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The Military deny Agent Orange was ever used in Guam. But levels of dioxin as high as 19,000 ppm are reported at a former fire training area on the main air base. Workers and ex-service personnel suffer known dioxin-related illnesses.

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 the island for temporary duty in the late 1960s.

“We would move these barrels and the 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 after developing cancer of the larynx, he has had a large cyst removed from his neck and has been diagnosed with skin cancer. Understandably perhaps he is now beginning to wonder what was in those barrels.

Burgett thinks it was Agent Orange, and he is not alone in thinking this. Several other veterans have come out to testify that the pesticides Agents Orange, White and Blue were stored and used on Guam during the Vietnam War. They also claim they are in contact with dozens of other veterans 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 added that they had spent millions cleaning up Andersen Air Force Base.

In June Illinois Congressman Lane Evans wrote a letter to Department of Defence 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 Defence communication officers in Washington, D.C., have been ignored.

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. But the military has never reported using or storing the chemicals on Guam although the federal government provides medical benefits to veterans with health problems as if they had served in Vietnam, veterans who did not serve in that country have to prove that they were exposed to the pesticides that have now been linked to diabetes, cancer, lymphoma, birth defects and a number of other serious diseases.

Burgett believes he is living proof the chemicals were used in Guam. He said during his three temporary duty assignments there 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 as I was only in my 40’s.”

The Veterans Administration (VA) doctor that Burgett visited asked what he did in Guam. “Everything looks to be that you’ve been exposed to Agent Orange” he said.

“I didn’t know nothing about Agent Orange and when I came back I started thinking. I found these pictures of the supply yards that I took in Guam,” Burgett said, “When I got to looking at these pictures here, I saw these barrels, Agent White was there and so was Agent Orange,” he said.

Burgett said he can identify the barrels because the colours of the agents were painted on the lids and in a stripe around the middle of the drums. He sent the photographs to the Veterans Administration after getting three men who worked with him at the time, one of whom was in the photographs, to write letters testifying to the fact that they were in Guam when the photographed were taken and they were sure of the contents of the barrels. Burgett says all three of these 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 would come in and remind you to close the windows in the barracks, then they would hit it with the stuff and all the geckos and everything would disappear. Then they would be gone for two or three month, and then they would come back," he said. "They used Agent Orange and these herbicides all over. It was part of pest management in those days."

Sanderson said he has been in contact with about 50 people who claim to know of others 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 is 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 ten 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?" Sanderson asked. "That means that 1.9% of the soil is dioxins. That is just a huge, huge amount. You can go into Vietnam and not find it like that."

After-effects

David Starr and his wife lived in Guam while he was a military police officer in the Marine Corps in 1961-62. 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 am blind. I have a child with spinal bifida, which is one of the things caused by Agent Orange. I've got a child that has had heart surgery. I've got two children that have extra toes or extra fingers. I've got degenerative bone disease, osteoporosis, arthritis, degeneration of the spine, all that is wrong with me."

Starr remembers going on night manoeuvres and seeing planes overhead spraying them with something. "We always noticed that the damn trees on both sides of the strip was dead, and the grass down in the cracks of the airstrip was always dead." 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 are 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 cannot discuss the details because we do not 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, I was young and dumb enough to trust whatever you told me, just because you are a higher rank," he said.

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

Adapted from the article:

Sick vets report on Agent Orange

By Katie Worth

Pacific Daily News

<http://www.guampdn.com/news/stories/20030617/localnews/ln-2003-3.html>

Guam Pacific Daily News

June 17, 2003