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Air Force veteran, 72, alleges Agent Orange use on Andersen Air Force Base

Kyla P Mora , kmora@guampdn.com Published 7:02 p.m. ChT Jan. 7, 2017



(Photo: PDN file foto)

Air Force veteran Gerard Laitres, 72, was stationed at Andersen Air Force Base from September 1963 to March 1965. During that time, he worked as a liquid fuels system maintenance specialist, cleaning and monitoring above-ground pipelines for chipped paint and damage.

He was always surprised, he said, that there was never any brush around the pipeline that needed chopping or clearing.

“We worked around the Tumon Tank Farm, and around the immediate storage areas along the flight line. There were 10 pump houses,” Laitres said. “We had no problem getting into anything we had to get to. I always wondered what happened, how they cleared that out. Now I know it.”

Laitres believes the Air Force used Agent Orange as a defoliant on Guam, particularly along the path of the pipeline he worked to maintain.

“They did that, on the pipeline, and that’s a lot of mileage of defoliation,” Laitres said. “And so, are they going to admit it?”

Laitres, who moved back to Guam after he retired, said that he has never told anyone about the use of Agent Orange at Andersen AFB until now. He was motivated to come forward with his story after reading about 68-year-old veteran and Florida resident Leroy Foster, who recently shared his story of spraying Agent Orange at Andersen AFB during the 1960s and 1970s.

Related story:

[A 68-year-old Air Force veteran said he sprayed Agent Orange on Guam in '60s, '70s](#)

"I'm 72 years old. I don't know what the congresswoman is going to find out when she has her briefing," Laitres said. "As long as the truth gets out. That's important."

Guam Del. Madeleine Bordallo has requested a briefing from the military, detailing the handling of the toxic herbicide Agent Orange at Andersen Air Force Base during the 1960s and 1970s.

In a letter addressed to Maj. Gen. Steven Basham, director of the Air Force Legislative Liaison, Bordallo wrote that, in light of "a deeply disturbing report alleging the sanctioned use of Agent Orange" at the base, "it is unclear the extent to which individuals at AAFB, or elsewhere on the island, could have come into contact with the herbicide."



Bordallo (Photo: PDN file photo)

"This report is particularly concerning to me, and the personnel stationed at AAFB, their families, as well as the people of the U.S. territory of Guam deserve to understand fully the circumstances under which this proven dangerous carcinogen was handled," Bordallo said.

Speaker Benjamin Cruz said an Oct. 13, 2005, decision by the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans upheld an unidentified Air Force veteran's claim that Agent Orange exposure while stationed at Andersen Air Force Base from Dec. 1966 to Oct. 1968 caused him to develop diabetes mellitus.

However, Agent Orange's use on Guam has never been officially verified. Therefore, even if veterans can provide dates and locations, they still may be denied benefits on the basis that they cannot prove Agent Orange was present on Guam.

Laitres said he assumed the Air Force was using "some kind of defoliant" to keep the brush clear. While he says he never saw anyone spraying defoliant, he does remember seeing barrels along the flight line.

"As long as the truth gets out. That's important."

Gerard Laitres

During his stay at Andersen, Laitres never saw anyone using any lawn equipment to maintain foliage, and doesn't believe it would have been possible to "cut everything that close around the pump houses, and leading up to them, and down into the refuel pits."

Laitres volunteered for Vietnam while stationed on Guam. As a native French speaker, he knew the military needed personnel fluent in French. He wasn't accepted because, at the time, he was considered to be in a critical career field at Andersen.

In 1965, Laitres returned to the United States and transitioned to a career in high-altitude reconnaissance, working as a precision photo-processing technician. In 1968, Laitres deployed to Vietnam as the NCO in charge of quality control with the 460th Reconnaissance Technical Squadron.

When he got there, Laitres said, he put two and two together: what he had seen at Andersen and what he was seeing in Vietnam.

"I spent a whole year in the jungle because we weren't allowed to put our facility on base. We were out there in the middle of nowhere," Laitres said. "And guess what? They didn't use lawnmowers there, either."

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As for the alleged use of Agent Orange on Guam, Laitres said, he "can't blame them. It was so easy. They used Agent Orange here, and in Vietnam, we used Agent Orange and Agent White."

Laitres knows the impact the use of these chemicals had, particularly on the Montagnard Degar tribes who assisted American forces in Vietnam.

"The Montagnards were friends of ours. They fought with us. And we treated them like poop. Because we rained down white rain, and they didn't know it was coming, and they were soaked in that stuff," Laitres said. "We were killing them. And either we didn't realize it, or we didn't advertise it if we knew it."

As for Agent Orange, Laitres said he was exposed to it on Guam and "was swimming in it in Vietnam." Laitres has health claims pending with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

As a Vietnam veteran, any Agent Orange-related health claims Laitres may submit would likely be handled differently than those of veterans who claim exposure only on Guam. Because no official acknowledgment of Agent Orange use on Guam exists, veterans who claim exposure to the toxic chemical on Guam have largely had their claims denied.