



Ray Laughton kept his mouth shut for twenty years. When he finally began asking questions, he uncovered a virtual horror story of human experimentation.

by Douglas C. DiMarco

CODES OF SILENCE BROKEN!

GB nerve gas, originally developed in Hitler's laboratories, destroys one of the body's vital enzymes, causing the nervous system to literally go on a rampage. The victim falls to the ground, twitching and convulsing like a dying cockroach.

Ray Laughridge sits in the modest living room of his middle class home in Thornton and tries to make sense out of the callousness and deceit of more than a score of public officials involved in his personal tragedy. Like too many of his fellow ex-Rocky Mountain Arsenal employees, Ray Laughridge has been repeatedly exposed to potentially deadly doses of nerve gas and now, at age 54, he is permanently disabled. He has suffered a general "loosening" all over, a deterioration of his mental and physical faculties which often causes him to stumble, crumple into a heap on his couch, or forget simple things that he once easily remembered. He first started complaining back in the fifties, but was assured by doctors that GB had no long-term effects on those who lived through an exposure. Now they're not quite so sure.

Ray Laughridge is not sure of anything anymore. His experience with the Army has left him confused and disgusted with a military establishment for which he served in two wars and, as a long-term civil servant, he protected by "Keeping his mouth shut" about top secret and extremely deadly activities.

On September 11, 1976, Laughridge made a decision which was to profoundly change his life. On that day he telephoned the FBI and quietly informed Special Agent Frank Remmer that he planned to break security. The oath of silence to which he once swore was, at long last, not worth his frightening personal sacrifice or, for that matter, the paper it was printed on. Ray Laughridge's dedication to perpetuating the secret of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal's activities had been compromised by the dismissal and lies which had been his lot as he sought vainly for a token gesture from Uncle Sam—a paltry award for disability from the Social Security Administration. Instead of a check he received the closed door of a scientific bureaucracy which wanted no part of a used specimen.

For more than twenty years the United States Army has been exposing employees of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal to doses of GB gas. And, through an arrangement with Colorado General Hospital, has been carefully recording the results of the exposures to the hapless civil servants. Until recently, when the *Rocky Mountain News* undertook an investigation of the Strangelove-like goings on at RMA, very little was known about

the hideous industry and real-life science fiction engaged in behind the miles of barbed wire fences.

Laughridge is just one of the resulting human tragedies. A lifetime lay Baptist minister, frequently called upon by members of his congregation to assist them in their hours of stress, Laughridge now has trouble quoting the scriptures he knows so well. Slowly but surely, the vestiges of all that Ray Laughridge once was are being erased by the creeping symptoms of severe nervous system disorders brought on by exposures to nerve gas. As he looks across the living room toward a wall festooned with citations and certificates for productivity and achievement, he wonders why he's been sold down the river by his nation.

Laughridge, certainly, is not the only victim charging callous neglect on the part of the military. Another of his colleagues claims that three of his children were born mentally retarded and horribly deformed because of his employment at the Arsenal. The worker, now employed by a local construction company, has four children. His one normal child, a girl, was conceived two years before he accepted a job at the Arsenal.

One man claims that three of his children were born mentally retarded and horribly deformed because of his employment at the Arsenal. Another ex-colleague recently died after slow deterioration.

Joe Romero, another ex-colleague, recently died. Just before his death, one would never have recognized the once active Arsenal worker. Like Laughridge, Romero's symptoms began as a gradual "fuzziness" all over, then his muscles began to deteriorate until he was confined to a wheel chair. As his doctors told him he was dying, Joe, with what remained of a smile, would try to understand. Before he went to work at the Arsenal, he had been the epitome of good health. While he remained alive, Joe Romero repeatedly insisted that his years of employment at the Army's super-secret plant left him broken and dy-

ing. Now, he too has been silenced. Before he too suffers the same fate as his friend Joe Romero, Ray Laughridge has decided that his story will be heard.

What goes on at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal has long been hushed up. We've seen how the Army can lull the populace of Denver into a stupor of obfuscated nonchalance. A quick press conference, a lot of brass and some doubletalk and "all is well." It is difficult to tell that to Ray Laughridge and his colleagues as they drive down the highway, looking at the skyline of Denver, a city teeming with living, laughing people, and they see the soft silhouette of a slowly approaching DC-10 landing over the series of arsenal bunkers. What if . . .

"EXPERIMENTS"

That the United States government is capable of inflicting harsh cruelties upon its own citizens is a fact that the average American is beginning to accept with almost blasé indifference. From the dusty archives and dim corridors of the CIA, FBI, FDA and the Pentagon come whispered reports of various "experiments," "studies," and "tests" which seem designed to expand the already seemingly limitless frontiers of just how far we can go in experimenting with our fellow man.

That the Central Intelligence Agency loaded up one of its employees with LSD, causing him to leap from a building, leaving his wife a widow and his family fatherless is a fact which, like so many others, took up space during television newscasts for a few days, only to be suddenly forgotten in the wake of box scores or the nocturnal cavorings of selected Capitol Hill luminaries. The military establishment has admitted routinely subjecting "volunteers" to experimentation involving mind altering drugs and recording the subjects' reactions for purposes not quite clear to most observers. Those of us who watched as *60 Minutes* reviewed films of a drug-altered soldier wandering aimlessly through a forest as his commanders looked on, will not soon forget the sight.

Behind the imposing starkness of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal may be one of the most insidious examples of crime perpetrated on our own citizens by an arm of their government. These crimes have been conceived in a foggy and long-obsolete notion of tactical weaponry and executed with

Still determined not to break the code of silence, Laughridge wrote to President Ford, pleading for another hearing of his case. When he received a form letter in return, that did it. He called the FBI and told them he was blowing the whistle.

the same fine precision which made *Dachau*, *Treblinka* and *Auschwitz* household words, perched frighteningly on the tongues of the last three generations.

In 1955 Ray Laughridge was a technical employee at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, one of the Americans who could pass the McCarthy-inspired rigidity of the tightest security checks ever. He was assigned to work on one of the most sensitive, top secret projects in the country: The manufacture of a deadly nerve gas to be used against an enemy then clearly defined as the hordes of armed militarists in the Kremlin.

A veteran of World War II and Korea, the former Army Air Force flight instructor was making his way toward the good life in a generation dominated by the national *laissez-faire* of the Eisenhower administration. The Rosenbergs had been dispossed of, Hoover reigned supreme in Washington and Ray Laughridge, like thousands of his fellow Americans, was working for a defense establishment which was working overtime to head off the red menace.

Laughridge punched in and out at the arsenal oblivious to the fact that he was one of numerous guinea pigs at the Army plant. From 1955 through 1957, Laughridge suffered five "acute" exposures to the nerve gas with which he was working, once described by an Army Chemical Corps officer as the most toxic chemical agent yet known. GB nerve gas, a form of Sarin ($C_4H_{10}FO_2P$), an anti-cholinesterase agent which destroys one of the body's vital enzymes, was developed originally in Hitler's laboratories by a Dr. Hirsch. With the advent of victory in Germany, the United States started grabbing the German's military technology by the truckload. As Werner Von Braun and his liquid oxygen tanks were being spirited across the Rhine and out of Europe, chemical warfare experts from Eisenhower's SHAEF command stumbled upon GB. They immediately recognized the potential terror for what it was: a valuable asset to our postwar arsenal. Armed with Hirsch's research and GB itself, the Army immediately allocated millions of dollars to set up three centers

for experimentation with, refinement of and manufacture of GB nerve gas. One manufacturing plant was set up at the Chemical Corps headquarters at Edgewood Arsenal, Maryland, one in Alabama and one at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal just outside Denver. Although now looked upon as superfluous in the wake of "second strike capabilities," GB was a hot weapon in the fifties.

SIMPLE

GB is simple in its deadliness. It kills by ruining the nervous system. Basically, our nervous systems function like clockwork because of various chemicals within the body. When the brain starts transmitting its messages to our nerve endings, one particular enzyme is synthesized and creates a link between the nerve endings and the body's muscles. GB destroys that enzyme and without it, our nervous system literally goes on a rampage. The victim falls to the ground, twitching like a dying cockroach as paralysis sets in and, shortly dies. The end comes in the form of massive convulsions which halt breathing and simply stop the heart.

It was that effect which, on the morning of January 14, 1963, caused the massive roosting bird population at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal to begin falling like stones from their nests in the compound building's eaves. As workers reported to duty that day, they were treated to the sight of hundreds of birds bouncing and twitching on the ground as they ingested gas from a massive leak on the property.

At first the Army lied about the leak. They said it did not occur. Finally, after investigation, they admitted that the leak had occurred. According to a number of employees who witnessed the death throes of the birds, arsenal employees began running like hell in the other direction as the odorless, colorless gas spread. After the workers who were exposed were shot full of atropine, the only antidote, mopping up exercises commenced. It was then, as they disposed of the dead birds, cats and prairie dogs that most of the exposed employees knew they'd cheated death

themselves.

Laughridge and his fellow workers were to be exposed to the nerve gas many times. After each exposure they were rushed to the hospital for their dose of atropine. According to one former employee, the workers who could tell they'd only received a slight dose often would not go to the hospital, preferring the symptoms of nerve gas exposure to the atropine treatment, which was even worse. Unfortunately, the workers were laboring under the belief that GB exposures had no long-lasting effects and they would recover quickly.

BRAIN DISTURBANCE

During the fifties, and up until the mid-sixties, the workers were periodically sent to Colorado General Hospital where they underwent electroencephalogram tests to determine what level of damage was being done to their brains. The EEG's were conducted under the supervision of Dr. Joseph Holmes of Colorado General.

As it turns out, Holmes was using the employees as parts of his research into the effects of what are termed *organophosphorous agents* on human beings. Holmes's studies have been published in numerous professional journals such as *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, and *Archives of Environmental Health*. Unbeknownst to Laughridge or his fellow employees, Holme's studies and the entire research project at Colorado General Hospital were set up through grants by the Army Chemical Warfare Service, The U.S. Public Health Service and other government and military agencies.

By monitoring the exposure of its own employees, the Army could analyze the effects of nerve gas on a potential enemy. None of the reports of the EEG examinations were ever revealed to the subjects. The Army was naturally hesitant to explain that it was destroying the brain cells of its own employees.

Dr. Holmes didn't tell Laughridge or his colleagues that their brain wave activity was being seriously impaired. The following is an excerpt from an EEG examination of Ray Laughridge in 1957: "The findings are suggestive

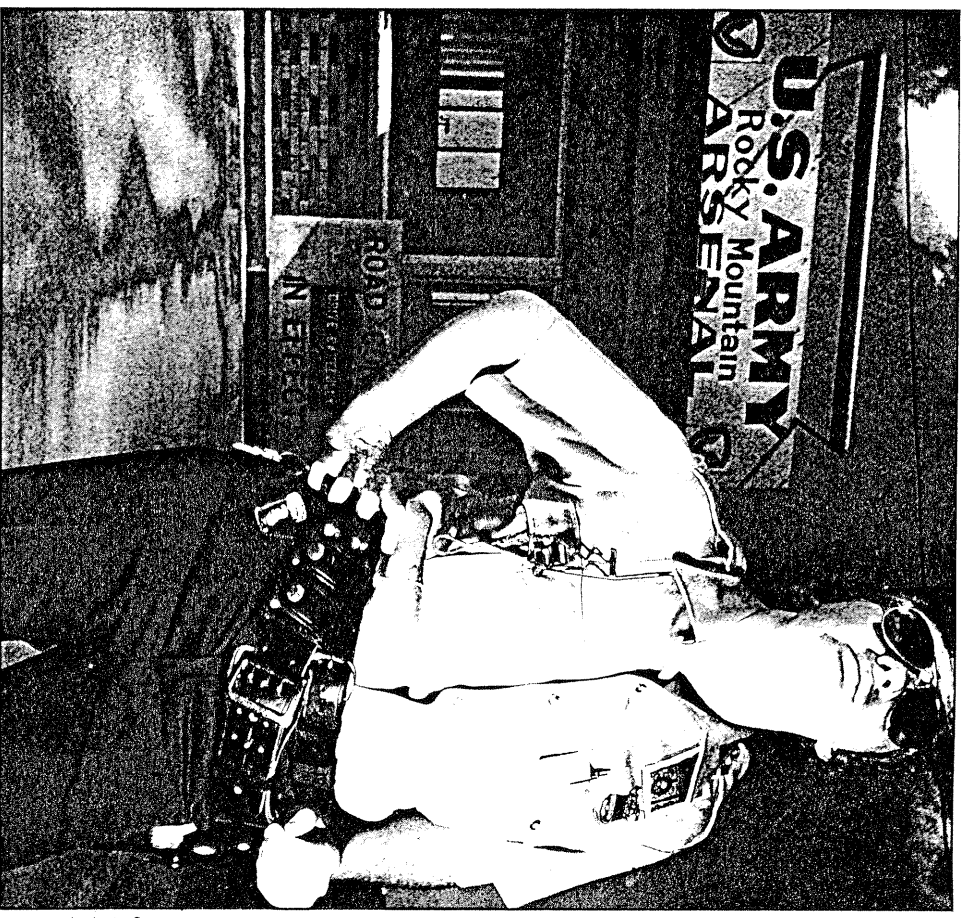
of the presence of a mild brain disturbance most marked in the frontal and central regions." Dr. Holmes has stated that it wasn't his job to inform the men whom he tested. "That was the Arsenal's problem," Holmes said in a recent interview. "They just came out here for the tests. It wasn't our duty here to tell them anything."

Ray Laughridge swears he was never informed of the presence of such a dangerous disturbance in the most vital part of his body. Six months later, another EEG conducted by a different physician said, in part, the following: "This is distinctly an abnormal record indicative of the presence of cerebral cortical instability and indicative of the presence of a convulsive tendency. The present record is more disturbed than was the previous record. These findings do not suggest the presence of brain tumor or other such lesions but do suggest that whatever process was responsible for the initial mildly abnormal record is still in progress and the entire situation with regard to this particular man should be re-viewed."

"OH, THOSE RECORDS"

Once, after an acute exposure to GB gas and subsequent treatment, Ray Laughridge drove his car through an intersection in Brighton and slammed into a Public Service truck. He was arrested by the Brighton police after they took a look at his arm. Not two hours before, new needle marks from atropine antidote shots had been added to his already needle scarred arm.

The Brighton Police were convinced that Laughridge was a narcotics user and they booked him into the jail for investigation of drug abuse. Meanwhile, after checking his identification papers, someone made a phone call to the Arsenal. While the police were running a check on him, someone from the Arsenal showed up and, after a few moments of whispered conversation with the officials, spirited Laughridge from the police station and ordered him to go directly home. Ray Laughridge remembers the day vividly. Oddly enough, when asked by investigators, no one in the Brighton police could provide any information or records of Laughridge's arrest. Later, presented with irrefutable proof that they had, indeed, arrested the Arsenal employee, the officer quickly remembered the case: "Oh, *those* records," they explained. Brighton still has been un-



Photography by Len Irish

able to produce the records.

Laughridge was not surprised that he was whisked away from the police station. "At that time," he says, "the whole gas project was extremely top secret. They didn't want anyone snooping around and they even went so far as keeping us at the arsenal after an exposure so we wouldn't be able to go home and thus be classified as a 'lost time' accident."

That statement by Laughridge opens up a Pandora's box of falsification and deliberate deceit by the Army as related to its safety record at the Arsenal. According to Laughridge, the Army was paranoid about recording workers' exposure to nerve gas as a "lost time" accident. He is convinced that the orders came from the Pentagon itself. "If someone had a concern about what was going on at the Arsenal, say an agent or a foreign power, all he would have to do is review the number and type of 'lost time' accidents out there and he could get a pretty clear picture of just what kind of activity was going on."

The fantastic safety record at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal, it seems, was a deliberately trumped up scheme. The Army has taken what turns out to be deceitful pride in the fact that

they have only recorded six "lost time" accidents at the Arsenal since 1953. Recent statements by ex-Arsenal employees and admissions by the Arsenal itself reveal that employees were placed in a hospital bed, allowed to sit alone in rooms or were "driven around" for hours or days on end while they recovered from acute exposures to nerve gas. During that time, the Army carried the employees on the roles as being actively engaged in their jobs.

COMIC BOOKS

According to Laughridge and some of his colleagues, the Army even went as far as sending ambulances to the homes of stricken workers so they would be able to report to the Arsenal. They were incapable of driving to work, and naturally, were of no value when they got there. Yet the Army brought them through the gates and put them on "light duty" or, as Laughridge attests, "let them read comic books" for sometimes an entire work day, rather than carry them as "lost time" accidents.

Although arsenal employees were suffering from hallucinations, nausea, chest congestion, blurred vision and

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CODE OF SILENCE Cont'd

numerous other symptoms, they were still logged in as fit for duty. Even in cases where the employees were hospitalized for a day or more, they continued to be carried on the duty roster.

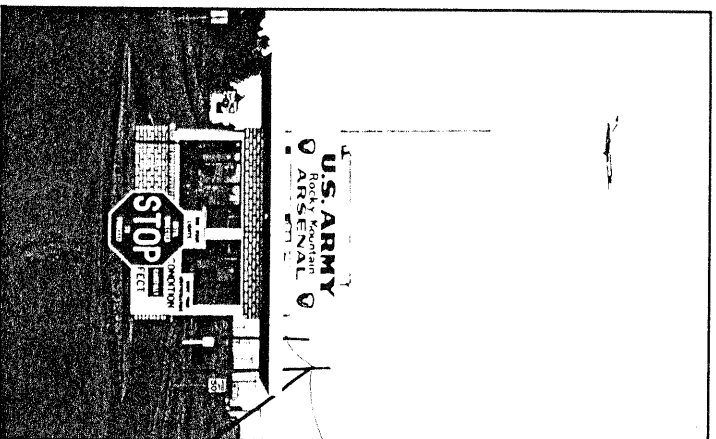
After his repeated exposures and ignorance of the devastating effect it was having upon him, Ray Laughridge was dumped from his Arsenal job during an Army austerity move in 1958. Following his termination, Laughridge went into business for himself as a licensed plumbing and heating contractor. From 1958 until 1975, he never once mentioned the details of the ongoing production at The Rocky Mountain Arsenal. He held fast to his promise to keep silent.

Then, however, as the severity of his disability increased, Laughridge found that he was unable to work. As a man who'd been paying into Social Security since he was old enough to be employed, Laughridge felt it was time to collect. He tried. He filed a disability claim, but was turned down. He was somewhat surprised but persevered. He exhausted every recourse at his command save filing a civil suit against the Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare. After his claim was turned down the first time, Laughridge went through a Reconsideration Determination. The answer was no. Following that, his case was submitted to an administrative law judge in Denver and, once again, he was told his claim had no merit. Finally, the accumulated paperwork, doctors' statements and personal depositions were presented to an appeals council in Washington. For the final time he was told that he had no valid claim. Still, Laughridge, who by this time had discovered the disturbances in his EEG's and was beginning to understand the meaning of his repeated exposure to deadly nerve gas, did not break security. Instead he used a recourse available to every American. He wrote to President Ford, pleading for another hearing on his case. What he got in return was a letter from a "director of correspondence" saying, in effect, don't call us, we'll call you. That did it.

"UNAVAILABLE"

Ray Laughridge called the FBI and the information officer at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal and informed them that he'd been had once too often and was going to blow the whistle.

Until that time, the balance of his records during the time he was employed at the Arsenal were "unavailable." They had been administratively lost. He started calling Dr. Maurice Gaon, Arsenal medical officer, in an attempt to garner the records. "What records?" Gaon asked initially. When Laughridge informed him that he wanted to examine the test results from those many visits to Colorado General, a red flag went up in some official corners. Gaon was naturally hesitant to provide Laughridge with the records. According to Dr. Holmes at Colorado General, Gaon, as chief medical officer at the installation, would bear the direct responsibility for informing the Arsenal workers that they were in extremely bad shape because of numerous exposures. Gaon



had never let the workers know that they were suffering ill effects. Dr. Gaon impresses one as a characterization from a B-rated war movie. Speaking to visitors with a heavy European accent, hands poised with fingertips pressed together, he peers out from behind thick glasses and explains his position with the curious, studied language which evokes visions of doorbells ringing in the middle of the night, sterile laboratories and callous experimentation. On one hand he is quick to point out that extensive studies prove that no brain damage has been suffered by Rocky Mountain Arsenal employees. On the flip side Gaon admits that abnormal brainwave patterns have been found in many Arsenal workers who were

treated following exposures, under an examination program begun in 1969.

At the time Gaon and three other researchers were conducting experiments into the effects of GB on brain wave patterns, they failed to inform workers at the plant that there was a possible connection. In a statement in May of this year, Gaon said he did not feel that he should be required to notify employees that testing indicated they may well have suffered damage from their exposures to GB. According to Dr. Gaon, the Army would eventually issue the report on GB exposures and resulting damage, and at that time the workers would find out about the danger.

In what seems to be an abject contradiction, Dr. Gaon says that Rocky Mountain Arsenal employees with abnormal brain wave patterns were informed about the potential interpretation of test findings but were additionally told that there was no proof that exposures to nerve gas leads to "prolonged" damage. One Arsenal worker, still employed, denies that Gaon or anyone from the medical division called him in to explain anything. The worker, who chose to remain anonymous, says the undercurrent of rumblings concerning the GB exposures is as far as any information has gotten. There has been no official word, he says. In addition, the worker reports that when asked about the rumors floating around the Arsenal, he and his fellow employees were rebuffed by the medical department. He claims the entire situation has been a well guarded secret.

The secrecy of the events surrounding the Arsenal's mission and the danger of employees involved in that mission was clearly demonstrated when Laughridge sought to secure the Colorado General Hospital records of his tests during the 50s.

As Laughridge began his search, he began having doors shut in his face. First Colorado General denied it had his records and suggested that he try Fitzsimmons to see if they were being held in storage there. Laughridge was told by Fitzsimmons that they never had any such records and he might want to try Colorado General Hospital. Back at Colorado General, Laughridge began to get angry.

In an investigation conducted by Laughridge and a couple of ex-employees from the arsenal, he determined that the records were being

held in a shack near Parker, Colorado where Colorado General routinely shuttles old reports. Armed with this information Laughridge confronted Colorado General officials and asked them if they had searched the old warehouse. He was told that they had looked and the records were not there. Certain of his sources, Laughridge made another call to Colorado General, this time with a threat to bring a flock of reporters to the shack site and confront the hospital officials on the spot. Colorado General said they would look again. Two days later Laughridge was informed that they had found the records and the hospital would hand them over.

After another week and a half of waiting, the records were finally sent to Dr. Gaon at the Rocky Mountain Arsenal.

Examining the EEG reports which found their way to him, Dr. Gaon immediately made a statement, saying that the review of Laughridge's tests was the first time he'd seen the results. According to Gaon, if he had seen the serious abnormality of the patient's tests, he would have ordered that Laughridge be removed from the GB areas at the arsenal. Gaon laid the blame directly on the doorstep of Colorado General for not informing him of the acute abnormality in Laughridge's tests. Once again Dr. Holmes and the Colorado General administration denied the responsibility for informing the patient. Inferring that a close doctor-patient relationship existed between Gaon and the employees at the arsenal, Holmes threw the blame back on Dr. Gaon and reiterated that it was his responsibility to have informed his patients and that Colorado General had made all tests and results available to Gaon at the time they were conducted and recorded. That statement sheds considerable speculation on the accuracy of Gaon's insistence that he'd never seen Laughridge's records before.

DEADLY CARGO

Laughridge feels he now has enough proof to demonstrate that the Army has been callously negligent in failing to inform him and his fellow workers of the dangers on their jobs. At the same time, The Rocky Mountain Arsenal is trying to foist that responsibility for informing the workers on Colorado General, which con-

ducted the tests under a contract. The hospital will have none of that. Colorado General has taken the position that they were not required to inform the patients directly, that, under the terms and conditions of the operating contract between them and the Arsenal, they were only required to conduct specific tests and to report back to Gaon and the Arsenal the results of such tests. There is an interesting question which arises from all of that. Given that Dr. Holmes and Colorado General were using the tests as part of other studies to determine the effects of organophosphorous agents on human beings, wouldn't it have been the responsibility of the hospital's management to inform the patients of the test results?

Just recently, Dr. Gaon conveniently suggested to the Surgeon General of the Army that the department immediately undertake a thorough study to determine if Rocky Mountain Arsenal employees exposed to

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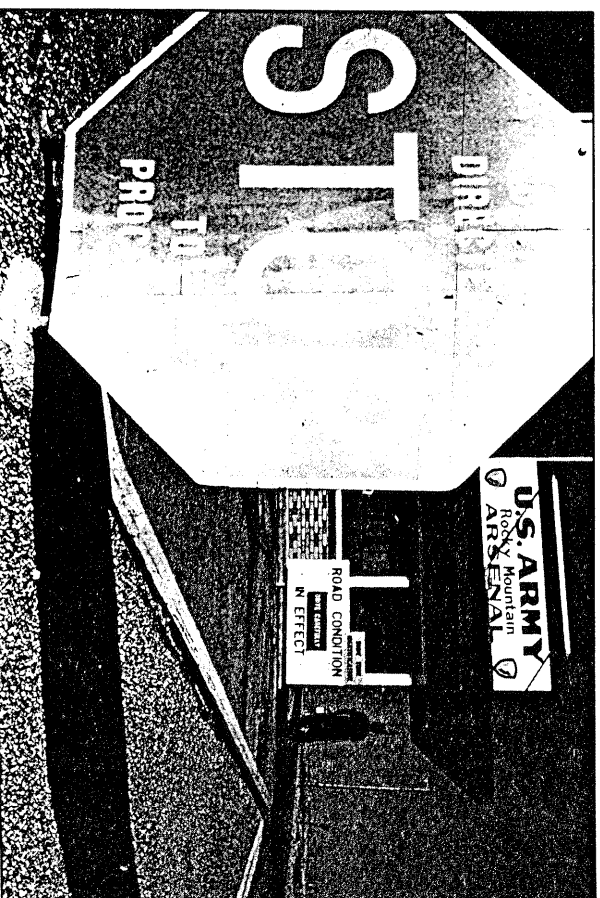
nerve gas have suffered personality disorders. Gaon now has admitted, in light of the Laughridge case and the reexamination of other cases it

engendered, that there is a variance in the brain wave activity between exposed workers and those who have not been subjected to GB exposures.

Simultaneously, Arsenal Commander, Col. John Byrne has guaranteed that he will personally inform all current Arsenal employees, now dismantling the huge stockpile of nerve gas bombs, that a potential danger exists in handling the deadly devices.

The case of Ray Laughridge and his colleagues is not over. Not by a long shot. In light of the disclosures brought forth by the ex-employees, Denverites should take a closer look at the proximity of the Rocky Mountain Arsenal to their city. The Army's record of deception, abfuscation and negligence, as it seeps out of the confines of the Arsenal daily is a signal to all local residents of the lack of concern with which the Army treats the deadly cargo behind their fences.

Ray Laughridge kept his mouth shut for nearly twenty years. When he finally began asking questions, the answers he prodded from the establishment reflected a virtual horror story of human experimentation and callous disregard. Ray Laughridge may or may not be awarded a claim for social security disability. That is for the proper agencies to sort out. Now, at least, he has enough ammunition to once more approach the bureaucracy and perhaps garner some attention for the plight he and his fellow ex-employees face. Ray Laughridge asks only for the same type of compensation given to others in the Social Security system . . . others who were not used as human litmus paper. ■



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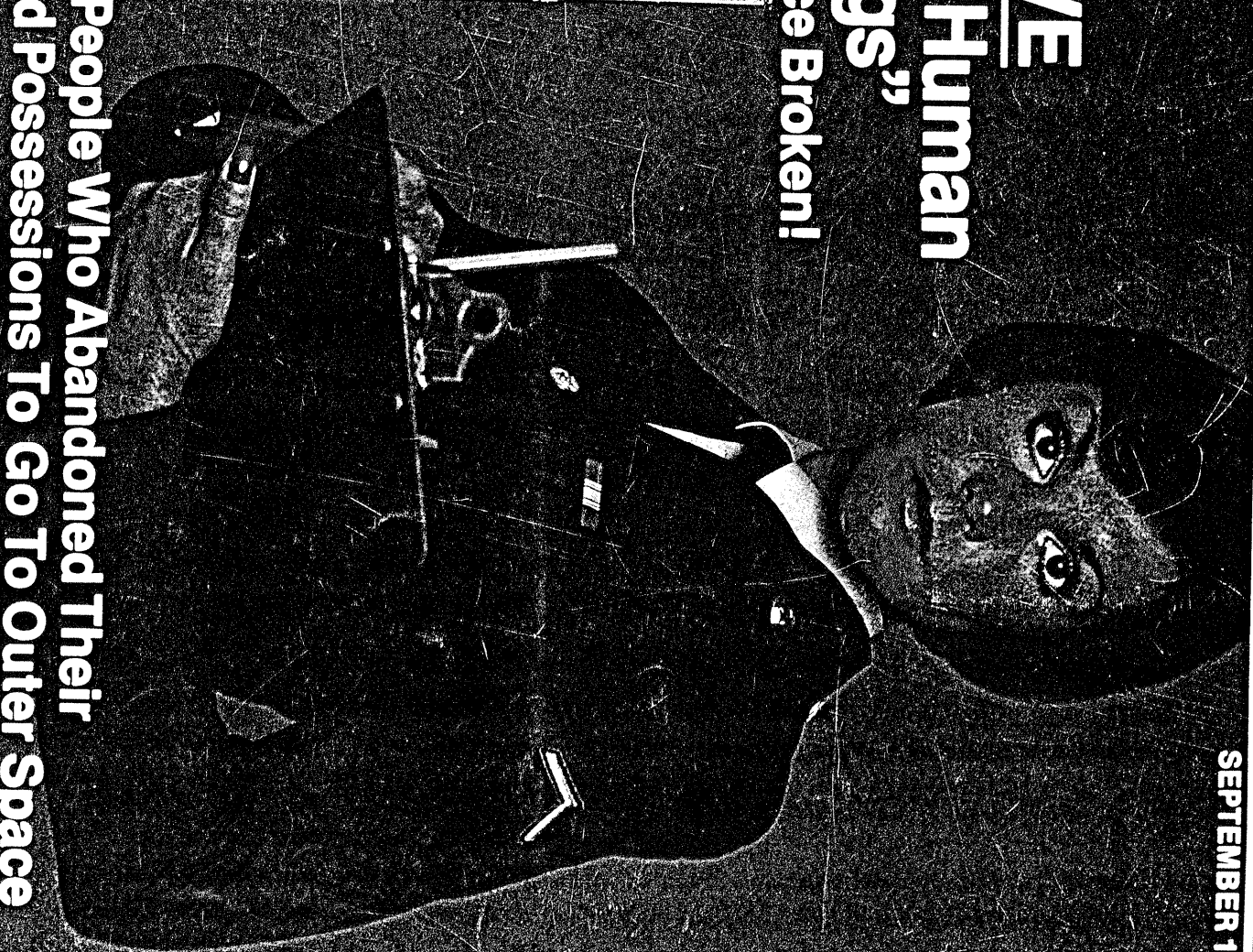
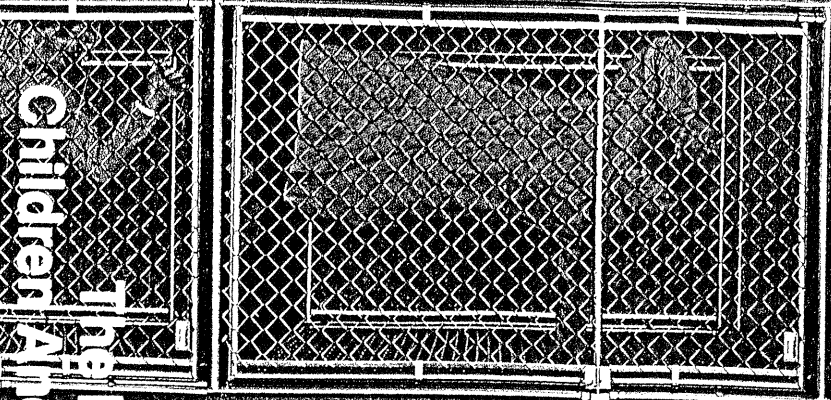
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