

# Solway's Silver Bullet

Mike Small

"Unborn children of the region are being asked to pay the highest price, the integrity of their DNA."<sup>1</sup>

Ross B. Mirkarimi

A new kind of nuclear war is being waged. It's already being fought in Scotland and the combatants are you and me. Our attackers are the Ministry of Defence, a force which has already poisoned its own soldiers and threatened the health of the civilian populations of the former Yugoslavia, Kuwait and Iraq.

Why is this happening? The threat comes from 'the coalition' of the perceived need to re-use uranium left-over from commercial production, and a military 'need' for a strengthened shell casing. The result is Depleted Uranium, nicknamed 'the silver bullet'.

In 1996, the UN Subcommission on Human Rights classified Depleted Uranium (DU) ammunition as an indiscriminate 'Weapon of Mass Destruction', and a 'Crime Against Humanity'. Grant Wakefield, of opposition group 'The Fire Next Time', says: "The use of DU, and the subsequent massive efforts to downplay its after-effects represents one of the most stupendous and outrageous lies ever told by Western governments."

What is Depleted Uranium? DU is used to make projectiles which can penetrate armour, for example in anti-tank missiles. After penetration the DU forms a powder which is 'pyrophoric', burning to form a fine dust of uranium oxides. DU is a by-product from the production of enriched fuel for nuclear reactors and weapons, and used to manufacture shells, bullets and protective armour of tanks. This excess uranium, composed mainly of the uranium isotope U-238, is called "depleted" because it has a lower than normal content of the fissionable material. But it has one very "excellent" property—it is extremely dense and capable of penetrating heavily armoured vehicles.

DU spontaneously burns on impact, creating tiny aerosolized particles less than five microns in diameter, small enough to be inhaled. At least 70% of the uranium in these weapons is released in this form on impact, and these tiny particles travel long distances when airborne. Today's precision bombing headline is tomorrow's contaminated landscape.

## Poisoning The Populations of Kuwait and Iraq

A minimum of 940,000 rounds of DU were fired by US forces during the Gulf 'war'. An estimated 300 metric tonnes of DU material was deposited over vast tracts of land, primarily in Southern Iraq. A letter was sent to the Royal UK Ordnance on April 21st 1991 by Paddy Bartholomew, Business Development Manager of AEA Technology, the trading name for the UK Atomic Energy Authority. Enclosed was a 'threat paper', marked 'UK restricted' which set out the true nature of the contamination:

"US tanks fired 5,000 rounds, US aircraft many tens of thousands of rounds, and UK tanks a small number of DU rounds. The tank ammunition alone will amount to greater than 50,000 lbs. of DU. [...] If the tank inventory of the DU was inhaled, the latest International Committee of Radiological Protection risk factor calculates 500,000 potential deaths. The DU will spread around the battlefield and target vehicles in various sizes and quantities. [...] It would be unwise for people to stay close to large quantities of DU for long periods and this would obviously be of concern to the local population if they collect this heavy metal and keep it."



30 mm DU Bullet

The people of Basra have just received their second dose of missiles tipped with depleted uranium in 12 years. They're still reeling from the first lot.

Scott Taylor, the editor of *Esprit de Corps* magazine, writes: "For the past 10 years the medical staff at the Basra Pediatric Hospital have compiled a very disturbing photographic record which catalogues thousands of patients born with 'congenital anomalies'." Due to its strategic location—just north of Kuwait—Basra was one of the most heavily targeted Iraqi cities during the Coalition Forces' aerial bombardment during what's being called 'Gulf War I'.

In the decade since Operation Desert Storm, the lethal legacy of that conflict continues unabated in the form of widespread cancer, an epidemic of renal disease and a tremendous increase in genetic birth defects. The collection of photographs which line the walls of the Basra Hospital "memorial gallery" are horrific: grotesque babies born with two heads, tiny infants with internal organs protruding through their chest cavities, numerous limbless children, and an alarming number of newborns who reached full term without developing any skin.

"To find similar congenital anomalies we have had to research the radioactive aftermaths of Hiroshima and Nagasaki", said Dr. Khalid Al-Abidi, Iraq's Deputy Minister of Health. But as the Campaign Against Depleted Uranium says: "The risks of Depleted Uranium are not only present during wars, or far-off conflicts, but affect us much closer to home, where the weapons are manufactured and tested."

## Scotland: Birthplace of The New Warfare

As depleted uranium shells rained down on Iraq, the Scottish people could take pride in the fact that the weaponry has been developed and tested in and around the Solway Firth for the past twenty years. We simply couldn't have brought them this level of liberatory democracy if we hadn't already tried it out at home.

Many thousands of DU tipped shells have been test-fired from the Dundrennan range, though the MoD insist that the environmental contamination caused by the shells is negligible as "they were fired into a cloth target"<sup>2</sup> and there was no known risk to public health.

This process, which sets up the Dumfries countryside and its local population as an open air medical experiment, was halted recently, ironically, because of restrictions over access to land due to foot and mouth disease. But now they're testing again.

While the after-effects of depleted uranium are shrouded with expected secrecy, the bald facts are made plain in several key reports. A frank admis-

sion from the US in 1990 stated: "Short-term effects of high doses can result in death, while long-term effects of low doses have been implicated in cancer."<sup>3</sup>

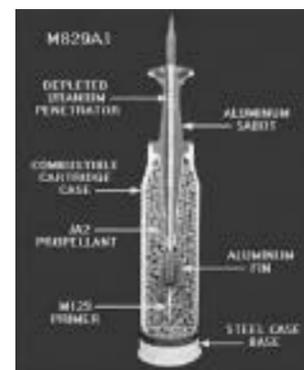
But while the suspected connection between Gulf War Syndrome and DU has galvanised a movement to oppose this scientific experiment in America, it has been slow off the ground in Scotland. In the US, the Depleted Uranium Citizens' Network began its work in 1992 and introduced itself to the public in March of 1993 with the release of a report entitled 'Uranium Battlefields Home and Abroad'. This report was written by DU Network members, the Rural Alliance for Military Accountability, the Progressive Alliance for Community Empowerment, and Citizen Alert. The DU Network's membership consists of people living near uranium enrichment plants and near facilities where DU munitions are made, former workers at those facilities, people living near where DU weapons are tested, and both Persian Gulf and Atomic veterans.

In Scotland there is little opposition. It's difficult to tell why not. Maybe it's the geography of Dundrennan. Certainly culpable are the failed Scottish Labour Party, the useless Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) and the opportunistic Nationalist agenda that plays to a pro-military sub-agenda. Unfortunately, also true is that the softly-softly approach of Scotland's Green MSP, the multi-coloured scarf-wearing Robin Harper, has been ineffective. Perhaps Kevin Dunion, in his new role as Scotland's Secret's Supremo, can uncover some of the truth about the military in Scotland? But the more likely reality is that we shall have to uncover the truth ourselves.

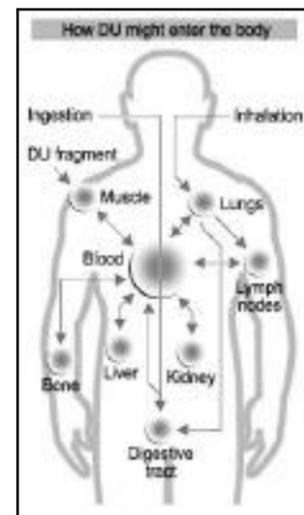
Elsewhere the anti-DU movement has grown out of disaffected soldiers' own politicisation. Their legal and medical cases—and a growing realisation that they are the dispensable pawns of the military—have fuelled rather than quelled an investigative spirit that's lacking in Scotland. In the US this has been enhanced by a radicalised veteran's movement and a decade of enquiry into Gulf War Syndrome. Scotland wears its military history on its shoulder with pride. It's part of some strange nostalgic affection with our violence. Scottish regiments, long bought by the British to wage wars abroad (be it Ireland or Iraq) carry this notion of romance with them through the centuries. So, the nationalists would rather bristle under regimental pride than look into the filthy secrets of experiments on the civilian population.

Like Dounreay, also left unanswered, unresolved and unwanted, the rural positioning of the Dundrennan Range suits the Generals and the career politicians busying themselves with the defence of the realm and the creation of micro-policy at Holyrood.

Manuel Pino, an environmental activist from the Acoma Pueblo in New Mexico, sees links between the geography and the placement of radioactive military sites in the US: "In remote areas of the Navajo Reservation there are still over one thousand unreclaimed uranium pit mines open, filled with water, inviting children to swim



the Depleted Uranium Penetrator shell



and animals to drink.”

Uranium development on indigenous people's land parallels the history of the nuclear industry in the United States. When the race to build atomic weapons began in secrecy during World War II, nuclear weapons research had been established in New Mexico. Six Pueblo nations in northern New Mexico are within thirty miles of the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory, where the first atomic bomb was developed. The remote desert spot called Trinity, New Mexico, where on July 16, 1945, the first atomic bomb was tested, is within sixty miles



Photographs: J.B. Russell, 'congenital anomalies' in Iraq following 'Gulf War I'.

of the Mescalero Apache Nation. The Grants Mineral Belt—which would ultimately become the largest uranium belt in the world—was located on or near the Navajo nation and Laguna and Acoma Pueblo lands.

It's said that the MoD were asked to identify a UK site for nuclear testing—Caithness. The only factor that stopped it was the levels of rainfall rather than the population.

### Fighting Military Occupation in Puerto Rico

Since 1938, the US Navy has been acquiring land in Vieques by expropriation. The US Navy uses 75% of the Island's soil for war manoeuvres, and bomb storage. Not surprisingly, the Puerto Rican population of 9,000 have learnt effective methods to oppose their further colonisation.

Vieques' fishermen have been at the forefront of a courageous resistance to military occupation confronting warships at sea several times. In February of 1978, US admiral Robert Fanagan told the fishermen that they would not be allowed to fish during 3 weeks. NATO countries had planned an intensive military manoeuvre along all of Vieques' coastline. Carlo Zenún informed him that they would protest. "Imagine me, a Puerto Rican fisherman, telling a US Navy admiral that we're going to cause problems for them", he said. On February



6th, 1978, fed-up with the Navy's arrogance, the fishermen took a desperate gamble. Forty fishing boats 'invaded' waters where target practice with live ammunition was about to begin. They were successful in stalling the manoeuvres and awakening the support of the entire Puerto Rican nation. This activism at sea has won important victories for the people of Vieques during their struggle against the US Navy.

After a civilian, David Sanes Rodriguez, was killed by the navy on April 19th, 1999, a group of civilians gathered in the "accident" area to protest the bombardments. This show of outrage and civil disobedience was a frontal challenge to the US Navy's ill-gotten authority. On April 21st a group gathered at the place of the bombings, placed a large cross and named the area Mount David, in memory of Mr. Sanes. Mount David is peppered with live ammunition. In spite of this, many people organised protests behind the gates of the Navy's restricted areas. All these protests have successfully detained the bombings since Sanes' death. "I know that there is a great danger", said Pablo Connelly, one of the civilians that protested, "I know that the risks are great, but all the risks are worth it. I do this for my children and for the children of all Vieques and I know that during the time that I remain here there is not going to fall a single bomb in Vieques."

On May 8th, the Puerto Rican Independence Party (PIP) established a second campsite in Playa Carrucho. The president of the party, Senator Ruben Berrios, vowed to stay in the campsite until either the Navy left or he was arrested. A scenario of confrontation was set. Once again, David faced Goliath eye to eye. Many other Encampments of Civil Disobedience were established over the course of that year in the target range. At the begin-

ning of May 2000, there were about 14 of them with over one hundred people living permanently in such harsh conditions.

On Thursday, May 4, 2000, at 5:30am federal authorities began to arrest the people conducting Civil Disobedience in Vieques. This act was considered an offence of the US Government against the will of the people of Vieques and Puerto Rico, who took back their land for one full year to prevent the bombing and shelling of the Island.

### History Of DU Testing In Scotland

Regular test-firing of DU shells started in 1980 at Eskmeals in Cumbria, and at the Ministry of Defence's firing range at Dundrennan, near Kirkcubright in South-west Scotland in 1981. In June 1993 the MoD, answering a parliamentary question, in effect denied that there was any problem, there being "only very low levels of radioactivity" detected. But when radiation reports were made public in July (with some excisions) these revealed serious levels of contamination outside the controlled area at Eskmeals, and grass and soil samples at Kirkcubright were "well above acceptable limits." The test-firings had resulted in the accumulation of radioactive waste at these sites. Currently 91 cubic metres at Eskmeals is estimated to rise to 468 cubic metres by 2030.

At Kirkcubright there is considered to be no nuclear waste as DU shells are fired into the Solway Firth. All MoD efforts to retrieve them have failed.

At Kirkcubright a misfiring on 13th

November 1989 involved a DU shell exploding into fragments on impact with a stone bank. This resulted in a local concentration of 1,692 mg/kg well exceeding the MoD's normal limit of 72 mg/kg and upper limit of 300 mg/kg. Presumably, in investigating this incident, military personnel inspected the site of impact and were exposed to this concentration. Depending on wind and weather conditions, local populations in Britain may be exposed to unknown concentrations over prolonged periods.

So what is the present situation in Scotland? For SEPA's last statement on the issue you have to go back to 12th January 2001, which simply noted public concern and the MoD's inability to retrieve the shells. The MoD's monitoring has not shown elevated levels of uranium, nor has it found the specific DU 'signature'. However, if shells

cannot be retrieved it is impossible to demonstrate that the DU has dispersed and been absorbed into the normal background radiation.

In his statement to the House of Commons, the Minister for the Armed Forces, John Spellar MP, said: "The Environment Agency in England and Wales, and the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency in Scotland also have oversight of the firing programme." In fact according to SEPA: "MoD activities are not subject to the Radioactive Substances Act so SEPA does not have control over these activities, nor do we undertake monitoring for depleted uranium. We are aware of the firing programme and, along with the local Council, see the results of the MoD's own monitoring. We also provide advice to the MoD."

It would be difficult to imagine how SEPA could be more discredited. With the politicians disinterested, and the statutory body dissolute, the public are left powerless, ignorant and contaminated. Drawing on the Vieques Libre movement in Puerto Rico and the American people's legal opposition to their own military, we need to build a national body which monitors military operations throughout Scotland, and a movement against the occupying force.

Depleted Uranium is not just another weapon in the terrorist state's arsenal; it defies all the protocol of international law. The fact that Britain and America have used DU weapons in the present and past conflicts shows them to be beyond redemption, and exposes the contempt they have for their own civilian population as well as those abroad.

Every opportunity should be raised to move to shut down the Dundrennan range and halt DU tests. As in Vieques, local fishermen can play a key role and unity should be made with the people of Northern England, Ireland and Dumfries and Galloway. It's degrading to remain quiescent in the face of such assault.

For an update on the campaign against military abuses in Scotland contact [product2000@hotmail.com](mailto:product2000@hotmail.com)

### Notes

- 1 Ross B. Mirkarimi, The Environmental and Human Health Impacts of the Gulf Region with Special Reference to Iraq, May 1992
- 2 <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/1873534.stm>
- 3 From the Science Applications International Corporation (SAIC) report, included as Appendix D of AMMCOM's Kinetic Energy Penetrator Long Term Strategy Study, Danesi, July 1990.

