

Lora couldn't hold back her smile, "It looks...uh, phallic?"

"Like a dong?"

"Let me guess," Lora put a finger on her chin, "a sexually transmitted disease?"

"Nope – not an STD, but a supposed cure for one. Dong Quai is a ginseng root."

Rolling her eyes, Lora found little humor in the illegal and charlatan cures making their way into the country. Some of those shipments were coming into Tampa.

Peterson grinned, "I'm sure you didn't wander in to discuss dongs."

"Uh...no." Lora pulled out the section of the intelligence reports. "Did you hear anything about the massacre over in Halabja?"

"Where's that?" Peterson asked, and read the article.

"Somewhere in Iraq, south of Turkey."

When he'd finished reading, Peterson's head snapped up. "What the hell? When did..." he looked at the dates in the article. "1988 - Why didn't we get immediate notification? This happened almost three years ago!"

"That's why I came here, to see if you knew anything." Lora shook her head, "My guess – it's between jurisdictions. That region would be covered by World Health and the UN."

Peterson scanned the article again. "From this, it looks like thousands died."

Lora nodded agreement. "Maybe because it was chemical, instead of biological – we weren't notified?"

"No!" Peterson almost roared. "This is one of the sentinel events we're supposed to know about – we should have been notified!"

"I'll make some phone calls." Lora made a fast exit.

There were many documented Iraqi chemical weapons attacks on 49 Kurdish villages in Dihok Province along Iraq's border with Turkey. The attacks continued through Aug. 25, 1988, five days after the Iran-Iraq war ended.

Between March 1987 and August 1988, Iraq made extensive use of chemical weapons against Kurdish villages. The attacks were documented by human rights groups, forensic

investigators and the Kurds themselves. Many strikes occurred in places far from the front lines of the Iran-Iraq war, neutralizing the argument that the bombing was directed at Iranian forces.

While the most deadly, the Halabja attack was just one of between 60 and 180 attacks that took thousands of civilian lives.

It wasn't far-fetched that a leadership that would sanction such ruthless actions in their own nation, would consider more severe strategies against a mortal enemy across the Atlantic.

Ghazi was Al-Amir's welcome guest for many visits. The guerilla commander found the doctor's intellectual conversations a pleasant change from the horror of war, and he'd send a messenger to retrieve the physician, his clothes, and any items needed to make Ghazi's extended visits more comfortable.

Al-Amir shared his philosophical case with Ghazi, "You see, it all comes down to a breakdown in discipline and the expansion of liberalism. In the U.S., the concept that everyone has a personal right to do whatever he or she wants, has led to a bankrupt society. There is no corporal punishment. If teachers do it, they are sued. If parents do it, they risk having the government take away their children, and going to jail."

"Simple moral values used to be taught in church, and parents were living examples. Children were taught that you mustn't kill; you mustn't do certain things."

Al-Amir coughed before he continued, "American children don't go to church. They are allowed unrestricted access to TV, the movies, and the media. They are exposed to greater knowledge and all of the world's ills, without intervening criticism. No one is there to say, 'This is wrong; this should not have happened'. Role models are not teachers or scientists, but

celebrities with drug and alcohol problems. Their daily television programming caters to American attributes of greed, gluttony, violence, casual sex, and narrow-mindedness.”

“The children are given minimal incentive for education, yet, in prisons, criminals are allowed to read, study law, and work out so they can get out of jail in better mental and physical shape to resume their lives of crime.”

Taking in a deep breath, Al-Amir held it for a bit, and exhaled. “The Americans jump in at the first sign of ‘oppression’...as if they never committed acts of terror or aggression. They forget slavery, slaughtering the Native Americans and taking their land, taking away the Hawaiian Islands by force, and the many, recent, dirty deeds while fighting the Cold War.”

Ghazi agreed. He had been with Americans for a long time, and had not realized how perverted their society had become.

“It is because of your tolerance as a physician, and strong personal beliefs.” Al-Amir coughed again. “You make allowances because you feel that you are not one of them...that you are different because you are Arab.”

He stood, and scratched the ground with the toe of his boot. “But Doctor Mahmud – you ARE one of them. We are all humans, and no matter what our beliefs, there are common rules to live by. These simple laws keep our world safe. If we break those laws, we must answer for our sins.”

“I thought your edict was to wage war against any nation not one with Allah.” Ghazi dared.

“We fight for what is right. Any religion, people, or government, that allows the strong punish the weak, or permits everyone to have a personal right to do harm - this is a crime against humanity. It is a contagious philosophy that will bring about the end of the world.”

“You’re holding your breath?” Ghazi quizzed.

“Not for long - I have worn out my welcome in this country. It seems that pointing out the danger of dealing with the Americans is an unpopular view to those that line their pockets with the profits from the opportunists.”

“No,” Ghazi clarified, “I meant that you’ve been coughing, and you’re holding your breath. Are you feeling well?”

“I am well enough, Doctor.”

“Try leaning forward when you cough – it might help.”

Scanning the area for observers, Al-Amir determined no one else was around, and did as Ghazi suggested. When he straightened, his hands were over his heart.

“Chest pain?” The doctor asked.

“No – it’s better.” His heart was thudding as if he’d just finished a marathon run. “What is it?” He wanted to know what problem the doctor suspected.

Ghazi shook his head. He only had a theory, “Maybe Marfan’s Syndrome.” He explained, “It’s a genetic ailment. The main skeletal manifestations of Marfan's syndrome are the most obvious. Marfan’s patients are tall and lanky, with long extremities. You’re almost two meters tall, and I noticed your hands when we first met. A high palate and overcrowding of the teeth are also common occurrences for patients with Marfan’s.”

Ghazi’s eyes wandered to Al-Amir’s mouthful of teeth, “The most significant effects are those on the cardiovascular system. One of the pathologies is mitral valve prolapse – causing that flutter you felt a moment ago. It is a natural reflex to cough. It’s called valsalva - coughing can interrupt the heart flutter, and set the heart back to normal rhythm. You should see a heart specialist.” Ghazi added.

“You’ll do,” Al-Amir evaded, and skipped back to business. “I have acquired debris and evidence of the U.S. involvement in Saddam’s actions at Halabja, and I have a plan to exact the

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same punishment they have inflicted of those incapable of defense.”

“You would wage war against the United States?” *That’s suicide*, Ghazi thought.

Al-Amir shook his head, “War against such enemies is futile – we will not wage open war. But in addition to experience in guerrilla warfare, we have knowledge in fighting tyrannical superpowers. We have bled the Soviet Union for ten years. It will go bankrupt in a short time, and they will be forced to withdraw in defeat. Their population is already turning against their own government, in opposition to the extended conflict. They tire of it, and its costs. We are starting this same policy to bleed America - Allah willing, we will be triumphant.”

Ghazi thought this was a very ambitious goal. But then, Al-Amir was a very ambitious, persuasive, and brilliant man.

“Doctor,” Al-Amir asked, “How would you like to have your own research lab?”

On Christmas Day of 1991, news of the unthinkable ripped the airways. Dr. Ghazi Mahmud was in his own lab when he heard the headlines. Just as Al-Amir had predicted - the invincible Soviet Union crumbled.

For his heroic efforts, the prince was exiled from Saudi Arabia. He went to Khartoum, Sudan, and Ghazi continued his covert visitations.

Winter 1991 - 1992

In Florida, Lora was enjoying more of the civilian world. As computer technology took its leaps and bounds into the common household, Lora was delighted when a new system was installed at her office, with access from home.

The Internet was in its consumer infancy, but already a researcher's bonanza. Curious about the ancient urn brought back during "Desert Storm", Lora searched for images and information. The closest match seemed impossible. It would make the urn older than the pyramids at Giza. While she was waiting for the results of her next inquiry, the phone rang. In an eerie coincidence, it was Mike Ayers. Lora was thrilled.

"Mike! How are you?" Sgt. Ayers was on the Army side of the discovery team, and had helped track the odd maladies that came out of the Gulf War, and Desert Storm.

"Good, Thanks. I'm calling about the results of 7014-A and B, that old pot that you processed last year?"

"Yes! I was just researching the 'Net for information about that thing!"

"Did you find anything?"

"Only that it has to be several centuries old."

Ayers took a breath, "We sent the container for dating, and that could take another month or so. But the preliminary results are back on the contents. Kind of surprising - there were unidentifiable biological proteins, and unusual DNA strands."

Absorbing the information Lora asked, "What do you mean?"

"We ran everything - spectrographs, chromatography, and numerous assays. The molecular structure of the protein doesn't match anything we have catalogued, and it's very complex."

"Something contaminated it?" Lora wondered.

“That’s the weird part. There are a few particles that don’t match the contents, but they salted out, like water and oil.”

“What did we get from the DNA?” Lora thought about mummies. Maybe the fluid was something used to preserve a body.

“This will give you the creeps.” Ayers said, and could tell that Lora was smiling on the other end. He took a deep breath, “The DNA yielded a whopping 190 billion-plus base pairs, and mitochondrial was near 6 million.”

“What?” It was the exact opposite of what she expected. A DNA molecule consisted of two strands that wrapped around to resemble a twisted ladder. The “rungs” of the ladder were base pairs. Humans had about 3 billion base pairs. As contributions of both parents continue the lineage – the mother’s side, mtDNA base pairs grew in number over many generations.

In Belgium, an ancient human living around 100,000 years ago was found in good condition. A specimen taken from its molar tooth yielded 123 base pairs of mtDNA. It was a very short section of DNA by modern standards. Today’s human had 16,569 base pairs. Lora cleared her throat, “The DNA has over sixty times the number of human base pairs?”

“Yeah – At least as far as our technology can determine.”

“But the proteins were unidentifiable, and the DNA isn’t human?” Lora was thinking aloud.

“Told you this would give you the creeps,” Ayers repeated. “The DNA is closer to human than any other species we know, but we can’t match the proteins to anything on file.”

He hesitated. “In other words, we have an urn that pre-dates Moses, but it contains a molecular soup from like...a million years in the future.”

Before "bioterrorism" became a household word, the US military had people to stop the malevolence. Lora Mitchell slips under the radar to fix the disheveled sentinel program. She unravels the statistical confusion, and discovers a genocidal plan to kill millions.

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