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## Veteran Seeks Agent Orange Probe

Veteran seeks probe into Agent Orange use in Guam

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A RETIRED airman is seeking a congressional inquiry into the extensive use of Agent Orange in Guam, where he was deployed between 1960 and 1970 as a fuel specialist tasked to mix and spray herbicides at Andersen Air Force Base and surrounding areas.

MSgt. LeRoy G. Foster this week wrote to Reps. Brian M. Higgins, D-NY, and Don Young, R-Ak., asking the congressional leaders to launch the investigation to force the U.S. Department of Veterans Administration and the Department of Defense to acknowledge "the fact that Agent Orange and other herbicides were used on Guam."

"There are other veterans who have written to me asking for my sworn testimony to this fact," Foster stated in the lengthy letter, in which he identified the locations in Guam where he sprayed Agent Orange.

"I believe it is the responsibility of the VA, DoD, Congress, Senate, the White House, and the states to make public the exposure of our servicemen and servicewomen, dependents, residents of Guam and other civil service employees to these chemicals," Foster said.

He also listed names of fellow veterans who have died of cancers as a result of their hazardous duties performed at AAFB from 1960s to 1970s.

Higgins and Young cosponsored the Veteran's Right to Know bill in the 109th Congress, proposing the establishment of a commission that would look into the U.S. military's use of biological agents between 1962 and 1974, and their health effects on those exposed to the toxic chemicals. The 109th Congress, however, adjourned without acting on the bill.

Without an official venue to testify, veterans suffering from diseases as a result of their exposure to defoliants have been crying out for help, sending testimonies to veterans Web sites devoted to Agent Orange contamination,

and writing open letters to whoever cares to listen to their pleas for medical assistance.

#### Guam commission

The 28th Guam Legislature created a local Right to Know Commission based on the congressional bill.

Speaker Mark Forbes, R-Sinajana, who authored the Guam bill, said the commission —composed of lawmakers, health activists and other representatives from the private sector — is getting ready to meet soon and gather pertinent testimony.

"This commission will provide the forum where people can testify and submit their testimony," Forbes said.

He said the commission would try to establish the extent to which Agent Orange was used on Guam and determine Guam residents' possible exposure to the chemicals, which the U.S. military used to kill weeds and thin jungles during the Vietnam War.

"It might take a while but we need to get the ball rolling on this issue. We need to start documenting these things," Forbes said, adding that his office will soon send out invitations to commission members.

The Department of Defense has never officially admitted to storing and using Agent Orange and other herbicides on Guam, despite Dow Chemical's earlier report which disclosed a huge amount of dioxin contamination at AAFB.

At least two successful applications for benefit claims filed by veterans deployed to Guam constituted VA's virtual acknowledgement of the use of defoliants on island.

In March this year, the VA approved the benefits claim filed by Robert L. Burgett, a Vietnam War veteran who developed cancer of the larynx, eventually causing his speech disability, as a result of his direct exposure to Agent Orange when he was stationed at AAFB between 1968 and 1969. He received a full grant of benefits.

In 2005, the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans ruled in favor of an unidentified airman who was determined to have developed diabetes mellitus as a result of his exposure to defoliants while he was deployed on duty at AAFB from December 1966 to October 1968.

Forbes said the favorable VA decisions obtained by the two veterans set a precedent that could be the commission's starting point.

"If one person's claim for benefits has been approved, then we can take it a step further to establish the fact that Agent Orange was used here," the speaker said. "We're definitely pushing forward with this."

Foster, meanwhile, acknowledges that his request for a congressional inquiry and the veterans' quest for justice and fair compensation might not come soon, but he maintains that the issue must be put forward for public discussion.

"I may not be alive to see the end of this but will give sworn testimony and give any other kind of evidence to our nation, to our state representatives who have the responsibility to defend those servicemen and servicewomen from their states who served with honor who are ill and suffering from past wars, and to the people of the United States of America who I know would demand our government do the right thing by and for our nation's veterans," he stated in his letter to Higgins and Young.

#### Sprayed areas

Foster has been diagnosed with thyroid cancer and arterial disease, which he believes were caused by his direct exposure to the toxic defoliants.

When he was deployed on Guam, Foster's job was to prepare and spray herbicides at AAFB facilities, including fuel tank farms in Tumon Bay, NAS Agana, Tamuning and Yigo, and the cross country pipeline extending from Andersen AFB to NAS Agana and NAS Agana to the Naval Station Underground Fuel Storage facilities near the USO Club on the U.S. Naval base at Agana.

"I sprayed the security fence lines, completely encircling Andy I and II, hydrant storage buildings on the flight line around the flight line area at Andersen AFB, the Quality assurance and Liquid Oxygen buildings and Fuels Administrative offices located within the security fence area of Andy I Fuel Tank Farm," Foster said.

"Within these security fenced areas were storm drains that led directly into the water shed in the northern part of the island," he added.

Attached to Foster's letter to Higgins and Young is another note from a fellow veteran, Richard Spinale, who was stationed at AAFB, where he worked as a civil engineer from October 1966 to April 1968.

In a letter addressed "to whom it may concern," Spinale said he and other servicemen tasked to spray Agent Orange "were not aware that the chemical we were using as a weed killer was dioxin. We were not warned of contamination to our bodies."

"My duties included the maintenance of water pump stations, swimming pools, reservoirs, and deep water wells on Guam most of which were located off base in Guam. When I worked on the air strip, we were in charge of maintaining water pipes that ran across the field of the flight line, and maintenance of valves," Spinale wrote.

He said he also had to spray the foliage on the base to keep the air strip clean for take-off and returning flights.

"We also sprayed around the water pumps that were located off base for accessibility for maintenance and repair. After the spraying was completed, we waited a few days for the foliage to die and then we had to go in and clear the area of the dead foliage," he said.

The chemicals, he said, were stored in 55-gallon drums on the edge of the base. "Many of these barrels showed evidence of leaking and decay," he added.

Agent Orange was used from 1961 to 1971, and was by far the most used of the so-called "rainbow herbicides" utilized by the U.S. military for its herbicidal warfare program during the Vietnam War.

According to chemical experts, degradation of Agent Orange, as well as Agents Purple, Pink and Green released dioxins, which have caused harm to the health of those exposed during the Vietnam War. Agents Blue and White were part of the same program but did not contain dioxins.

Studies of populations exposed to dioxin, though not necessarily Agent Orange, indicate increased risk of various types of cancer and genetic defects.

Since the 1980s, several lawsuits have been filed against the companies that produced Agent Orange, such as Dow Chemical and Diamond Shamrock.

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## About

While there is much discussion in Guam about the economic benefits of increasing the island's military presence, the damages/dangers that they represent are rarely mentioned. This blog, a supplement to the Peace and

Justice for Guam Petition, is meant to counter that by providing information about the US military in Guam, with the hopes of steering policy away from a dangerous unilateralist course to more sustainable notions of regional development and a strengthening international solidarity.

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