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[Book Catalog](#) First the newborn lambs died, then older sheep.
Then the cloud engulfed the valleys

THE DAY WE BOMBED UTAH

By John G. Fuller

The night was quiet except for the bells of the sheep. On the winter range they were restless. It was mild that March night in 1953, a soft 49 ° F. Still, inside the snug sheep wagon the wood stove took off the chill. Even before first light Kern Bulloch and his brother Mac would be saddling up their horses to nudge their band of nearly 2,000 Rambouillet sheep on the trail toward Utah, toward home. There was more than 100 miles to go, from north of the Lincoln Mine, in Nevada, trailing eastward along Tickaboo Valley, Dry Lake, and Panaca, and on home to Cedar City. Kern, lean, limber and slight, loved the range with a passion. Mac Bulloch, barrel-chested, with a cherubic face, felt the same way.

The sheep travelled and grazed about six miles a day, grubbing their muzzles deep into the snow and porous rocky soil down to the roots of the black sage, saltbrush and galleta grass. The Bulloch brothers were accustomed to the silence and loneliness of the Nevada range. But they could never get accustomed to the violent spurts of the atom-bomb tests at Yucca Flat, just 40 miles away.

Some of the test bombs would yield more than four times the kilotons of the bomb that had leveled Hiroshima eight years before.

The mushroom cloud, fiery and turbulent, would boil upward just before sunrise to create a false dawn. The Bulloch horses would rear up, the sheep would scatter, and the dust cloud would sweep toward them, thick with dirt and fallout. There could be no harm, of course. Press releases from the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) stated that the fallout "does not constitute a serious hazard to any living thing outside the test site."

For some reason the test shot that came in the predawn of March 24, 1953, seemed different to Kern Bulloch. The ground shook more. The sheep were more frenzied. Red, the sheep dog, jumped into the sheep wagon and cowered. The mushroom cloud, capped with a crest of ice crystals, soared 40,000 feet above them. Kern covered, his eyes. He thought he could see the bones through his clamped fingers.

What neither Kern nor Mac Bulloch realized at the time was that they were to become unwitting principals in a tragedy.

At first the cloud of tragedy would pass over their herd. Then it would engulf hundreds of humans. The cloud would not dissipate in their lifetimes. And despite 30 years of strenuous government efforts to deny the tragedy, it hasn't ended today.

Some 20 miles to the south, thirty-one-year-old Bob Sheahan watched from the Groom Mine. He had once been an engineering student at the University of Nevada. With his father, Dan, he had already seen nearly 30 radioactive clouds pass by since the tests started two years before. He had taken photographs of many. The clouds were heavily laden and

dirty. The Groom Mine, a cluster of a dozen buildings and cabins, sat on the eastern border of Nevada Proving Grounds, in the path of the winds that blew to the north and east.

As the clouds and dust from the March 24 detonation headed north from Yucca Flat and toward Bald Mountain, near the mine, Bob Sheahan went down to one of the cabins to see if William Holy, the radiation monitor from the Public Health Service, wanted to have some breakfast. Holy wanted some, but he couldn't leave his radio and telephone equipment, which he had set up for the shot. There would be messages coming in from the other monitor posts to track the fallout from nearby Tempiute, Lincoln Mine, and Control Point.

Holy was occupied with a broken generator when the phone rang in the cabin. He asked Bob Sheahan to get the message. On the phone was Holy's counterpart out near the Lincoln Mine. The radiation reading there and for the valley where the Bullocks were was very hot.

A few miles from Lincoln Mine the Bulloch brothers, on horseback, herded up the stray sheep and watched as the dusty haze closed in. According to legend, on a clear day you could see a train coming two days away. Today was nothing like that, but they could see a jeep speeding toward them on one of the few roads that cut through the desert. In the jeep were several men. They pulled up close to the Bullocks and got out, looking worried. They were wearing plastic boots. "You fellows are in a helluva hot spot," they said. "You better get out of here fast." Kern Bulloch asked, "How can we do that? The sheep move six miles a day." The answer was: "Move 'em as quick as you can, then. This is no place to hang around." Then the jeep drove away.

The Bullocks had never heard of a radiation hot spot. The herdsman did the only thing they could. They hustled their sheep east, away from the blast, toward Utah.

Later that day Bill Holy filled in the Sheahans about his radio and phone calls. A report on a band of sheep and two sheepherders had come in. In the valley where the Bullocks were, the readings were hotter than at the Lincoln Mine. There was talk of sending a copter to get the two sheepmen out. But the Public Health Service monitors didn't want to return to the spot. The decision was made at the Proving Ground control point to get the people at Lincoln Mine under cover. Nothing could be done about the two sheepmen.

On the range the Bulloch brothers continued to trail the sheep home. The ewes, were a month away from lambing now. By May the lambing sheds at Cedar City, Utah, would be full of hundreds of mother ewes. Approaching the Utah border a week after the test shot, the herd grazed every foot of the way, nibbling at the sparse vegetation, taking in mouthfuls of dirt and desert sand along with it. Mac Bulloch, circling the rear of the herd on his horse, drew up to a ewe and saw she was about to give birth to a premature lamb. He dismounted to help her. When the lamb came out, it was stunted. There was no wool. It had a strange potbelly. There were no legs.

But premature lambs on the trail were not uncommon. Mac Bulloch shrugged it off. He did the same even when eight more lambs dropped prematurely on the rough terrain of the range. The ewes ignored them. Their natural maternal instincts seemed to be gone. Bulloch had a fleeting thought. Could the long series of tests since 1951 - 22 of them so far have anything to do with this? He had no way of knowing.

He was glad when they got to the lambing sheds in early April. By May there would be no more immature lambs.

The brothers stacked the feed mangers high with hay, grain, cotton cake, and bone meal, a rich diet needed after the rigors of the trail. Kern Bulloch, stocking the feed manger one day, noticed one of the sheep in a peculiar position. Its head had dropped into the manger, its muzzle buried in the feed. It was motionless. He went to the sheep and tried to lift it by the wool on its back. The wool came off in his hand in an enormous clump. The sheep was dead. All around its nose and mouth, as well as on its ears, were scabby sores. Its hooves were hardened. There were running sores with large pustules on its back.

In a matter of days the scene repeated itself. Sheep would stand, as if in a stupor, then suddenly fall over dead. During shearing wool would slide off the sheep's backs with a single push of the clippers. The brothers would come to the sheds with their father in the morning to find 40 or 50 sheep lying dead by the mangers. The symptoms were always the same. The local veterinarian had never seen anything like it before. Neither had Steven grower, the agricultural agent for Iron

County.

When the lambing season peaked, the scenes were horrifying. The newborns would emerge, deformed and stunted, with no wool and with flesh as pale and soft as a human's. They had tiny legs. You could see the heart beating through the flesh. The baby sheep tried to stand, and fell over. The toll mounted quickly. Hundreds lay dead. But the scenes weren't confined to the Bullochs' lambing sheds.

Some 17,000 sheep belonging to Cedar City herders had been on the Nevada range at the same time that season. Many of the herders began to experience the same trauma. Annie Corry and her fifteen-year-old daughter were covered with blood in the lambing sheds as they tried to save the lambs and ewes at birthing. Their herdsman locked himself in his sheep wagon because he couldn't face the sight of the piles of dead sheep. At the end of the long day, Mrs. Corry rushed her daughter home to clean up for the school prom.

Dee Evans, a sheepman from Parawon, Utah, cringed at the sight of the bulldozers as they raked the dead bodies of his sheep into piles and shallow graves. At the Cedar City sheds of the Clark family, young Bob Clark came home from high school to help, his brother Ken stack dead lambs into piles of 300 each, then throw them on a flatbed truck. Doug Clark, the father, counted the dead and watched as the truck hauled away what he'd worked for all his life.

Preliminary count of the losses for all the Cedar City herdsman: 4,390. That was enough to form a carpet of carcasses two ' miles long. Nothing like this had happened in the history of the region.

The name of that test shot on March 24, 1953, was Nancy. It was shot number two of the series known as Upshot-Knothole. Nancy packed power. She was 24 kilotons, about twice that of the Hiroshima bomb. She was fired at Yucca Flat as she sat in a cab atop a 300-foot steel tower, which was vaporized in a fraction of a second.

Rain or snow had to be carefully monitored. Either could bring down tightly packed fallout in a concentrated lump. To fire or not to fire was never an easy decision. It took the test manager, test director, and an advisory panel of experts to decide. Though they could postpone a shot, the major plans and decisions were made by the AEC in Washington. The commissioners operated under uncommon pressure and a sense of urgency.

Throughout the country patriotism was rampant. If you were against nuclear testing, it was suggested that you might possibly be a Communist. War was raging on the Korean central ridges. McCarthyism was spreading. Ike had been inaugurated. Stalin had died, but the Cold War was hot. The Soviet Union had just detonated its own nuclear device, and the American nuclear monopoly was broken. Tests in the Pacific were too expensive. They took too much time and travel. The sites were vulnerable to enemy attack. In spite of intense debate, Nevada was the tactical, if not the popular, choice. Shots like Nancy were not popular.

Nancy had considerably exceeded the estimated yield. No one knew exactly why. The AEC's Dr. John Bugher, briefing the commissioners, said that some locations had been hit with as much as 10 reds, but added that only thinly populated areas had been affected. But then there was a sharp rain-out from a subsequent Upshot-Knothole shot on April 25, at Troy, New York, creating a hot spot a day later some 2,000 miles away. The commissioners talked about the chances that had to be taken to meet a tough test schedule. Later, reviewing the long sequence of detonations, commissioner Thomas Murray summed up everything in an elegant double negative: "*We must not let anything interfere with this series of tests<nothing.*"

A. C. Johnson, the elderly local vet at Cedar City, could do nothing as the sheep continued to die. Medication and forcefeeding were useless. He told Steve grower, the county agricultural agent, that in all the years the sheep had trailed on the range, he had never observed symptoms like the lesions around the face and head or the slippage of wool at shearing.

The first team of AEC veterinarians didn't arrive until June 5, some ten weeks after Nancy and two weeks after Dirty Harry. By that time only a few piles of dried bones of the stricken sheep were left. The vets were concerned and solicitous.

Brower joined both Dr. Robert Thompsett, from AEC Los Alamos, and Dr. Robert Veenstra, from a U.S. Navy base in

San Francisco, as they went to the first sheds to examine the surviving sheep. Would the survivors exhibit the same symptoms as the dead sheep - or at least provide a clue?

When the team examined the first lamb on the underside of its neck, the radiation meters went off the scale. "This is hotter than a pistol," Thompson said. "The needle tried to go past the post." He scraped off one of the hard, scabby lesions that covered the mouth, nose, and head, and he handed it to Brower. "Just like the ones at Trinity," Thompson said. "Heavy radiation damage." He was referring to the livestock badly scarred by beta burns after the first A-bomb had been exploded in New Mexico, in 1945. Veenstra took further readings. They were consistently high along the backs of the sheep. There was concern among members of the team that none of the really sick or dead sheep were available for examination. The sheep with the fewest symptoms and lesions were the only animals left for the team to look at.

Brower asked all the doctors in the AEC group if he could get a copy of their official studies. They agreed. Meanwhile the medical men wrote their reports.

Dr. Veenstra wrote: "The location of the lesions and the nature of the sheep to nibble grass short leads one to suspect that the lips and foreface could easily come in contact with material on bushes, grass, etc. that would cause these lesions.... It is my opinion that radiation was at least a contributing factor to the loss of these animals." And Dr. Thompson reported: "Examination of these lesions leaves little doubt as to their origin ... a diagnosis of radioactivity damage."

The others on the preliminary team concurred. None could find any convincing alternate cause. But there was a major problem. Neither the sheepmen nor county agent Brower was informed of these results. Instead, a long series of machinations began behind the AEC's closed doors. The AEC coverup remained hidden for almost three decades until it was revealed in congressional hearings and an extraordinary court decision. Today court documents tell the story that the government hoped would never come to light.

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What Happened Afterwards:

When the veterinarians handed in their reports of radiation damage to the sheep, the AEC classified their reports and suggested that the sheep had died of malnutrition and disease.

In 1955 the sheep ranchers sued the Federal Government.

In 1956 the sheep ranchers lost their case [Bulloch v. United States] for want of proof. Crucial evidence, which had been classified by the AEC, was withheld from the trial.

In 1979 the evidence that was lacking in the 1956 Bulloch case was declassified during a congressional hearing about the AEC's activities during the 1950's. The hearing also uncovered evidence of fraud in the 1956 Bulloch case. So ...

In 1982 the Bulloch case was reopened, and the judge (the same one who heard the 1956 case) concluded that the AEC had deceived the court, and ordered a new trial, in which he overturned his own 1956 decision.

In 1983 the Court of Appeals could find no proof of fraud, and overturned the 1982 decision.

In 1985 the Bulloch case was reviewed by the same court, and once again the ruling was in favor of the Government. The sheepherders appealed the decision to the Supreme Court.

In 1986 the Supreme Court refused to hear the case.

(Eds.)

Working Suggestions:

1. Why couldn't the two shepherders get used to the tests?
2. "There could be no harm, of course." Why of course?
3. Discuss the relevance of the metaphor "the cloud of tragedy".
4. When did the AEC vets come around to examine the sheep? Comment on the delay, please.
5. What clues did they find when they examined the sheep?
6. How did they know it was radiation damage?
7. What happened to their reports and why?
8. Pick out the information about the March 24 shot. What was special about it?
9. What is a "hot spot"?
10. Find the reasons the text gives for the "uncommon pressure" the commissioners operated under, and explain what the Korean War, Ike, McCarthy, and Stalin had to do with Nancy?
11. Comment on "No one knew exactly why ... "
12. Comment on Dr. Bugher's remark that "only thinly populated areas had been affected".
13. Comment on commissioner Murray's evaluation of the test series.
14. Comment on the article as a whole: How does the writer treat the subject? How does he describe the shepherders, the vets, the AEC? What factual information does the article contain? Is the information relevant? What are the writer's intentions?

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