

## Agent Orange was likely used in Okinawa: U.S. vet board

MANILA (Kyodo) The U.S. Board of Veterans' Appeals found in 1998 that the hazardous chemical defoliant Agent Orange was probably used in Okinawa during the Vietnam War era.

The finding was part of a recently uncovered ruling in favor of a former U.S. serviceman seeking compensation for prostate cancer he blamed on his work in Okinawa in the early 1960s.



The U.S. jungle warfare training area in northern Okinawa is seen in this aerial photograph taken in 1996. KYODO PHOTO

The discovery comes as the U.S. Defense Department has still to confirm whether Agent Orange was stored or used in Okinawa during the Vietnam War, which ended in 1975.

In a ruling issued Jan. 13, 1998, the board concluded that "credible evidence sustains a reasonable probability that the veteran was exposed to dioxins while serving in Okinawa."

The board granted the man service-connected disability compensation for prostate cancer that was "the result of Agent Orange exposure" while in Okinawa between 1960 and 1961.

It found "entirely believable" his testimony about the U.S. military's mixing, storage and use of Agent Orange in Okinawa at a time when the prefecture was still under the control of the United States and used it as a strategic transport hub during the Vietnam War.

Agent Orange, a herbicide mixture containing the highly toxic substance dioxin, was sprayed by U.S. military aircraft over South Vietnam from 1961 to 1971 to clear jungles and deny cover to communist fighters.

It has since been blamed for numerous health problems, including various types of cancer and birth defects.

The former serviceman, who worked as a motor transport operator on Okinawa Island and had never been to Vietnam, testified that while Agent Orange was mainly used to defoliate trees and shrubbery in lush war zones like Vietnam, "in Okinawa, we had other uses for it, particularly near base camp perimeters."

He said herbicides thought to include Agent Orange were sprayed from trucks or backpacks along roadsides, used for landscaping and taken to the densely forested northern part of Okinawa to clear foliage to facilitate war game maneuvers.

Subtropical Okinawa's heavy rainfall, he said, created a demand for nonwater-soluble defoliants such as Agent Orange that would not wash away with the next rain.

"The thing that bothers me the most is that we were not told or warned about the hazards of the herbicides that we were handling, nor were we issued any protective clothing," he testified.

As recently as November 2004, the U.S. Defense Department stated that it had been unable to find any records of Agent Orange being used or stored in Okinawa during the Vietnam War era.

The statement came in response to queries made that July by then U.S. Rep. Lane Evans, a ranking Democrat on the House of Representatives Veterans' Affairs Committee, who wrote to then Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld requesting any information on the use or storage of Agent Orange in Okinawa.

"I am particularly interested in ascertaining when and where Agent Orange and similar herbicides were stored on Okinawa and whether or not there was any usage of herbicides or reports of spillage from drum corrosion or any other event which potentially involved exposure of service members to these herbicides," he wrote, according to a copy of the letter.

Richard Myers, then chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, replied to the letter in November 2004, saying "records contain no information linking use or storage of Agent Orange or other herbicides in Okinawa."

Myers further said there was "no record of any spills, accidental or otherwise, of Agent Orange. Therefore, there are no recorded occupational exposures of service members in Okinawa to Agent Orange or similar herbicides."

The Board of Veterans' Appeals ruled that while the U.S military was "generally unable to document the use of herbicides in Okinawa,"

experts who attempted to verify specific dioxin exposure there "do not negate that possibility."

The former serviceman, it said, "was indeed where he said he was, at a time when military buildup from a support standpoint was considerable, doing a job which was entirely consistent with the mixing and other transport of herbicides, and at a time when these were both used and warnings not necessarily given, as he stated, since the hazards were not fully understood."

Hundreds more former U.S. servicemen who were stationed in Okinawa during the Vietnam War have lodged medical compensation claims with the Department of Veterans Affairs, citing Agent Orange exposure, according to information online in the archives of the Board of Veterans' Appeals.

Most cases have either been denied or sent for review on the grounds of insufficient evidence linking their illnesses to Agent Orange exposure.

The various documents surface at a time when Washington and Tokyo are realigning the U.S. military presence in Japan following years of protests from Okinawans, who have long complained about crime, noise and crowding associated with U.S. bases.

U.S. bases occupy about 20 percent of Okinawa's land area and have been viewed as being a large part of the island's environmental problems.

In 1969, a leak of the deadly nerve agent VX on Okinawa injured 23 U.S. servicemen and one American civilian, sparking a furor among Japanese as the chemical weapons had been kept secret from Japan. The weapons were subsequently removed.

Under the realignment, about 4,000 hectares of the 7,800-hectare U.S. jungle warfare training area that straddles the villages of Kunigami and Higashi in northern Okinawa, mentioned as a place where Agent Orange was sprayed, are due to be handed back to Japan.

Kunitoshi Sakurai, president of Okinawa University and a specialist in environmental engineering, expressed concern over the possibility of residual dioxin there, pointing out that the northern area is the source of most of Okinawa's water supply.

Dioxin, Sakurai noted, does "not dissolve in nature" and would still be present even more than 40 years after its use.

"The Okinawa government does not know whether Agent Orange was

used in the base," he said. "It's difficult to know what is going on inside a military base."

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