



The Whitecoat Legacy.

Dengue is a nasty illness. “Breakbone Fever” they call it. Nothing other than an unusual challenge could persuade a healthy young man to become a willing guinea pig, a recipient for the medical inducement of dengue. Yet it did happen. Here’s the story.

When President John F. Kennedy set the nation off on a race to the moon he knew that it would be no “walk in the park”. For instance how well would an Apollo crew perform in a cramped capsule if they took sick, say with a high fever? The experts needed answers. They got them when virile young men volunteered, risked their lives, for God and Country.

Who were these men? They were the “Whitecoats”. They earned our acclimation.

Over the course of the years that encompassed the Korean and Viet Nam conflicts, Army scientists sought healthy young men who would volunteer as subjects for medical experiments, men who would probe the challenges ahead; gnarly problems like germ warfare, and chemical destruction of armies.

So they put out the call for men who used no tobacco, no alcohol and no street drugs. They found them as young draftees, 2300 in all, who volunteered to do regular army duties while awaiting the call to special projects; they all knew that any of these might place them in jeopardy.

Sure, they could decline but over the years (19 in all) four out of five from the entire group outwitted and outlived about 150 research projects.

They absorbed experimental vaccines, swallowed new antibiotics, sweated it out in confining suits designed to protect from deadly chemicals. They were the unsung heroes of an epoch. Doctor Walter Reed of Yellow Fever fame would be proud of them all. Indeed so should we.

NASA had developed high flying plans for Apollo 8. If all went well, in December, 1968, it would soar into the heavens and circle the moon. But a nettlesome question plagued the scientists. Would the mission be jeopardized and would disaster strike the capsule if one or more of the astronauts should fall ill, say with a high fever? For answers the researchers turned to the Whitecoats. Would one or more of them volunteer to man a mock-up of a space capsule for a grueling 18 days? Yes!



On August 22, 1967 to September 9, 1967, Art Walls, along with other Whitecoat warriors man a hospital bed with a simulated cockpit display in front of them.

They were given a week to acquire proficiency in operating the simulator. Then came an infusion of the virus of Sandfly fever. Within 24 hours they were ill. Doctors and nurses were in constant attendance and all was recorded on camera.

Throughout it all they performed math calculations, monitored blinking lights, warning flashes, code-lock and target identification. If lights stopped blinking, they must be reset. Or a series of amber and blue lights would blink in preset order for a few seconds, then change into a different sequence. Corrections must be made within five seconds. And so it went, endlessly it seemed.

They accomplished it all under the duress of a disabling febrile illness. They led the way, showing that it could be done.

President Nixon put a halt to the activities at Fort Detrick in 1969, but the serendipitous fallout from the Whitecoat chronicles proved to be enduring. Consider for instance President Carter, along with Sadat of Egypt and Begin of Israel when they forged their detent at Camp David in 1977.



It played out like this. Rift Valley Fever, a devastating plague of man and beast had slipped the flimsy bounds of Public Health and demanded immediate effective measures to subdue its spread. Thanks to a vaccine that had emerged from the blood and sera of these American boys, President Carter held a card or two and played them with aplomb. At least one sage was prompted to proclaim, “Peace has broken out in the Middle East”.

Writing about them recently, Ken Jones, Whitecoat '54-'56 and former president of the Whitecoat Foundation said this, “...a tremendous amount of knowledge was gained that has [afforded] present day protection and has saved the lives of millions of humans and animals throughout the world.”

It would require a volume or two to record adequately the epic activities and to pay due respect to these young American men. Perhaps one day their story will be recorded in full. Meanwhile we salute them and their medical handlers, intrepid scientists all.

Compiled by Dr. Raymond West / Information provided by Ken Jones, Whitecoat '54-'56