

PILOTS QUIT GUARD UNIT IN ANTHRAX ARGUMENT VACCINATION ORDER COSTS  
BRADLEY  
WING 8 VETERANS  
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Eight veteran combat pilots from the Connecticut Air National Guard -- almost a quarter of the 103rd Fighter Wing -- are resigning to protest a requirement that they be inoculated with a controversial anthrax vaccine.

The pilots' battle with military authorities over whether anthrax shots are safe is a growing and festering dispute within the U.S. military, but few, if any, units nationwide can claim as many simultaneous resignations over the controversy. They come at a time when the U.S. Department of Defense is already losing vitally needed fighter pilots to private industry.

Anthrax is an infectious disease contracted by wild or domestic animals that can be transmitted to humans. It is a disease that has been turned into airborne spores by Iraq and at least 10 other countries so it can be sprayed or fired as ammunition.

Three of the Connecticut pilots, Maj. Dom Possemato and Russell Dingle, both 42, and Capt. Thomas L. Rempfer, 33, said they stepped forward to publicize the plight of others nationwide because they are sworn as military officers to be responsible for the health and safety of those they supervise.

The fighter pilots -- who have flown missions in Bosnia and other overseas areas -- said they are also deeply concerned about their own health and safety after considering the extensive research they have reviewed and the discussions they have had about the subject.

"We are the knights in the fight who have to speak up for others who are either afraid to speak out or who don't know" about the potential dangers of defense department vaccination policy, said Possemato, a 17-year veteran.

The three officers and six other resigning veterans represent 25 percent of the 103rd Fighter Wing pilots stationed at Bradley International Field in Windsor Locks. The unit will be assigned to duties in southwest Asia, including the Persian Gulf area, in the spring.

Col. Walter Burns, an Air National Guard commander, confirmed that eight pilots have resigned in response to the controversy. He said the ninth pilot's resignation was only partially due to his opposition to the vaccine.

Burns said all the pilots were shown what he considers convincing scientific evidence that the vaccine is safe and effective. The other 480 members of the local Air Guard units accepted the vaccination without protest, he said.

Burns said he has no doubt about the sincerity of the pilots who are resigning, adding "there is no bad blood" between the pilots and himself or anyone else in command.

It is difficult for the Defense Department to deal with resignations of pilots with such outstanding credentials for reliability and patriotism at a time when experienced military pilots are in short supply, Burns said.

Asked why sincere, intelligent and reliable pilots would resign rather than take a vaccine he and others insist is safe and effective, Burns said he believes some now distrust the military as a result of what they believe was inadequate care and experimental medications for sick Persian Gulf War veterans.

Still others believe it is immoral for the Pentagon to issue orders to military personnel to take what the troops insist is an unsafe vaccine, said Burns. For some, he said, the orders to take a controversial drug were just the last straw for pilots who would rather spend more time with their families, and at their more lucrative full-time jobs.

Dingle said he has done extensive research on the anthrax vaccine and concluded there are no studies proving it harmless to the user's health -- or even effective against airborne anthrax spores used in biological warfare.

What's more, said Rempfer, even if the vaccine is effective and safe, the Department of Defense is not prepared to administer the essential medical follow-up in the event pilots or soldiers inhale anthrax spores.

The U.S. military has ineffective devices to immediately detect an anthrax attack, he said. So if those inoculated with anthrax were exposed to anthrax spores, he said, the medics would not know when to administer the heavy doses of antibiotics absolutely necessary to fight the disease.

Of course, enemies aware that U.S. troops have been inoculated against anthrax could readily use any number of other biological agents the troops have not received a vaccine for, Rempfer said.

Burns said he urged anyone concerned about safety to show him any evidence that the anthrax vaccine was unsafe or ineffective, and no one could. Because the vaccine has proved effective for almost 30 years of limited use, he said, the Department of Defense would have been negligent if it had not made sure it was used to protect all military personnel.

The anthrax immunization program was started by Defense Secretary William S. Cohen in December 1997, when he announced the Defense Department's intention to vaccinate the entire 2.4 million-member U.S. military force. Cohen, who himself has been inoculated with the vaccine, said deadly anthrax is a weapon that Iraq's leader, Saddam Hussein, is ready to use on U.S. pilots and other military personnel deployed in the Persian Gulf area.

The military vaccination program requires anyone in the military assigned to either the Persian Gulf region or South Korea to receive six shots within 18 months.

Some batches of the vaccine produced by the military's supplier, Michigan Biologic Products Institute, have been widely reported to have been subject to quality control problems, a factor that has concerned some knowledgeable military veterans and others.

Most who have refused to take the shots have been disciplined or discharged from the military. For instance, in April, at least seven sailors, including officers, on two Navy ships dispatched to the Persian Gulf and two fliers in Air Force units who refused to submit to vaccination were removed from their posts and subjected to disciplinary action.

Anthrax vaccine: Care or curse?

The vaccine:

A treatment designed to protect against anthrax, a livestock disease that is almost 100 percent fatal to humans.

Why use it?:

The Pentagon says vaccination of military personnel is necessary to guard against one of the world's top biological warfare threats. Anthrax is considered the easiest germ weapon to make and use. It can be produced in a dry form that can be ground into tiny particles and stored. When inhaled, the particles can cause severe pneumonia and death within a week.

Why resist it?:

Critics question the safety and effectiveness of the vaccine. They say a link may exist between diseases developed by Persian Gulf War veterans and anti-anthrax shots administered to 150,000 U.S. troops who served in the 1991 conflict. Their worries were reinforced last year when Food and Drug Administration inspectors said testing and record-keeping at the Michigan plant that produces the vaccine did not meet federal standards.

The critics also say there is little to indicate that the vaccine will work as a biological-weapon defense. People who might handle anthrax-infected animals receive the vaccine now, and they appear to be protected. But tests have never been conducted to show whether inoculations would combat the inhaled anthrax spores that would threaten military personnel, critics said.