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CIA's Manhattan 'tests': Experiments on New Yorkers?

By James Coates

WASHINGTON — The CIA did something sinister in New York City in 1955 and early 1956 — possibly exposing unsuspecting Manhattanites to germ warfare agents or drugs such as LSD.

Everybody who was involved in the covert operation is long gone, said agency spokesman Dale Peterson. "Nobody here remembers the details," he explained.

But if dead men — or for that matter, retired men — tell no tales, their expense accounts live long after them. And it is a CIA expense account that gives chilling hints that agency operatives did something nasty in New York with germs or hallucinogenic drugs.

A fragmented picture emerges from a pile of yellowing receipts released by the agency under the Freedom of Information Act. Here are some of the things the spy bureaucrats billed the home office for:

- "Cigarets, Development Security \$1.30"
- "Bottle stoppers — juice, biol. exp. \$2.02"
- "Beer, security, exp. devel. \$1.58"
- "Ice, 275 lbs. emergency \$1.56"
- "Book, The Complete Shepherd \$3.97"

UP TO THAT point the vouchers could be for a slightly weird party involving small amounts of beer and large amounts of ice.

- But, the chits soon become more menacing:
- "Bug duster, one dozen, dissemination \$2.98"
- "N.Y. Times, Subscription-Information \$1"
- "Shotgun shells, dissemination study \$10"
- "Nasal filters, sampling 3 at \$12.50 each \$37.50"
- "Driver license, car rental, proposed field test — area survey — security \$9.70"
- "Nasal filter pads — Emergency sampling \$8.15"
- "Animal Fresh Food, emergency \$2.89"
- "Book — WRITING CODE, security \$2.50"

"Dual Exhaust Dissem — study \$8.50"

THERE ARE 93 separate expense items listed in the receipts and several people have pondered the nature of the program they financed. Here are some highlights of the speculation:

• A team of CIA agents working with Army personnel from the germ warfare labs at Ft. Detrick, Md., equipped a 1953 Mercury with a dummy exhaust system, which may have served as a dispersal system for a germ or drug weapon.

• The automobile was driven for miles on New York streets, bridges, expressways, and tunnels for "tests."

Afterward the automobile was scrubbed at a commercial car wash for "decontamination," the expense vouchers say.

• Scores of bug dusters — the ordinary "flit gun" variety with a pump at one end and a little jar for holding bug killer at the other — were purchased. The agents also bought numerous packs of "nasal filters" as well as suitcases, miniature motors, and soundproofing material.

THE IMPLICATION LURKING in that series of purchases, say some analysts of the documents, is that the agents hooked motors to the bug guns and placed the devices in suitcases converted to conceal the spraying apparatus. Wearing nose plugs, the agents carried the devices in city crowds where bystanders got a dose or whatever was being sprayed.

The vouchers also covered purchases of hundreds of small boxes and vials — apparently to hold specimens taken around town to establish just how well whatever was being sprayed covered surrounding people and objects.

The CIA-Army team also collected a lot of weather data during their experiment, feeding speculation that conditions had to be just right before the spray was effective.

A voucher for \$1.50 to visit the observation tower of the Empire State Building for "weather data" was one major tipoff that Operation Big City — the CIA's code name for the project — occurred in New York. Other data includes numerous — and obvious — references to Manhattan's streets.

The expense accounts, like most other CIA data released under the Freedom of Information Act have been heavily censored. Names of hotels, car washes, restaurants, food suppliers, and the like have been crossed out.

THERE ARE TANTALIZING hints for armchair analysts that the CIA operatives made mistakes during their tests. One voucher, for example, shows they bought a quantity of "nasal filter pads — emergency sampling."

Another cryptic entry reads as follows: "Toy dog, No official Recp. (receipt?). Air contamination test \$0.98/.02 tax /\$1."

Why did the spies need a \$1 toy dog? One observer speculated that the

toy was a wind-up animal that was operated in a corridor filled with the chemical, then tested to see how much had adhered to its fake fur.

Sciencologists
Operation Big City
(N.Y.)
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Between May 17, 1955, and Feb. 17, 1956, the agents sought reimbursement for the purchase of 93 items, which they justified to the home office.

Many of the project's expenses were covered elsewhere in the regular CIA budget, the documents show. But attached to the receipts now circulating, there is an agency-memo saying these expense accounts were covered by a slush fund because "proper funds for a given activity will require an undesirable amount, of written or oral justification."

WHATEVER THE AGENTS were doing in New York, it appears unlikely that people were infected with disease or intoxicated with any hallucinogenic drugs.

One analyst of the documents, a well-financed foe of the CIA, said that checks of newspapers, oath certificates, and other sources during the experiment showed no unusual incidents had occurred. The expense accounts are among 20,000 pages of once-classified material from an agency project code named MKULTRA, a governmentwide effort to develop mind control methods and use LSD and other hallucinogenic chemicals on urban populations.

The project was developed during the Cold War when extensive publicity was focused on how the Soviets had brainwashed Cardinal Jozef Mindszenty and how the Communist Chinese had broken the wills of numerous American POWs in Korea.

Under MKULTRA, the CIA sought to provide a U.S. capability for the same techniques — and it was expanded into studies of mind control drugs and chemical agents, a CIA official explained.

John Marks, a former CIA agent now considered a renegade by his one-time colleagues, documented many of the farfetched MKULTRA schemes in several books and articles, including a recent volume called, "The Search for a Manchurian Candidate."