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Agent Orange's Toxic Legacy Hits Home

January 13th, 2011

By [Jan Barry](#)



Retired Master Sergeant LeRoy Foster is haunted by the job that launched his 20-year career in the US Air Force—spraying herbicides along perimeter fences and fuel pipelines at Andersen Air Force Base in Guam. This duty seemed inconsequential, field maintenance work done amid B-52 bombers thundering in and out to refuel for bombing raids over Vietnam and a beehive of other military operations buzzing at Navy bases on the small island in the mid-Pacific Ocean. Despite nasty outbreaks of acne that a military doctor recorded in a 1968 medical report, he

couldn't imagine that the government-issued weed-killers might be planting tiny time bombs powerful enough to destroy his health and the lives of many other people.

Forty-some years later, MSgt. Foster spends much of his time in a wheelchair, anxiously rocking his infant grand daughter, who was born last year with extra toes and fingers and a heart abnormality. At 62, living on VA disability and military retirement checks, he also spends hours on his computer in Westfield, NY, a small town near Buffalo, emailing to wider and wider circles of other veterans and public officials. High on his to-do list are pleas for a federal investigation and public health warnings of the potential effects of the toxic legacy of extensively contaminated land and water in Guam—as well as at many other active and former US military bases around the world.

Relentlessly working the Internet, Foster and a group of fellow veterans who were stationed on Guam have persistently lifted the lid on a long-hidden story beyond the widely reported use of Agent Orange herbicides in Vietnam. Their research unearthed information that their experience on Guam was hardly unique. The secretive transition of chemical warfare agents designed to kill crops and defoliate forests to routinely used all-purpose weed-killers had many way stations.

The Story Beyond Agent Orange

The wider story is that a witches' brew of herbicides contaminated by dioxin, and other hazardous substances, were used at numerous military bases stateside and overseas. Far and wide beyond Vietnam—where a decade of massive spraying missions with Agent Orange and other herbicide mixtures left dioxin "hot spots" at former US bases and many local residents have gruesome birth defects and other severe health problems—hundreds more military sites were contaminated by a toxic mess of chemical spills, cleaning solvents, heavy metals such as lead, plus dioxin in many cases.

During the height of military use of herbicides, which started in the 1950s and mushroomed in the 1960s, millions of soldiers, family members and civilian workers were on these bases, from Florida to South Korea. It was an era in which chemical herbicides were a modern marvel; in which benzene, trichloroethylene and other powerful chemicals were routinely used to wash nearly everything, from "dry cleaned" laundry to engine parts and greasy hands, with the residue washed into the nearest drain. In the decades since, millions more people have been stationed at these bases, which in many cases ended up with some of the most contaminated soil and water outside of industrial plants that manufactured these hazardous materials.

Like many veterans, Foster didn't connect his health woes to Agent Orange until recent years when news articles reported that the VA kept adding more and more diseases, plus birth defects in children, to a growing list of health effects associated with dioxin exposure. Then he painfully recalled his herbicide-spraying days as a young airman. The VA's response was to deny Foster's claim for additional compensation, beyond his 70 percent disability rating for spinal and heart diseases that were deemed service connected, stating that there was no proof Agent Orange was used in Guam.

Foster's Internet research found that, elsewhere in the country, some veterans of Guam duty have gained VA compensation for Agent Orange exposure based on data they provided. That propelled him to document his knowledge of herbicide use and to tell his story as widely as he could.

"I prepared, mixed and sprayed Agent Orange herbicides on Andersen AFB Guam and off base fuels facilities and pipelines and security fences surrounding those facilities on and off base" from September 1968 into the 1970s, Foster wrote last spring in a

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Brian: I hope I didn't imply that we shouldn't defund because I agree with you that this...

Dan Miller: Brian, I agree that ObamaCare, with its thousands of pages, was too long, too complex and...

Brian: Even denying funding to Obamacare is going to have unintended consequences. We cannot predict...

Dan Miller: Judging by most of the comments on the article at Pajamas Media, there are lots who want...

Tom Carter: This is the right political strategy if one is a Republican. There are undoubtedly those...

Tom Carter: Interesting. I confess to not having a solid grip on this whole problem of U.S. debt held...

Tom Carter: Despite the risk of incurring the wrath of a pantheon of PC gods, I find this problem...

Dan Miller: Great Zeus and Thor Almighty. Tom, you are going to be hauled up before a PC inquisition...

evon thompson: my husband glenn died dec 2009 he was a very sick man he died from all agent oranges...

Tom Carter: Good interview, Dan. It's been a long time since I was in that part of Texas!

Tom Carter: Lisa, you're right, times have definitely changed. It's sad that kids...

drijm: @Lisa: I agree with your last comments. Parents have to accept some of the responsibility for...

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blog forum response to the Chicago Tribune's extensive series on lingering health effects of the US military use of Agent Orange in Vietnam. "Many of my buddies ended up sterile like me, chloracne covered my body, severe ischemic heart disease, diabetes II, high blood pressure, high cholesterol unaffected by meds, immune problems, ankylosing spondylitis, spinal stenosis, osteoporosis, severe arthritis, and many more diseases," he wrote of the health problems in various combinations that he and others had developed. "This is the truth so help me God. Many of my buddies are dead now and many are dying."

A few weeks later, Foster sent emails to officials at Department of Defense schools in Guam stating that he had learned from Internet networking that many former students of these schools have severe health problems. "Some of the alumni kids from Andersen AFB have contacted me with some of their stories of health problems," he wrote. "This is very sad to find that they have problems like LUPUS, DIABETES II, AUTOIMMUNE DISEASES MIXED CONNECTIVE TISSUE DISEASE, MULTIPLE MISCARRIAGES, STILL BIRTHS, BIRTH DEFECTS IN THEIR CHILDREN. ETC. I highly recommend that DoDDs Pacific, DoDDs Guam, the Air Force Surgeon General and student alumni associations contact one another to find out what is happening to them and do an investigation to help them."

Last September, Foster was invited to address a federal Institute of Medicine committee meeting in Washington, DC on his research efforts about dioxin's health effects on veterans and civilians who lived in Guam. It was the culmination of a determined campaign to get federal officials to examine the health concerns that disturb him.

"I believe that after conversation with the Buffalo NY Veterans Administration that United States Congress needs to direct the VA or the US court of appeals to order an immediate remand of all claims denied to Agent Orange exposure especially those which were outside the country of Vietnam especially Guam, Okinawa and Thailand," Foster wrote to members of Congress in seeking a congressional investigation. "I was told by the VA in Buffalo NY yesterday that they will not seek out those veterans who were denied nor all of those dependent children of those veterans who would have been entitled to Dependency Indemnity Compensation DIC from the exposure of their father's and mother's to Agent Orange, Agent White and the other herbicides used during the Vietnam WAR."

Air Force Has No Records

In response to previous congressional queries, Foster found, the Department of Defense maintained the Air Force has no records of Agent Orange being used in Guam. It insists that high levels of dioxin at Andersen Air Force Base discovered by an EPA investigation were due to burning hazardous materials. However, the DOD added in a letter to Rep. Lane Evans in September 2003, Army records show that Agent Orange and similar herbicides were used in testing, storage or war missions in numerous other places, including Florida, Georgia, Mississippi, Texas, Arizona, California, Washington state, Hawaii, Maryland, Pennsylvania., Rhode Island, Puerto Rico, Canada, Cambodia, Laos and Thailand.

And by the way, the DOD added in its letter to Rep. Evans, another chemical agent called Herbicide Purple was stored on Guam in the early 1950s during the Korean War. Purple was part of a rainbow-colored array of military commissioned chemical agents—including Pink, Green and Orange—that were contaminated in the manufacturing process by a highly toxic byproduct called TCDD or dioxin. The most widely used, according to military records, was Agent Orange. Health studies reviewed by the Institute of Medicine, and accepted by the VA as a basis for claims, link dioxin to various kinds of cancer, spina bifida birth defects, ischemic heart disease, diabetes II, numerous other health problems and a skin disorder called chloroacne.

Other veterans Foster contacted found VA references to Agent Orange use along the DMZ in South Korea and at Fort Drum, NY. A 2001 government document noted that the VA was seeking further information on other "areas where veterans allege AO to have been sprayed [that] include:

1. Guam from 1955 through 1960s (spraying).
2. Johnston Atoll (1972-1978) was used for unused AO storage.
3. Panama Canal Zone from 1960s to early 1970s (spraying).
4. Eglin AFB (FL) (Agents Orange and Blue) on Firing Range and Viet Cong Village.
5. Wright-Patterson AFB (OH) and Kelly AFB (TX)."

Foster has heard from other veterans who say the herbicides were also used at bases on Okinawa and in the Philippines. At issue, Foster and many other veterans believe, is a fiscal resistance by federal agencies to acknowledge how widespread the health legacy of dioxin-laced herbicides extends. As Politico.com writer David Rogers noted last summer in an article titled "The bill for Agent Orange comes due":

"Age and Agent Orange are closing in on Vietnam veterans, a legacy of hurt for those who served — and a very big bill for American taxpayers. It's a world turned upside down from decades ago when returning soldiers had to fight to get attention for deadly lymphomas linked to the herbicide. Now the frailties of men in their 60s — prostate cancer, diabetes, heart disease — lead the list of qualified Agent Orange disabilities, and the result has been an explosion in claims and the government's liability.

"The latest expansion, approved by Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki in October, adds ischemic heart disease and Parkinson's and will cost at least \$42 billion

over the next 10 years. The VA estimates 349,000 individuals are already receiving Agent Orange disability benefits, and that number could soon reach 500,000 — or one out of every four surviving Vietnam veterans by the VA's count."

Big Hazardous Waste Problem

In fact, the health bill could be far larger—if the effects of exposure to the full array of hazardous materials at military bases were subject to VA health care and compensation coverage. Foster found another veteran had dug up disturbing records of congressional hearings in 1987 on hazardous waste at military sites. These hearings noted that the Pentagon "in 1986, produced hazardous waste at 505 of its 871 installations in the United States. The types of hazardous waste found at DOD installations include, among others, solvents, polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB), contaminated sludges, acids, cyanides, and contaminated fuel and oil. ... In a classified report concerning hazardous waste management at overseas installations, we also identified similar problems to those found at bases in the United States."

Foster's research found that one of the largest hazardous-waste problem areas is Guam, where the EPA lists more than a dozen Superfund sites, areas deemed among the most contaminated, at island bases. Meanwhile, he found, a private company that rates corporate environmental problems stated that Agent Orange manufacturers such as Dow Chemical and Monsanto have a growing liability problem in Guam. The 2004 report by Innovest Strategic Value Advisors, an investment risk group based in New York, noted:

"Agent Orange exposure has also become an issue for military personnel stationed outside of combat zones and for U.S. civilians as well. Soldiers stationed on Guam who handled Agent Orange have become ill and symptoms of TCDD (dioxin) poisoning are apparent in the general population of the island as well, TCDD contamination as a result of Agent Orange handling has been measured at up to 1900 ppm in some areas of Andersen Air Force Base on Guam. Given that safe levels of TCDD have been placed at below 1 ppb by the EPA and even lower by many state regulatory agencies (toxic effects have been measured at parts per trillion), this implies an extraordinary level of contamination. TCDD has been shown in laboratory animals to have multigenerational impacts, not just on the offspring of exposed animals, but on the next generation as well."

After all he has discovered about the toxic stew he helped to create while in the Air Force, Foster's latest mission is to help spur ways for veterans and civilians who were at military bases, and their families, to exchange information and get the best health assistance.

"What shocked me is when kids contacted me on the Internet and I knew their fathers [on Guam]. I sprayed right past their houses," Foster said in a recent interview for this article. Now grown, many of these military dependents, he learned, have severe health problems, including birth defects. "There's been no movement by anybody to help the kids who were on Guam. I feel bad, because I was there going around spraying that stuff..."

"My daughter found out what is being passed down to her children now, so she has decided not to have any more," he added. "So I will only have one grandchild. This is a story of genocide to an entire section of Americans. We were the poor and the down trodden who served in the Vietnam War. We need our stories told and recorded for all time."

Foster and several other veterans have kick-started the process of recording their stories by posting personal statements, VA claims records, military medical records, photos and other documents on a website, www.guamagentorange.info. Foster has also initiated an online petition seeking Congressional action on their concerns regarding Guam. The petition is at <http://www.ipetitions.com/petition/guamagentorange/>.

"I want to convey to everyone, especially the veterans service organizations," said Foster, a member of the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans and Vietnam Veterans of America, "and to all of the public schools and universities who have contact with vets and their children and grandchildren, to organize, to share, to be kept informed and to help one another. We are all in this together. I am sorry to say lots of information has been kept from us on purpose. They didn't want to scare us or make us so angry that we would result in uprisings or anarchy, but this is really bad and really terrible."

For further information:

<http://www.guamagentorange.info/home>

Jan Barry, a veteran journalist who served in the Army in Vietnam, has investigated Agent Orange health issues in news reports carried by the Associated Press and published in the New York Times and many other publications.

(This article was also posted at EarthAirWater.com.)

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