

EXCLUSIVE INSIDE THE MoD'S SECRET LAB

WAR TRIALS

The military research centre at Porton Down is one of the most secretive sites in the UK, yet *Focus* news editor **Andy Ridgway** was given an exclusive behind-the-scenes tour. This truly is science at the front line...

IN A HARSHLY-LIT ROOM WITH STAINLESS steel walls stands the figure of a soldier. Dressed in the latest chemical warfare protection suit and wearing a black gas mask, he's strapped into a motorised metal frame attached to his head, arms and feet. As the motor starts up, the frame forces his limbs to begin moving in a slow running motion. Silently, the chamber starts to fill with a colourless gas that smells a little like garlic or horseradish. It's mustard gas – one of the oldest and most potent chemical warfare agents. But there's not a flicker from the man in the mask. Just that same steady running motion.

Exposure to one of the most deadly substances known to man is all in

a day's work for this army recruit. In 1997 he started work at the MoD research centre at Porton Down. The protection of troops from chemical, radiological and biological (CRB) weapons is a priority at Porton Down, so for over a decade he's been exposed to chemical weapons practically every week of the year. And each time he's been able to feed back the vital pieces of information to his employers. Did the chemical suit leak? If so, was the dose of 'agent' sufficient to cause death or serious injury?

Who is that masked man?

Our mystery soldier has the answers. But who could withstand this constant barrage of the world's worst nasties?

On the face of it, he looks pretty much like your average squaddie – about 5ft 10ins tall and sturdily built. But under his protective suit is the secret of his resilience. Instead of flesh and bones, there's a fibreglass body and steel skeleton. This is Porton Man – a kind of crash test dummy for chemical weapons. He's packed with chemical sensors and is used to test the latest anti-chemical weapon gear before it finds its way to the front line and onto the backs of real -life soldiers. His work could make the difference between life and death.

"We can use real chemical agents on him, things like mustard gas," says Tom Huggins, a physicist who works with Porton Man. "He's covered in ➔

