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Sick vets report on Agent Orange

By [Katie Worth](#)
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Robert Burgett remembers hauling big steel drums of chemicals from naval facilities to the supply yards on Andersen Air Force Base when he was assigned on island for temporary duty in the late 1960s.

"We would move these barrels and stuff would spill and go all over us," he said. "We'd just wash off and keep going."

In the 34 years since then, Burgett has had his vocal chords removed because of cancer of the larynx, he's had a large cyst removed from his neck, and he has been diagnosed with skin cancer. He's started to wonder what was in those barrels.

Burgett thinks it was Agent Orange, and he's not alone. Several veterans have come out to testify that the pesticides Agents Orange, White and Blue were stored and used on Guam during the Vietnam War, and said they are in contact with dozens of others who believe their health problems are connected to exposure to those chemicals while stationed in Guam.

Local military officials said they are waiting for more information from the investigation, but add that the military has spent millions in cleaning up Andersen Air Force Base.

Earlier this month, Illinois Congressman Lane Evans wrote a letter to Department of Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld requesting declassification of any information the Pentagon may have about the presence of the pesticides on Guam. Numerous calls to Department of Defense communication officers in Washington, D.C., were not returned.

Agent Orange and similar pesticides were sprayed extensively in Vietnam during that war to thin the jungles and make it easier for U.S. troops to advance. Since then, the chemicals have been linked to diabetes, cancer, lymphoma, birth defects and dozens of other diseases.

But the military has never reported using or storing the chemicals on Guam, and though the federal government provides medical benefits to veterans with these health problems if they were in Vietnam, military members who did not serve in that country have to prove that they were exposed to the pesticides.

Burgett believes he is living proof. He said during his three temporary duty assignments in Guam, his job consisted mostly of transporting barrels of chemicals from naval facilities to Andersen, and sometimes to planes leaving for Vietnam.

"I didn't know exactly what I was handling," he said. "When I had my cancer, the doctors could not figure out a man my age having this kind of cancer that early - I was only in my 40s."

"The VA doctor that I went to, he asked what I did. He said everything looks to be that you've been exposed to Agent Orange. I didn't know nothing about Agent Orange. Well, I came back and I started thinking, and I found these pictures of the supply yards that I took in Guam," he said, referring to photographs that show the drums he handled while on Guam.

"When I got to looking at these pictures here, I saw these barrels - Agent White was there and Agent Orange was there," he said.

Burgett said he can identify the barrels containing the agents because the colors of the agents were painted on the lids and in a stripe around the middle of the drums.

Burgett said he sent the photos to the Veterans Administration. He also had three men who worked with him at the time, one of whom was in the photo, write letters testifying to the fact that they were in Guam when photographed, and were sure of the contents of the barrels. Burgett says all three of those men now experience health problems associated with the chemicals.

Burgett said his job entailed not only transporting the drums, but also using their contents.

"I have a picture of this field that we sprayed with these chemicals," he said. "It was dead. Everything we sprayed, it killed."

More witnesses

Vancil Sanderson, a radioman for the Naval Communications Station on Guam from 1966 to 1967, believes he also was exposed to Agent Orange while here.

"We saw them spraying around the barracks and around the perimeters of the base. They'd come in and remind you to close the windows in the barracks, then they'd hit it with the stuff and all the geckos and everything would disappear. Then they'd be gone for two or three months, and then they'd come back," he said.

"They used Agent Orange and these herbicides all over. It was part of pest management in those days," he said.

Sanderson said he has been in contact with about 50 others who claim to know of people affected by pesticide use in Guam or believe themselves to be affected.

"Most everyone remembers the spray from the jeeps and vehicles, and from the hand attachments around the roadways and the perimeters," he said.

"Many of them have health problems. The most prevalent seems to be cancer." Sanderson himself has had such health problems.

"I've had a rare form of cancer called soft tissue sarcoma that's associated with Agent Orange," he said. "It's very high in Vietnam veterans, and in the veterans in support of Vietnam - those on Guam and on the ships and so on - the rate is just as high. The one difference is that (the support troops) have a higher death rate."

A public health assessment published early last year by the U.S. Department of Health's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry said dioxins, the contaminant in Agent Orange, were found in soil samples from 10 sites on Andersen.

The highest level reported was in a former fire training area on the main base, where soil samples showed dioxin counts up to 19,000 parts per million, according to Pacific Daily News files. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's recommended residential cleanup goal is one part per billion, according to EPA's Web site.

"Do you know how high that is?" he asked. "That means that 1.9 percent of the soil is dioxins. That is just a huge, huge amount. You can go into Vietnam and not find it like that."

Aftereffects

David Starr and his wife lived in Guam while he was a military police officer in the Marine Corps in 1961 and 1962. He and his family are now suffering from a multitude of health problems he believes are related to exposure to Agent Orange here.

"Right now I have diabetes. I'm blind. I have a child with spinal bifida, which is one of the things caused by Agent Orange. I've got a child that's had heart surgery, and I've got two children that have extra toes or extra fingers," he said. "I've got degenerative bone disease. I've got osteoporosis. I've got arthritis. I've got degeneration of the spine. ... That's all that's wrong with me."

Starr remembers going on night maneuvers and seeing planes overhead, spraying them with something.

"We always noticed that the damn trees out there on both sides of the strip were dead, and the grass down in the cracks of the airstrip were always dead," he said. Starr said he has photos of barrels of the chemicals.

"They're going to tell you it wasn't there? Well excuse me, I've got pictures of the barrels, I've got a picture of the labels, I've got a picture of the forklift with a number on it that will correlate with it being on Guam," he said. "And they're going to tell you it never

happened?"
Mitigation

Andersen Air Force Base spokeswoman Sgt. Kim Melchor said the base has as much interest as anyone in learning about the outcome of the investigation.

"Here at Andersen, people are the biggest factor. This is our community too, and we certainly want to find out about this issue just as much as the public does," she said. "But of course since we are not the agency conducting the investigation, we can't discuss the details because we don't have all the facts."

Melchor also pointed out that the Air Force has poured millions of dollars into cleaning up the base since the federal Environmental Protection Agency added it to the national priority list of toxic sites in 1992.

Health coverage

Burgett filed a case six years ago with the Veterans Administration in an attempt to get medical coverage for his health problems. He said the military has dragged its feet in the matter.

"The reason why is if I get it, then it opens up the door for all these other people on Guam that have got problems," he said.

Sanderson agreed with that theory.

"If they admit it to one, how can they not admit it to everyone else?" he asked.

Starr said he was clueless at the time about the damage he believes was being done to his body while he was in Guam.

"Before, you could have told me anything. And I was young and dumb enough to trust whatever you told me, just because you're a higher rank," he said.

"Had I known about Agent Orange I'd have tried to get off that island, that's for damn sure."