

# UK: More troubling questions emerge in the Skripal case

By Robert Stevens  
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It emerged this week that the first person to give first aid to the Russian double agent Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia—poisoned in still unexplained events in Salisbury last March—was the most senior nurse in the British Army, Alison McCourt.

This adds a fresh layer to the ever-changing account cooked up by the British government and intelligence agencies, who immediately blamed Russia for the poisoning without providing any concrete information.

From facts that have been made public, Sergei and Yulia were found on a bench in Salisbury town centre on March 4, 2018 in an unconscious state. One witness, Jamie Paine, told the BBC that she saw them both in a distressed state. Sergei was “doing strange hand movements and looking up to the sky,” while Yulia was frothing at the mouth with her eyes “wide open but completely white.”

Paine decided not to intervene as “they looked so out of it that I thought that even if I did step in, I wasn’t sure how I could help. I just left them but it looked they had been taking something quite strong.”

It was known that a “nurse” did intervene, but hardly any details were made available. The *Times* reported last May, almost two months after the poisoning, “that the first person to respond to the Skripals when they passed out was an off-duty army nurse, who had worked on the ebola outbreak in Sierra Leone. The nurse, a commissioned officer who has asked to remain anonymous, treated them before the emergency services arrived, and was vomited on but is not thought to have suffered novichok poisoning.”

Virtually no other details were provided.

In December, the *Daily Mail* cited the comments of PC Alex Collins who arrived on the scene to see that “The female [Yulia] was on the floor on her side. There was a member of the public, who turned out to be a doctor, helping her, maintaining her airway. I believe if that

doctor hadn’t done that, she would have died.”

The *Mail* added, “The female doctor is believed to have placed Miss Skripal in the recovery position after discovering her vomiting and fitting on the bench and tended to her for almost 30 minutes.”

The fact is that the doctor/nurse was Colonel Alison McCourt, chief nursing officer in the British Army. This only emerged when her daughter, Abigail, was proposed by her mother for a “lifesaver award” at the local radio station for her actions in helping the pair, including helping administering CPR.

According to Spire FM’s report, “Abigail believed Sergei Skripal was having a heart attack. The teen, who was out celebrating her brother’s birthday quickly alerted her mum who is a nurse and together they gave first aid to the two Russians until paramedics arrived.

“Abby and her mum had to undergo hospital tests to make sure they weren’t contaminated with Novichok.”

According to an online biography, McCourt joined the Army in 1988 and became Chief Nursing Officer for the Army on February 1, 2018, just a month before the Skripals’ poisoning. She received the OBE (Officer of the Most Excellent Order of the British Empire) honour from the Queen in 2015. The biography, which includes a posed photo of McCourt outside the prime minister’s residence 10 Downing Street, notes, “Alison has deployed to Bosnia, Kosovo, Iraq and Sierra Leone.” Subsequent assignments include Officer Instructor at the Defence Medical Services Training Centre and a deployment to Kosovo as the Senior Nursing Officer for 33 Field Hospital in 2001. During that operational tour she was the in-theatre lead for the establishment of the joint UK/US hospital facility at Camp Bondsteel.”

Camp Bondsteel is the main US army base in Kosovo and was set up as the largest “from scratch” foreign US military base since the Vietnam War.

According to the British government’s account,

novichok is probably the most toxic and deadly substance ever invented. The Skripals' poisoning was utilised by the May government to ratchet up tensions with Russia, with the prime minister stating in Parliament that the Putin regime had attempted to assassinate the pair using a "weapons-grade nerve agent in a British town" in "an indiscriminate and reckless act against the United Kingdom, putting the lives of innocent civilians at risk."

The BBC wrote, "Novichoks were designed to be more toxic than other chemical weapons, so some versions would begin to take effect rapidly—in the order of 30 seconds to two minutes. The main route of exposure is likely to be through inhalation or ingestion, though they could also be absorbed through the skin."

What then are the chances of administering CPR to someone who has supposedly been attacked by this substance only minutes previously—and who was witnessed as frothing at the mouth—while being able to avoid contact with the nerve agent?

Only a single police officer, Nick Bailey, who had substantially less contact with the Skripals and supposedly only came into contact with the nerve agent while wearing gloves, after being sent to their home where it had been allegedly sprayed on the door handle, was affected during the initial incident. He was hospitalised for three weeks and only resumed his duties last week.

On June 30 in nearby Amesbury, nearly four months after the Skripal poisonings, Dawn Sturgess sprayed a substance said to be novichock onto her wrists, thinking it was a perfume. She died in hospital days later on July 8. Her boyfriend, Charlie Rowley, has suffered ill-health ever since the incident.

The more information that emerges about the Skripals case, the less there is that can be said for certain.

Nothing has been heard from the Skripals since they were spirited out of hospital months ago in a military-type operation and taken to a secret location. One can only conclude that they are being prevented from speaking.

At present the roof of Sergei Skripal's home is being demolished and replaced, on the basis that it could be contaminated.

It should be noted that one of the authors of the above-mentioned *Times* articles was Deborah Haynes, the newspaper's defence editor. The *Times* has played a critical role in the anti-Russia hysteria and is a regular forum where senior British military and intelligence figures parade their views demanding an escalation of preparations for military conflict with Russia and for a

vast increase in military spending.

A number of Murdoch press journalists, including Haynes, were exposed in a document detailing the UK "cluster" of the Integrity Initiative, set up by the London-based Institute of Statecraft to spread propaganda on behalf of British imperialism. The cluster includes at least nine journalists with four from Rupert Murdoch's *Times/Sunday Times* — Haynes, David Aaronovitch, Dominic Kennedy and Edward Lucas. Also named are leading BBC, *Guardian* and *Financial Times* journalists.

The Integrity Initiative has been heavily involved in the Skripal affair. The WSWS noted earlier this month, based on documents from the IoS/II's servers made public by the Anonymous group, "Just days after the poisoning of the Skripals, the IoS proposed that the Foreign and Commonwealth Office 'study social media activity in respect of the events that took place, how news spread, and evaluate how the incident is being perceived' in various countries. Within days, the II's 'Operation Iris' swung into operation. As well as monitoring media coverage with its own team, it recruited the global investigative solutions firm Harod Associates to analyse social media activity related to the Skripals affair."

With the government's account of how the Skripals came to be poisoned shot through with inconsistencies, and the public's scepticism in their ever-changing story growing, the II raised concerns just a week after the poisonings, that the government was "far too weak," declaring, "[I]t's essential the government makes a much stronger response this time."

*The author also recommends:*

UK Integrity Initiative heavily involved in Skripal affair [7 January 2019]

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