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Poisons in the Pacific: Guam, Okinawa and Agent Orange

By JON MITCHELL

The day after 19-year-old Sgt. Leroy Foster arrived on Guam's Andersen Air Force Base, one of America's largest Pacific military installations, in 1968, he was assigned to what his superior officers called "vegetation control duties."

"I mixed diesel fuel with Agent Orange then I sprayed it by truck all over the base to kill the jungle overgrowth. None of the older service members wanted to do the work so because I was the low man on the totem pole, it was left to me," Foster told The Japan Times.

Within days of starting the assignment, Foster developed pustules and boils all over his body that were so severe he bled through his bed linen. Then during the following years he fell ill with a litany of sicknesses, including Parkinson's and ischemic heart disease, that he believes were caused by the highly toxic herbicides he was ordered to spray. Foster also contends that Agent Orange's dioxins — long proven to damage successive generations' health — have also affected his daughter, who had to undergo cancer treatment as a teenager, and his grandchild, who was born with 12 fingers, 12 toes and a heart murmur.



Rainbow warrior: Ralph Stanton — now a leading researcher into military herbicide usage — works on Guam sometime in 1969 or 1970, when he believes he was exposed to Agent Orange, one of the "rainbow herbicides." COURTESY OF RALPH STANTON

But Foster could be considered one of the lucky ones. While hundreds of other American veterans claim they were sickened by Agent Orange on Guam, Foster is one of only five people known to be receiving U.S. government compensation for exposure on the island. The rest have been denied any help due to Pentagon assertions that its data "does not show any use, testing or storage of tactical herbicides, such as Agent Orange, at any location on Guam."

These denials will be familiar to readers following The Japan Times' investigations of the U.S. government's alleged usage of these toxic chemicals on another American military outpost:

Okinawa. Over the past 18 months, dozens of former service members have spoken out about herbicides on Okinawa during the Vietnam War. These veterans, and in some cases their children, are sick with illnesses consistent with dioxin exposure, yet the U.S. government has only acknowledged the poisoning of three of them — and it persistently denies that Agent Orange was ever kept, buried or used on Okinawa.

The parallels between the U.S. military's poisoning of Guam and Okinawa are disturbing, and the reasons why it brought Agent Orange to these islands in the first place lie in their similar histories. Located 2,200 km from one another in the Western Pacific, both Guam and Okinawa witnessed some of the most vicious battles of World War II. Guam, a former U.S. shipping station, had been seized by the Japanese in December 1941 and subjected to a brutal 2½-year occupation before its liberation by U.S. forces in July 1944. The Japanese prefecture of Okinawa was captured by the American military in the spring of 1945 during fighting in which 12,000 U.S. service members were killed and almost 40,000 wounded.

The heavy loss of G.I. blood on both islands imbued in many U.S. leaders a sense of entitlement to the hard-won territories. Following the end of World War II, the islands were gradually transformed into two of the most militarized places on the planet — Guam became the "Tip of the Spear" and Okinawa the "Keystone of the Pacific."

Although much-loved by martial pundits, these nicknames belied the peripheral status foisted upon the islands' residents. In 1950, Guam was declared an unincorporated organized territory, which granted the island a civilian government but left residents without the right to vote in presidential elections — a system that persists today. Between 1945 and 1972, Okinawa existed under the gray zone of American administration, protected by neither the U.S. nor Japanese constitutions. Such policies enabled the military to get away with actions on the two islands that might have been difficult elsewhere — including the usage of toxic herbicides.

According to the Pentagon's own records, it first stored these defoliants on Guam in 1952 with the delivery of 5,000 barrels of Agent Purple. One of several so-called "rainbow herbicides," which took their names from the color-coded stripes around the barrels, Agent Purple was a forerunner of Agent Orange and today is known to be even more toxic. The U.S. military had brought the herbicides to Guam for use in the Korean War. But the conflict ended before they could be deployed and, according to the U.S. government, the chemicals were subsequently removed from Guam.

Ralph Stanton, a leading researcher of military herbicide usage who also believes he was exposed on the island while stationed there from 1969 to 1970, is skeptical of the government's version of events. "The Department of Defense has no records of the barrels being returned to the U.S. so I think their statement is a myth or a lie. In the 1950s, the cost of shipping would likely have been more than the herbicides were worth."

Regardless of the final fate of that initial stockpile, what is clear from Stanton's research is that during the 1960s and '70s, as the U.S. waged war in Vietnam, military herbicides were routinely sprayed on Guam and shipped via the island on the way to Southeast Asia, where they were used in massive quantities to kill enemy crops and jungle cover. In Vietnam alone, the Red Cross estimates that 3 million people are still suffering from the effects of these chemicals.

According to Edward Jackson, a sergeant with the 43rd Transportation Squadron assigned to

Guam in the early 1970s, these herbicides were a common sight. "Andersen Air Force Base had a huge stockpile of Agent Orange and other herbicides. There were many, many thousands of drums. I used to make trips with them to the navy base for shipment by sea," Jackson told The Japan Times.

Knowing what we do now about the toxicity of these chemicals, it is easy to imagine that service members handled them wearing protective clothing. But for years the military and manufacturers suppressed the research on their dangers. "They told us Agent Orange was so safe that you could brush your teeth with it," says Stanton.

Not only did this lackadaisical attitude apply to the usage of these herbicides, it also applied to their disposal. Just like on Okinawa, where veterans have claimed Agent Orange was buried on Hamby Air Field (current-day Chatan Town), Kadena Air Base and Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, former service members on Guam say they engaged in similar practices.

According to Jackson, the barrels of herbicides were sometimes damaged during transit so they were dumped on Andersen Air Force Base. "I would back my truck up to a small cliff that sloped away towards the Pacific Ocean. I personally threw away about 25 drums. Each individual drum was anywhere from almost empty to almost full," Jackson explains.



Toxic legacy: U.S. Air Force veteran Leroy Foster holds his granddaughter in a picture taken not long after her birth in 2010. She was born with 12 fingers and toes, as well as a heart murmur — abnormalities that Foster believes are a consequence of his exposure to Agent Orange on Guam in the late 1960s.
COURTESY OF LEROY FOSTER

In the 1990s, the U.S. government cracked down on such methods, and after conducting environmental tests on the site where Jackson dumped the barrels, the area was found to be so severely polluted that it was listed for urgent cleanup by the Environmental Protection Agency. Across the tiny island, almost 100 similarly tainted sites were identified, including one where dioxin contamination in the soil of 19,000 parts per million (compared to a recognized safe level of 1,000 parts per *trillion*) made it one of the most toxic places on the planet. Further alarming residents was the proximity of many of these sites to the Northern Guam Lens, the aquifer that supplies the island with its drinking water.

In 2007, Luis Syfrez, an outspoken former University of Guam professor, warned that islanders were living "in a virtual omnipresent mist of the rainbow herbicides." His assertions were seemingly supported by skyrocketing rates of nasopharyngeal (upper throat) cancer and diabetes among Guam residents.

Today, the U.S. government claims to have cleaned up the majority of its toxic sites on the island, but University of Guam associate professor Lisa Natividad doubts these assurances. "Often their definition of what is clean is not accurate. So we need to commission independent researchers to cross-examine their claims," she told The Japan Times.

However, people on Guam are in some ways better off than Okinawa residents, who have been kept deliberately ignorant about the extent to which their island's earth and water have been contaminated by U.S. military dioxins. On repeated occasions, both the Japanese and U.S. governments have rejected calls for an investigation into Agent Orange contamination on the island — notably in November 2011, when Nago City residents demanded an environmental investigation on nearby Camp Schwab after The Japan Times published an article suggesting that large stockpiles of Agent Orange were kept on the base during the Vietnam War.

Left in the dark, current residents of Okinawa — including U.S. service members and their dependents stationed on the islands' bases — can only speculate about potential contamination. Futenma Air Station merits particular concern due to its similarities to Andersen Air Force Base on Guam. Both installations have been in operation for more than six decades, during which time they have been subject to the daily flow of dangerous chemicals — not limited to Agent Orange — necessary to keep the military machine running smoothly. Andersen's EPA reports revealed 32 so-called "contaminants of concern" including lead, PCBs and arsenic. Futenma, like Andersen, is situated atop a network of caves and fresh water springs. More worryingly, while Andersen is located in a lightly populated area, Futenma is in the crowded center of Ginowan city — home to 94,000 residents.

Wrangling over the closure of Futenma has been going on for the past 16 years, straining U.S.-Japan relations and testing the patience of the Okinawan people. But if comparisons with Andersen are accurate, even after its closure, Futenma's cleanup will likely run into billions of dollars. The U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement places the full financial burden of this cleanup on Japanese taxpayers. With such costs at stake, is it any wonder that Tokyo has allowed Futenma's closure to flounder for so long?

The fates of Guam and Okinawa have been entwined in the Gordian knot of the planned relocation of thousands of U.S. Marines within the Pacific theater. Associate professor Natividad believes that this plan has made Guam's leaders reluctant to push the Pentagon for full disclosure about its poisoning of the island. "Our former governor was too afraid of making waves with Washington for fear of jeopardizing the realignment. Our current governor is more confident but even if he pressured Washington for an admission, they'd just send him a letter saying that they've cleaned up the contaminated sites."

While it now seems clear that America's reasons for bringing Agent Orange to Guam and Okinawa were rooted in the Cold War past, Washington's increasingly implausible refusals to admit to the presence of these toxic substances on either island are tightly interwoven with its 21st century military strategy for the region.

"We veterans have become a political pawn between the U.S. and Japan," says Jackson, the former air force sergeant. "We're an army waiting to die."

More information about Agent Orange on Guam is available at Ralph Stanton's comprehensive website: www.guamagentorange.info. In May, Ryukyu Asahi Broadcasting aired "Defoliated Island," a documentary featuring The Japan Times' coverage of Agent Orange on Okinawa. Nominated for the best documentary award by the National Association of Commercial Broadcasters, the final results will be announced in September. Send comments and story ideas to community@japantimes.co.jp

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