

BITTEN Press Backgrounder

Kris Newby

Author of *BITTEN: The Secret History of Lyme Disease and Biological Weapons*

(650) 867-8862, krisnewby@comcast.net

Skype: krisnewb

Why does Congressman Chris Smith (R-NJ) want to investigate entomological warfare, including tick weaponization?

The U.S. military conducted thousands of experiments exploring the use of ticks and tick-borne diseases as biological weapons during the Cold War, and in some cases, these agents escaped into the environment. Smith's home state, New Jersey, is at ground zero of the tick-borne disease outbreak. He says that he wants to declassify the details of these open-air bioweapons tests so that we can begin to repair the damage that these pathogens are inflicting on humans and animals in our ecosystem.

Why is this important?

I believe that history will judge the tick-borne disease outbreak that began in 1968 as one of the worst public health failures of the last century. In the beginning, we were slow to recognize this triple threat of Lyme disease, babesiosis, and spotted fever. This outbreak, which is now out of control, could've been contained with an early intervention of tick-control projects and a public education campaign.

It has been fifty years since the mysterious outbreak of tick-borne diseases began, and fixing it is going to require extraordinary efforts. We have an ecosystem out of balance, with climate change enabling aggressive, disease-carrying ticks to move into new territories. Our medical system is still reluctant to test for and treat Lyme disease and tick co-infections. And our broken government is underfunding tick-disease research. If the outbreak was caused by a U.S. accident, we need it exposed. If it was initiated as a hostile act by a foreign actor, then it shows how woefully unprepared we are for future attacks.

Releasing a few classified documents is much less expensive than funding a nationwide collection of ticks, followed by the gene sequencing of all the microbes inside of them. If the

government started this epidemic of tick-borne diseases, the public has a right to know. This investigation will save research dollars and lives.

What inspired this Congressional investigation?

BITTEN provides extensive evidence that the discoverer of the Lyme disease bacterium, Willy Burgdorfer, artificially infected fleas, ticks, and mosquitoes with deadly pathogens for the U.S. biological weapons program. The military's intent was to release them on our enemies. The book provides eyewitness accounts and documents proving that the U.S. military dropped ticks on sugarcane workers in Cuba and funded the release of at least 282,000 radioactive ticks in Montana and Virginia in the 1960s. The Cuban ticks carried an unknown incapacitating disease agent. The 282,000 ticks released in Montana and Virginia were thought to be free of viruses and bacteria, but this cannot be known with certainty given the state of technology during the late sixties.

New discoveries disclosed in BITTEN include:

- A 1962 pilot study where infected ticks were dropped on Cuban sugar workers.
- Releases of hundreds of thousands of radioactive, aggressive, Lone Star ticks on the Atlantic coastal bird flyway. (A chemical in the saliva of these ticks can cause life-threatening red-meat allergies in man.)
- Omissions in scientific publications of an unidentified rickettsial bacterium inside ticks and Lyme patient blood during the original outbreak.
- Documentation of military studies where live disease-causing bacteria, some which can be spread by ticks, that were sprayed from planes, boats and vehicles on an unsuspecting American public.

Based on Burgdorfer's interviews, his original lab notebooks, and newly declassified documents, I believe that the bioweapon that he eluded to is a genetic mix of a virus and a rickettsia. I list the most likely species in my book. Because the mystery microbes were left out of the Lyme discovery publications, the medical establishment isn't even looking for these possibly manmade organisms. In the book I ask the scientists the question, "Could what we call chronic- or

post-treatment Lyme disease really be due to complications of mixed Lyme-rickettsia-viral infections?” We don’t know because no one is looking for them.

What is the evidence that Lyme disease was created as a biological weapon?

I found no hard evidence that the Lyme disease bacterium, per se, was weaponized, though documents confirm that other similar bacteria and many other dangerous, disease causing agents were force-fed into ticks for the US entomological weapons program, led by Dale Jenkins at Fort Detrick, Maryland. [1]

A [genetically similar organism](#) to the “causative agent of Lyme disease,” *Borrelia burgdorferi*, was identified in 5,300-year-old ice mummy dubbed Ötzi, discovered in the Eastern Alps. In this study, scientists found less than two-thirds of the *B. burgdorferi* genome, so it’s far from proven that this is the exact organism that caused the serious disease outbreak around Lyme, Conn. Compare this to the COVID-19 situation: Everyone agrees that the causative agent is based on a bat virus, and that a few mutations to its genome created the devastating pandemic that we’re experiencing today.

How do you address the claim that ticks are aren’t fast and lethal enough to be used as a weapon?

In 1953, the U.S. biological weapons program started infecting fleas, ticks, and mosquitoes with both fast-acting fatal and slow-acting incapacitating disease agents. These eight-legged soldiers were the perfect stealth weapon, virtually untraceable and able to sicken a large population without damaging societal infrastructure. Later, the program focused on developing several tick-borne microbes (including tularemia and spotted fever rickettsia) that could be mass produced and deployed in aerosol form without the ticks.

The Army explained, “In 1953 the Biological Warfare Laboratories at Fort Detrick established a program to study the use of arthropods [including ticks] for spreading anti-personnel BW agents. The advantages of arthropods as BW carriers are these: they inject the agent directly into the body, so that a mask is no protection to a soldier, and they will remain alive for some time,

keeping an area constantly dangerous.” Source: U.S. Army Chemical Corps, “Summary of Major Events and Problems (Fiscal Year 1959),” Rocky Mountain Arsenal Archive.

Burgdorfer was a key member of this project team. He worked on weaponizing ticks and with fellow tick expert James Oliver at the Fort Detrick bioweapons headquarters, developing ways to mass-produce infected ticks so that they could be dropped from airplanes on enemy territory. These claims are backed up by interviews with these scientists, as well as with extensive government documentation from multiple reliable sources, all listed in BITTEN.

What is Lyme disease?

Lyme disease is caused by a corkscrew-shaped bacterium called a spirochete. It’s transmitted to animals through tick bites. Initially it causes flu-like symptoms, and if not adequately treated, it can lead to chronic pain, arthritis, neurological and cardiac problems, and even death.

In 1968, the first case of “Lyme arthritis” was documented near the township of Lyme, Connecticut. Today what we call Lyme disease is the most common tick-borne disease in the United States. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates that there are almost 400,000 new cases a year, an average of about 1,000 a day. Cases have been reported in all fifty states. And about 10 to 20 percent of Lyme cases go on to become chronic, ruining lives and burdening our health care system.

Going forward, we need to understand why the CDC and the states failed to track, control and prevent these tick-borne diseases so that we can better control our current epidemic and prepare for the next one. With both Lyme and COVID-19, we failed to contain the epidemics early on, failed to provide accurate and timely case counts, and failed to provide the leadership that would save lives.

How did you get interested in this story?

In 2002 my husband and I were bitten by unseen ticks while vacationing on Martha’s Vineyard. After we returned to California, we slid into the abyss of a mysterious 6-year illness. It took a

year, 10 doctors, and \$60,000 to diagnose Lyme and babesiosis, caused by a malarial-like parasite that infects red blood cells. It was devastating to our family, careers, and finances.

While I was recovering, I decided to do something to help other families avoid a similar fate. So, I worked on a documentary, UNDER OUR SKIN, to educate families about the politics of the disease and explain why they needed to fight for treatment. During this project, I interviewed literally hundreds of Lyme patients across the nation, and I was aghast at the magnitude of our tick-borne disease epidemic, and the fact that it was being largely ignored by our public health institutions.

After the film was out, I told my family, “I’m done with Lyme disease.” I had a good job as a science writer at Stanford. I wanted to move on. But, a few weeks later, I received a videotaped interview with the Lyme discoverer, Willy Burgdorfer, where he said that the original Lyme-area outbreak was caused by a bioweapon. It was a shocking admission, especially from a world-renowned scientist who, by admitting this, was destroying his own reputation.

I must emphasize that Willy didn’t say that the Lyme spirochete was a bioweapon — he thought the “perp” was probably a mysterious new rickettsia, a tiny virus-like bacterium nicknamed “The Swiss Agent” that he found in almost all the Lyme patient blood samples that he analyzed in 1978. So, driven by curiosity to get to the bottom of this mystery, I began investigating Willy’s claims, and as the story unfolded, I realized that the history of our weaponization of ticks and tick-borne diseases was so complex, that it needed to be carefully explained in a book.

How did it spread throughout the U.S.? And do we see it in other countries?

During the Cold War, the military had extensive pilot programs where these weaponized organisms were mass produced and freeze dried as aerosols, so that they could be sprayed over cities or armies. Willy was also involved in experiments where he force-fed ticks dangerous microbes, for the purpose of dropping infected ticks, essentially eight-legged soldiers, on enemy territories.

To refine these living weapons systems, the army conducted hundreds of open-air biological pilot studies around the world. It seems likely from time-lapse animations of the spread of Lyme disease around Long Island Sound and Wisconsin/Minnesota, that these are two key locations where releases occurred. Lyme is a serious problem in many parts of Russia and Europe, and there could've been drops there, though no evidence has emerged at this time.

I continue to look for military documents confirming the exact locations and dates of releases. Some are declassified now, but the ones involving incapacitating rickettsia/virus tests are not – I've tried unsuccessfully through FOIA requests to obtain these documents. Since the book was released, I've received several tips on where/when the tick-related releases could've happened, and I'm currently following up on those leads.

Has the government taken any accountability for past biological weapons releases?

Yes, for the military personnel involved with Project SHAD, an acronym for Shipboard Hazard and Defense, a.k.a. the biological and chemical tests conducted during the 1960s. This was initiated by a pro bono class action lawsuit against the CIA:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Project_SHAD

But there are no disclosures or accountability for open-air tests that may have affected civilians. After reading my book, Congressman Chris Smith of NJ called for an investigation into these military tests.

<https://chrissmith.house.gov/news/documentsingle.aspx?DocumentID=405915>

What surprised you most in your research for the book?

I don't understand why the dozen or so academic medical "Lyme experts" who control the narrative in the medical literature have reduced the chronic Lyme issue to a he-said, she-said debate, while failing to mount a serious effort to investigate the possibility that other mixed tick-borne coinfections are creating this chronic, incapacitating condition. How can the authors of the Lyme treatment guidelines continue to say that the millions of patients with ongoing

symptoms are suffering from mass hysteria or “the aches and pains of daily living” or “past life traumas”?

I am also surprised at the academics’ utter lack of scientific curiosity as to why three completely new, serious tick-borne diseases suddenly appeared around Long Island sound in 1968, at the height of the Cold War biological weapons program.

If I hadn’t researched secret backstory of the Lyme disease discovery, the details of this outbreak would’ve been buried with Willy. I think of this book as a call-to-action, a love letter with an infectious hook, aimed at our new generation of biomedical researchers: Please fire up your gene sequencers and big data epidemiology algorithms and start looking for where these microbes came from and how we can defeat them.

How do you counter Tufts veterinary professor Sam Telford (*Washington Post* op-ed Aug. 11, 2019), who says that the claims in BITTEN are “conspiracy theory”?

After this was op-ed published, I called Telford and he told me he hadn’t read BITTEN before he wrote it, saying “I don’t have time to read books.” After I discussed four of the primary inaccuracies in his piece, he refused to correct it or remove it from the Internet. It should be noted that Telford has a government grant to research tularemia, a tickborne disease on the US select agent bioweapons list, and that both his parents were career Army intelligence officers. Also, his father worked as a veterinarian studying the effects of the Nevada nuclear weapons tests on wildlife during the 1960s.

[1] W. Burgdorfer et al., “A Technique Employing Embryonated Chicken Eggs for the Infection of Argasid Ticks with *Coxiella burnetii*, *Bacterium tularense*, *Leptospira icterohaemorrhagiae*, and *Western Equine Encephalitis Virus*,” *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 94, no. 1 (1954): 84–89; W. Burgdorfer et al., “Experimental Studies on Argasid Ticks as Possible Vectors of Tularemia,” *Journal of Infectious Diseases* 98, no. 1 (1956): 67–74.

MORE RESOURCES:

I have posted many of the supporting documents here:

<https://beta.documentcloud.org/app?q=project%3Abitten-files-42452%20>

Here is more on my personal story, and why the health system is structurally designed to produce armies of chronic tick-borne disease patients:

<https://www.vox.com/the-highlight/2019/6/18/18677511/lyme-disease-diagnosis-health>

Images and info on BITTEN:

www.krisnewby.com

A recent Q&A from Martha's Vineyard Magazine:

<https://mvmagazine.com/news/2020/04/29/lyme-files>