

[THE ZEIT GIST](#)

25,000 barrels of Agent Orange kept on Okinawa, U.S. Army document says

By JON MITCHELL

Tuesday, Aug. 7, 2012

During the Vietnam War, 25,000 barrels of Agent Orange were stored on Okinawa, according to a recently uncovered U.S. Army report. The barrels, thought to contain over 5.2 million liters of the toxic defoliant, had been brought to Okinawa from Vietnam before apparently being taken to Johnston Island in the Pacific Ocean, where the U.S. military is known to have incinerated its stocks of Agent Orange in 1977.

The army report is the first time the U.S. military has acknowledged the presence of these chemicals on Okinawa — and it appears to contradict repeated denials from the Pentagon that Agent Orange was ever on the island. The discovery of the report has prompted a group of 10 U.S. veterans, who claim they were sickened by these chemicals on Okinawa, to demand a formal inquiry from the U.S. Senate.

The army report, published in 2003, is titled "An Environmental Assessment of Johnston Atoll." Outlining the military's efforts to clean up the tiny island that the U.S. used throughout the Cold War to store and dispose of its stockpiles of biochemical weapons, the report states, "In 1972, the U.S. Air Force brought about 25,000 55-gallon (208 liter) drums of the chemical Herbicide Orange (HO) to Johnston Island that originated from Vietnam and was stored on Okinawa."

In the early 1970s, the U.S. government banned the usage of Agent Orange in Vietnam after acknowledging the dioxin-tainted herbicide posed a serious threat to human health. Moreover, the time frame stated in the report suggests that the barrels were a part of Operation Red Hat — the military's 1971 operation to remove from Okinawa its 12,000-ton stores of chemical weapons in preparation for the islands' reversion to Japanese control the following year. A previous statement from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in 2009 stated that military herbicides had been included during Operation Red Hat but attempts to investigate that claim — including the filing of multiple Freedom of Information Act requests — have been hampered by U.S. authorities.

During the past year and a half, dozens of U.S. veterans have spoken to The Japan Times about their spraying, storage and disposal of Agent Orange on Okinawa during the 1960s and '70s. At this time, the island was a major staging point for the U.S. war in Vietnam, where the American

military sprayed millions of liters of Agent Orange, poisoning tens of thousands of its own troops and approximately 3 million Vietnamese people. Many former service members stationed on Okinawa claim they are suffering from similar illnesses due to exposure to the herbicide but the U.S. government is only known to have paid compensation to three of these veterans.

Following the discovery of the army report, 10 former service members have written a letter to the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans Affairs demanding a full investigation into the military's usage of Agent Orange on Okinawa. "We have a strong desire to do the right thing for all of the U.S. veterans who were exposed to herbicides/Dioxin on Okinawa as well as for Okinawa," states the letter, organized by former air force Sgt. Joe Sipala.

Sipala, who believes he was exposed to Agent Orange on the island in 1970, and the nine other veterans have offered to travel to Washington to testify before senators on the issue. The former service members were angered last year when the U.S. government and Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that veterans' accounts of herbicides on Okinawa were dubious.

"That is insulting to the credibility and integrity of the men and woman who served honorably, giving up years of our young lives to protect our great country of the United States of America and the island of Okinawa," says Sipala's letter.

Sipala told The Japan Times that he hopes the letter will convince the U.S. government to provide compensation to veterans who believe they were exposed to Agent Orange on Okinawa. At the moment, the government provides help to U.S. veterans who were exposed to military herbicides in Vietnam, Thailand and along the demilitarized zone in Korea. But Pentagon denials over the presence of these herbicides on Okinawa have prevented hundreds of these veterans from receiving aid.

John Olin, the Florida-based researcher who discovered the 2003 army report, says he will keep investigating the military's usage of Agent Orange on Okinawa. "Right now we have two governments — Japan and the U.S. — who were actively working together for many decades to lie to their citizens. There is an obvious disinformation campaign on this issue that only makes me want to look closer."

The Japan Times: Tuesday, Aug. 7, 2012
(C) All rights reserved