

# [Agent Orange's Toxic Legacy Hits Home](#)

*January 13th, 2011*

By [Jan Barry](#)



Retired Master Sergeant LeRoy Foster is haunted by the job that launched his 20-year career in the US Air Force—spraying herbicides along perimeter fences and fuel pipelines at Andersen Air Force Base in Guam. This duty seemed inconsequential, field maintenance work done amid B-52 bombers thundering in and out to refuel for bombing raids over Vietnam and a beehive of other military operations buzzing at Navy bases on the small island in the mid-Pacific Ocean. Despite nasty outbreaks of acne that a military doctor recorded in a 1968 medical report, he couldn't imagine that the government-issued weed-killers might be planting tiny time bombs powerful enough to destroy his health and the lives of many other people.

Forty-some years later, MSgt. Foster spends much of his time in a wheelchair, anxiously rocking his infant grand daughter, who was born last year with extra toes and fingers and a heart abnormality. At 62, living on VA disability and military retirement checks, he also spends hours on his computer in Westfield, NY, a small town near Buffalo, emailing to wider and wider circles of other veterans and public officials. High on his to-do list are pleas for a federal investigation and public health warnings of the potential effects of the toxic legacy of extensively contaminated land and water in Guam—as well as at many other active and former US military bases around the world.

Relentlessly working the Internet, Foster and a group of fellow veterans who were stationed on Guam have persistently lifted the lid on a long-hidden story beyond the widely reported use of Agent Orange herbicides in Vietnam. Their research unearthed information that their experience on Guam was hardly unique. The secretive transition of chemical warfare agents designed to kill crops and defoliate forests to routinely used all-purpose weed-killers had many way stations.

## **The Story Beyond Agent Orange**

The wider story is that a witches' brew of herbicides contaminated by dioxin, and other hazardous substances, were used at numerous military bases stateside and overseas. Far and wide beyond Vietnam—where a decade of massive spraying missions with Agent Orange and other herbicide mixtures left dioxin “hot spots” at former US bases and many local residents have gruesome birth defects and other severe health problems—hundreds more military sites were

contaminated by a toxic mess of chemical spills, cleaning solvents, heavy metals such as lead, plus dioxin in many cases.

During the height of military use of herbicides, which started in the 1950s and mushroomed in the 1960s, millions of soldiers, family members and civilian workers were on these bases, from Florida to South Korea. It was an era in which chemical herbicides were a modern marvel; in which benzene, trichloroethylene and other powerful chemicals were routinely used to wash nearly everything, from “dry cleaned” laundry to engine parts and greasy hands, with the residue washed into the nearest drain. In the decades since, millions more people have been stationed at these bases, which in many cases ended up with some of the most contaminated soil and water outside of industrial plants that manufactured these hazardous materials.

Like many veterans, Foster didn't connect his health woes to Agent Orange until recent years when news articles reported that the VA kept adding more and more diseases, plus birth defects in children, to a growing list of health effects associated with dioxin exposure. Then he painfully recalled his herbicide-spraying days as a young airman. The VA's response was to deny Foster's claim for additional compensation, beyond his 70 percent disability rating for spinal and heart diseases that were deemed service connected, stating that there was no proof Agent Orange was used in Guam.

Foster's Internet research found that, elsewhere in the country, some veterans of Guam duty have gained VA compensation for Agent Orange exposure based on data they provided. That propelled him to document his knowledge of herbicide use and to tell his story as widely as he could.

“I prepared, mixed and sprayed Agent Orange herbicides on Andersen AFB Guam and off base fuels facilities and pipelines and security fences surrounding those facilities on and off base” from September 1968 into the 1970s, Foster wrote last spring in a blog forum response to the Chicago Tribune's extensive series on lingering health effects of the US military use of Agent Orange in Vietnam. “Many of my buddies ended up sterile like me, chloracne covered my body, severe ischemic heart disease, diabetes II, high blood pressure, high cholesterol unaffected by meds, immune problems, ankylosing spondiolitis, spinal stenosis, osterporosis, severe arthritis, and many more diseases,” he wrote of the health problems in various combinations that he and others had developed. “This is the truth so help me God. Many of my buddies are dead now and many are dying.”

A few weeks later, Foster sent emails to officials at Department of Defense schools in Guam stating that he had learned from Internet networking that many former students of these schools have severe health problems. “Some of the alumni kids from Andersen AFB have contacted me with some of their stories of health problems,” he wrote. “This is very sad to find that they have problems like LUPUS, DIABETES II, AUTOIMMUNE DISEASES MIXED CONNECTIVE TISSUE DISEASE, MULITPLE MISCARRIAGES, STILL BIRTHS, BIRTH DEFECTS IN THEIR CHILDREN. ETC. I highly recommend that DoDDs Pacific, DoDDs Guam, the Air Force Surgeon General and student alumni associations contact one another to find out what is happening to them and do an investigation to help them.”

Last September, Foster was invited to address a federal Institute of Medicine committee meeting in Washington, DC on his research efforts about dioxin's health effects on veterans and civilians who lived in Guam. It was the culmination of a determined campaign to get federal officials to examine the health concerns that disturb him.

"I believe that after conversation with the Buffalo NY Veterans Administration that United States Congress needs to direct the VA or the US court of appeals to order an immediate remand of all claims denied to Agent Orange exposure especially those which were outside the country of Vietnam especially Guam, Okinawa and Thailand," Foster wrote to members of Congress in seeking a congressional investigation. "I was told by the VA in Buffalo NY yesterday that they will not seek out those veterans who were denied nor all of those dependent children of those veterans who would have been entitled to Dependency Indemnity Compensation DIC from the exposure of their father's and mother's to Agent Orange, Agent White and the other herbicides used during the Vietnam WAR."

### **Air Force Has No Records**

In response to previous congressional queries, Foster found, the Department of Defense maintained the Air Force has no records of Agent Orange being used in Guam. It insists that high levels of dioxin at Andersen Air Force Base discovered by an EPA investigation were due to burning hazardous materials. However, the DOD added in a letter to Rep. Lane Evans in September 2003, Army records show that Agent Orange and similar herbicides were used in testing, storage or war missions in numerous other places, including Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Texas, Arizona, California, Washington state, Hawaii, Maryland, Pennsylvania., Rhode Island, Puerto Rico, Canada, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

And by the way, the DOD added in its letter to Rep. Evans, another chemical agent called Herbicide Purple was stored on Guam in the early 1950s during the Korean War. Purple was part of a rainbow-colored array of military commissioned chemical agents—including Pink, Green and Orange—that were contaminated in the manufacturing process by a highly toxic byproduct called TCDD or dioxin. The most widely used, according to military records, was Agent Orange. Health studies reviewed by the Institute of Medicine, and accepted by the VA as a basis for claims, link dioxin to various kinds of cancer, spina bifida birth defects, ischemic heart disease, diabetes II, numerous other health problems and a skin disorder called chloroacne.

Other veterans Foster contacted found VA references to Agent Orange use along the DMZ in South Korea and at Fort Drum, NY. A 2001 government document noted that the VA was seeking further information on other "areas where veterans allege AO to have been sprayed [that] include:

1. Guam from 1955 through 1960s (spraying).
2. Johnston Atoll (1972-1978) was used for unused AO storage.
3. Panama Canal Zone from 1960s to early 1970s (spraying).
4. Eglin AFB (FL) (Agents Orange and Blue) on Firing Range and Viet Cong Village.
5. Wright-Patterson AFB (OH) and Kelly AFB (TX)."

Foster has heard from other veterans who say the herbicides were also used at bases on Okinawa and in the Philippines. At issue, Foster and many other veterans believe, is a fiscal resistance by federal agencies to acknowledge how widespread the health legacy of dioxin-laced herbicides extends. As Politico.com writer David Rogers noted last summer in an article titled “The bill for Agent Orange comes due”:

“Age and Agent Orange are closing in on Vietnam veterans, a legacy of hurt for those who served — and a very big bill for American taxpayers. It’s a world turned upside down from decades ago when returning soldiers had to fight to get attention for deadly lymphomas linked to the herbicide. Now the frailties of men in their 60s — prostate cancer, diabetes, heart disease — lead the list of qualified Agent Orange disabilities, and the result has been an explosion in claims and the government’s liability.

“The latest expansion, approved by Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki in October, adds ischemic heart disease and Parkinson’s and will cost at least \$42 billion over the next 10 years. The VA estimates 349,000 individuals are already receiving Agent Orange disability benefits, and that number could soon reach 500,000 — or one out of every four surviving Vietnam veterans by the VA’s count.”

### **Big Hazardous Waste Problem**

In fact, the health bill could be far larger—if the effects of exposure to the full array of hazardous materials at military bases were subject to VA health care and compensation coverage. Foster found another veteran had dug up disturbing records of congressional hearings in 1987 on hazardous waste at military sites. These hearings noted that the Pentagon “in 1986, produced hazardous waste at 505 of its 871 installations in the United States. The types of hazardous waste found at DOD installations include, among others, solvents, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB), contaminated sludges, acids, cyanides, and contaminated fuel and oil. ... In a classified report concerning hazardous waste management at overseas installations, we also identified similar problems to those found at bases in the United States.”

Foster’s research found that one of the largest hazardous-waste problem areas is Guam, where the EPA lists more than a dozen Superfund sites, areas deemed among the most contaminated, at island bases. Meanwhile, he found, a private company that rates corporate environmental problems stated that Agent Orange manufacturers such as Dow Chemical and Monsanto have a growing liability problem in Guam. The 2004 report by Innovest Strategic Value Advisors, an investment risk group based in New York, noted:

“Agent Orange exposure has also become an issue for military personnel stationed outside of combat zones and for U.S. civilians as well. Soldiers stationed on Guam who handled Agent Orange have become ill and symptoms of TCDD (dioxin) poisoning are apparent in the general population of the island as well, TCDD contamination as a result of Agent Orange handling has been measured at up to 1900 ppm in some areas of Andersen Air Force Base on Guam. Given that safe levels of TCDD have been placed at below 1 ppb by the EPA and even lower by many state regulatory agencies (toxic effects have been measured at parts per trillion), this implies an extraordinary level of contamination. TCDD has been shown in laboratory animals to have

multigenerational impacts, not just on the offspring of exposed animals, but on the next generation as well.”

After all he has discovered about the toxic stew he helped to create while in the Air Force, Foster’s latest mission is to help spur ways for veterans and civilians who were at military bases, and their families, to exchange information and get the best health assistance.

“What shocked me is when kids contacted me on the Internet and I knew their fathers [on Guam]. I sprayed right past their houses,” Foster said in a recent interview for this article. Now grown, many of these military dependents, he learned, have severe health problems, including birth defects. “There’s been no movement by anybody to help the kids who were on Guam. I feel bad, because I was there going around spraying that stuff…”

“My daughter found out what is being passed down to her children now, so she has decided not to have any more,” he added. “So I will only have one grandchild. This is a story of genocide to an entire section of Americans. We were the poor and the down trodden who served in the Vietnam War. We need our stories told and recorded for all time.”

Foster and several other veterans have kick-started the process of recording their stories by posting personal statements, VA claims records, military medical records, photos and other documents on a website, [www.guamagentorange.info](http://www.guamagentorange.info). Foster has also initiated an online petition seeking Congressional action on their concerns regarding Guam. The petition is at <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/guamagentorange/>.

“I want to convey to everyone, especially the veterans service organizations,” said Foster, a member of the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans and Vietnam Veterans of America, “and to all of the public schools and universities who have contact with vets and their children and grandchildren, to organize, to share, to be kept informed and to help one another. We are all in this together. I am sorry to say lots of information has been kept from us on purpose. They didn’t want to scare us or make us so angry that we would result in uprisings or anarchy, but this is really bad and really terrible.”

For further information:

<http://www.guamagentorange.info/home>

*Jan Barry, a veteran journalist who served in the Army in Vietnam, has investigated Agent Orange health issues in news reports carried by the Associated Press and published in the New York Times and many other publications.*

(This article was also posted at [EarthAirWater](http://EarthAirWater.com).)

Articles written by [Jan Barry](#)

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## 8 Responses to “Agent Orange’s Toxic Legacy Hits Home”

1. [Tom Carter](#) | [January 14th, 2011 at 6:28 am](#)

Thanks, Jan, for a great report on the challenges faced by many veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange and other herbicides during their military service. It’s been a long time coming, but it appears we’re approaching the point where most claims are being treated as legitimate and help, with some limits, is available. Unfortunately, though, individual veterans still struggle with the problem, and the case of MSgt Foster illustrates that well. He and his family suffered and continue to suffer as a result of his service, and they deserve better support than they’ve received.

I’ve been doing some reading around the internet on the subject, and there are an unfortunate number of people who still think Agent Orange-related illnesses and disability claims are bogus. That’s just plain ignorant. There’s a lot of information available to refute their views, but the [VA’s position](#) alone should be enough. Those who doubt should look at the VA site and follow some of the links. Still, we haven’t gotten as far as we should have.

2. Jan | [January 15th, 2011 at 11:15 am](#)

Jan,

For your information and reference. Here is another story about Agent Orange – an 18 year old girl at the time volunteering with the USO, exposed to Agent Orange, subsequent two cancers developed, the total lack of help for this American civilian, the struggles suffered — both financial and emotional for a lifetime.

It is MY Story.

<http://www.salem-news.com/articles/november202010/agent-orange-innocence-1m.php>

Thank you for taking the time to “meet me.”

Sincerely,

Lesli Moore Dahlke  
alossofinnocence.com

3. Jan | [January 26th, 2011 at 10:28 am](#)

*The latest news on MSgt. Foster’s story is one of the quickest updates in my journalism career, conveyed in an email sent yesterday:*

THANK YOU EVERYONE. SGT RALPH STANTON, THE UNITED STATES SENATE VETERANS AFFAIRS COMMITTEE, CONGRESSMAN FILNER, VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA OF NEW YORK, CONGRESSWOMAN BORDALLO, GUAM SENATOR BEN PANGLINAN, SENATOR SCHUMER, SENATOR GILLIBRAND, CONGRESSMAN HIGGINS, AMERICAN LEGION, MARY ELLEN MCCARDY, CAROINE WEKSELBAUM, GRETCHEN GARDNER, ALAN OATES OF THE VVA, MOOKIE PORTER OF THE VVA, TOM BERGER OF THE VVA, SHARON PERRY, THE DISABLED AMERICAN VETERANS OF NEW YORK, DAVE BARKER, NY SENATOR CATHY YOUNG, AND COUNTY EXECUTIVE GREG EDWARDS,

The Buffalo VA Regional office called me this morning to tell me the good news that my long battle for AGENT ORANGE EXPOSURE is finally over. They told me that my claims were approved and that I would be getting a very large claims package in the mail shortly. I believe this is the very first AGENT ORANGE HERBICIDE EXPOSURE CLAIM approved at VA Regional level. There were seven or eight previously approved claims but at COURT OF APPEALS LEVEL. I want to thank all of you for being a part of this battle and hope all veterans who were exposed to AO herbicides will be approved quickly. I hope those denied will have immediate reviews of their denied claims and the children / grandchildren affected will be helped quickly. thank you so much for your help and Praise God for answering our prayers for help.

LeRoy G. Foster, MSgt, USAF, Ret  
Life Member of the DAV of New York At Large member  
Member of the American Legion of New York Post 777, Celeron, NY  
Life Member of the Vietnam Veterans of America New York Chapter 459  
Member of War Vets of Fluvanna, New York  
70% Service Connected 100% Unemployable  
Totally and Permanently Disabled from Agent Orange on Guam

4. [Tom Carter](#) | [January 26th, 2011 at 11:43 am](#)

That's great news! I know the lives of Msgt Foster and his family are never going to be "fixed," but at least they'll get the support they need and deserve.

5. Jan | [January 31st, 2011 at 8:40 am](#)

The latest twist of fate for MSgt. Foster is that he subsequently learned the local VA office approved an "increase of my disabilities [compensation payments] and the presumptive disease of AO but did not approve the AO exposure," he wrote in an email. "They have denied my claim for AO exposure on Guam. I will be appealing it to the BVA AND I AM SURE TO THE COURT OF APPEALS." He also launched a letter-writing campaign to Senators Gillibrand and Schumer of New York, seeking congressional action on this issue.

Coincidentally, days later, the Cleveland Plain Dealer launched a series of articles on the lingering health effects of Agent Orange on families in Ohio and Vietnam:  
[http://www.cleveland.com/agentorange/index.ssf/2011/01/unfinished\\_business\\_suffering.html#incart\\_mrt](http://www.cleveland.com/agentorange/index.ssf/2011/01/unfinished_business_suffering.html#incart_mrt)

6. William Kemp | [March 8th, 2011 at 1:07 pm](#)

Need your help. Am searching for anybody that can help verify the fact that pre-flight Navy students were taked from Pensacola,NAS in the 1960s to Eglin,AFB for survival training. Am trying to find a silibus or anything to document for an Agent Orange VA claim. Any help will be appreciated.

7. [MSgt Foster](#) | [March 20th, 2011 at 11:56 am](#)

Thanks Jan for getting the word out about Agent Orange herbicides and all the veterans, military dependent children, families and future generations of children of AO exposed veterans of the diseases, miscarriages, still births and birth defects facing them. I can not thank you enough for taking the time to write such a wonderful written article. It gets the point across to the readers and hopefully it will be shared because many thousands of

American families are affected by AO locations other than Vietnam “boots on the ground” because of the policy of base commanders have unaccountable authorization to use AO herbicides on their bases.

I go MARCH 22, 2011, this Tuesday afternoon at 1 p.m. to the White team at the Erie VAMC in Erie Pa for a comp and pen exam with a VA Doctor on memory loss/dementia/parkinsons disease/MS and anxiety/depression which I was treated for at the US NAVAL HOSPITAL AT CHARLESTON SC IN 1978-80 TIME FRAME SOON AFTER RELOCATING PCS FROM ANDERSEN AFB GUAM IN JUN 78 AND MY FINAL DUTIES OF AO HERBICIDE HANDLING THERE. I never knew depression/anxiety/memory loss/dementia/parkinsons were connected to AO exposure till recently. This was all kept quiet and kept from active duty and veterans who had no idea what was happening to them. This was wrong. Terribly wrong. There are so many things going wrong with my body now it is hard to keep up with them all.

What is ironic is the VA Comp and Pen people and other VA officials and Congressional officials wanting you to remember things about AO handling and spraying and the Veteran has memory loss/dementia/ parkinsons disease/ms...it all kind of makes sense doesn't it ? sound like a nightmare to me ! ...OR THE VA SAYS PROVE IT , PROVE YOUR EXPOSURE WHEN THEY KNOW THE RECORDS HAVE BEEN DESTROYED AND THE VETERAN HAS NO WAY OF PROVING ANYTHING. THIS MAKES SENSE DOESNT IT ?

THE GUAM VETERANS ON THIS EMAIL KNOW WHAT I AM TALKING ABOUT AS THEY DEAL WITH SURVIVING EACH DAY WITH THEIR AO DISEASES WHILE THE VA CONTINUES TO DENY THEM AND MAKE THEM GO THROUGH THE COURT OF APPEALS PROCESS WONDERING IF THEY WILL LIVE TO SEE THE END OF THAT PROCESS AND THEIR QUAILITY OF LIFE SUFFERS WITH LIVING ON THE EDGE OF POVERTY AND MAKING THROUGH EACH DAY WITH BROKEN DOWN VEHICLES, EMPTY CUPBOARDS, COLD TEMPS IN THE HOME WITH THE THERMOSTAT ON 60 OR LESS BECAUSE OF HIGH HEATING BILLS, ETC... YOU GET THE PICTURE. THEY KNOW WE CAN'T WORK ANYMORE AND THEY KNOW IF THE DENY LONG ENOUGH WE WILL DIE FROM PNEUOMONIA OR HEART ATTACK OR STROKE OR CANCER. THE ODDS ARE AGAINST US living through it FOR SERVING OUR NATION IN A TIME OF WAR.

8. [Patricia Keefe-Miyaji](#) | [March 20th, 2011 at 12:59 pm](#)

MSGT Foster, what a great report! I, too am a Vietnam Vet who has some really strange tings happening to me. I laugh and say the loss of memory is just my “Blonde” coming out, but I guess it is more serious than that. I have two children who have birth defects, one has ADHD, the other was born blind in one eye, my grandson was born with fluid on the brain, so he is slower than normal and wears a shunt in his brain and always will, GOD BLESS HIM! It is all because I chose to serve my country. What a legacy! The

Women in Vietnam were subjected to millions of gallons of the herbicides being sprayed on us because we were at Long Binh, the most important base in Vietnam, we did all of the Logistics for the military in NAM. So a zipper raid on our compound would have been a catastrophe. I was contacted by four other women from my unit and of the four two of us are still alive but both of us have Breast Cancer the other one is dying and is likely dead now of Breast Cancer, the other two died of Breast Cancer, so there is a connection there. I am, I think, the lucky one of the bunch, I am 10 years in remission, but for how long? That is my question. But, all in all, great report MSGT Foster, Love and aloha and lots of chocolate kisse, Kui