

The American Canaries of WWI: How the US Conducted Fatal Chemical Weapon Tests on US Soldiers

Maya James

JOURNALISM

ABSTRACT: Since learning about Henrietta Lacks and the Tuskegee Experiments, I've always been interested in exploring the accounts of bad medicine, bad science, and at-risk communities. The power dynamics between doctors/scientists and their patient can have long-term effects on the health of an individual and their community (eg. black women's pain is severely underestimated compared to their non-black counterparts). However, the American University Experiment Station (AUES) chemical weapons testing presented an interesting situation outside my typical interest, in which the uneven power dynamic was between commanding officers, scientists, and the soldiers (mainly male and white) who worked beneath them. None of these soldiers were ever forced into experimentation, but they volunteered seemingly unaware of the danger of these new chemical weapons. It was patriotic to volunteer, but the dangers of such experiments were made out to be underwhelming or less dangerous than they actually were. Perhaps the most chilling discovery of all my research was when one DC newspaper wrote that "The time for the ethical discussion of chemical weapons is now over". It implied that during wartime, ethics could take a backseat until the danger had passed--ethical considerations seemed to hinder patriotic duty. I grew uncomfortable with this idea that ethical considerations could be suspended (even during wartime), and sought to reconcile this discomfort with thorough research about the former chemical weapons test site.

ACADEMIC YEAR: 2018

SCHOOL: COL

MAJOR: Government

MENTOR: Maureen Corrigan (Dept. of English) and Barbara Feinman (Dept. of English)