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The World's Window on Japan

The Japan Times

ONLINE

Agent Orange Buried on Okinawa, Vet Says

Ex-serviceman claims U.S. used, dumped Vietnam War defoliant



By JON MITCHELL
Special to The Japan Times

In the late 1960s, the U.S. military buried dozens of barrels of the toxic defoliant Agent Orange in an area around the town of Chatan on Okinawa Island, an American veteran has told The Japan Times.

The former serviceman's claim comes only days after Foreign Minister Takeaki Matsumoto said that he would ask the U.S. Department of Defense to come clean on its use of the chemical on the island during its 27-year occupation of Okinawa between 1945 and 1972. The U.S. government has repeatedly maintained that it has no records pertaining to the use of Agent Orange in Okinawa.

The veteran's allegation is likely to cause considerable concern in Okinawa, as Agent Orange contains highly carcinogenic dioxin that can remain in the soil and water for decades. The area where the veteran claims the barrels were buried is near a popular tourist and housing area.

The 61-year-old veteran, who asked to remain anonymous, was stationed between 1968 and 1970 in Okinawa, where he drove a forklift in a U.S. Army supply depot. During that time, he helped load supplies — including Agent Orange — onto trucks for transport to the port of Naha, from where they were shipped to Vietnam.

The veteran said that in 1969, one of the supply ships became stranded on a reef offshore and he had to take part in the subsequent salvage operation.

"They brought in men from all over the island to Naha port. We spent two or three days offloading the boat on the rocks. There were a lot of broken containers full of drums of Agent Orange. The 55-gallon (208-liter) barrels had orange stripes around them. Some of them were split open and we all got poured on," he said.



Following the removal of the damaged barrels, the veteran claims he then witnessed the army bury them in a large pit. "They dug a long trench. It must have been over 150 feet (46 meters) long. They had pairs of cranes and they lifted up the containers. Then they shook out all of the barrels into the trench. After that, they covered them over with earth."



Dig here: In this photo taken in July, a 61-year-old U.S. veteran draws a map of the location on Okinawa where he alleges dozens of barrels of Agent Orange were buried in 1969. JOE SIPALA

Two other former service members interviewed by The Japan Times — soldier Michael Jones and longshoreman James Spencer — backed up the veteran's claim that Naha's port was used as a hub to transport thousands of barrels of herbicide. Spencer also said he witnessed the 1969 salvage operation to unload the containers from the listing ship, though he was unable to confirm the contents of the containers.

But the veteran making the allegations said he was sure. "They were Agent Orange. I recognized the smell from when I handled (the barrels) at Machinato (Service Area)."

Since his exposure to the defoliant's dioxin during the salvage operation, the veteran has suffered serious illnesses, including strokes and chloracne. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) — which handles compensation for ailing service members — pays the former soldier more than \$1,000 a month in medical fees related to Agent Orange exposure.

But the VA claims he was exposed to dioxin during the six-month period that he was stationed in Vietnam.

Under the Agent Orange Act passed by the U.S. Congress in 1991, all American veterans who spent time in Vietnam are assumed to have come into contact with the defoliant — making them eligible for health benefits and compensation.

But due to the Pentagon's repeated denials that Agent Orange was ever stored in Okinawa, it does not pay these benefits to U.S. veterans who claim dioxin-exposure on the island.

The veteran said he is aware of the risk of discussing the issue — especially given the sensitivity of current Japan-U.S. relations over Okinawa, where negotiations are currently under way to realign U.S. forces stationed there. "I worry if I go public with my name on this, they'll take away my benefits," he said.

In 2002, the prefectural government uncovered a large number of unidentified barrels in the Chatan area near the location where the veteran claims he witnessed the trench being dug. According to a source close to the Chatan municipal office, after the barrels were uncovered, they were quickly seized by the Naha-based Okinawa Defense Bureau, which is under what is now the Defense Ministry.

"I asked the Chatan town base affairs division if they had a report from the defense bureau. They said no. The town still does not know what the substance was, how the barrels were treated or if the bureau conducted an analysis of the substance," the source said.

Over the past six months, The Japan Times has gathered firsthand testimony from a dozen U.S. veterans who claim to have stored, sprayed and transported Agent Orange on nine U.S. military installations on Okinawa — including the Kadena air base and Futenma air station — between the mid-1960s and 1975.

Among those who have come forward are Joe Sipala, a 61-year-old former U.S. Air Force mechanic, who says he sprayed the defoliant regularly to kill weeds around the perimeter of the Awase Transmitter Site, and Scott Parton, a marine at Camp Schwab who alleges that he saw dozens of barrels of Agent Orange on the base in 1971. Both men's allegations are supported by photographs of barrels of the defoliant on Okinawa. They are currently suffering serious illnesses — including type-2 diabetes and prostate disorders — related to their contact with the defoliant, and Sipala's children show signs of deformities consistent with exposure to dioxin. However, the VA is continuing to reject the men's claims due to the Department of Defense's denials that the defoliant was ever present on Okinawa.

The accounts of these 12 veterans suggest the wide-scale use of Agent Orange on the island during the Vietnam War. They say the defoliant was used and stored in massive quantities from the northern Yambaru district to Naha port in the south. The defoliant's carcinogenic properties were not fully revealed until the mid-1980s.

Okinawans expressed concern over the issue. A retired teacher whose school was located near one of the nine bases where Agent Orange had been sprayed recently explained how several of her students had died of leukemia — one of the diseases listed by the U.S. government as caused by exposure to dioxin.

Yoshitami Oshiro, a member of the Nago Municipal Assembly, called for an investigation into the claims of Parton, the former marine, that he had seen large numbers of barrels at Camp Schwab — which is in Nago.

This is not the first time the U.S. military has been accused of disposing toxic waste this way.

In 2005, Fort Mainwright, Alaska, made headlines after construction workers discovered tons of PCB-contaminated earth beneath a planned housing unit. In May, three U.S. veterans claimed they helped bury barrels of Agent Orange on Camp Carroll in South Korea in 1978. The Pentagon is currently investigating this assertion.

Kaori Sunagawa, an expert in environmental law at Okinawa International University, expressed her concern about possible contamination by Agent Orange.

"Okinawan people need to know the truth about this issue. The government has to conduct research to see if the contamination has spread. We need to know if there is still a risk to human health and the environment," she said.

<http://search.japantimes.co.jp/cgi-bin/nn20110813a1.html>