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Agent Orange on Okinawa: the smoking Gun

Since 1945, the small Japanese island of Okinawa has been unwilling host to a massive U.S. military presence and a storehouse for a witches' brew of dangerous munitions and chemicals, including nerve gas, mustard gas, and nuclear missiles. However, there is one weapon the Pentagon has always denied that it kept on Okinawa: Agent Orange.

Now, for the first time, a recently uncovered U.S. army report reveals that, during the Vietnam War, the United States stockpiled 25,000 barrels of Agent Orange on the Pacific island. The barrels, containing over 1.4 million gallons of the toxic defoliant, were brought to Okinawa from Vietnam before being taken to Johnston Island in the Pacific Ocean, where the U.S. military incinerated its stocks of the compound in 1977.

Contradicting decades of denial by Washington, the report is the first direct admission by the U.S. military that it stored these poisons on Okinawa. A series of photographs was also uncovered, apparently showing the 25,000 barrels in storage on Okinawa's Camp Kinser, near the prefectural capital of Naha.

The army report, published in 2003 but only recently discovered, is titled "An Ecological Assessment of Johnston Atoll." Outlining the military's efforts to clean up the tiny island that the United States used throughout the Cold War to store and dispose of its stockpiles of biochemical weapons, the report states directly, "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."

A Leaky Story

In the early 1970s, the U.S. government banned the use of Agent Orange in Vietnam after scientific studies showed the dioxin-tainted herbicide posed a serious threat to human health. The timeframe covered by the recently discovered report suggests that the barrels were a part of Operation Red Hat—the military's 1971 operation to remove its 12,000-ton store of chemical weapons (including mustard gas, VX, and sarin) from Okinawa in preparation for the island's reversion to Japanese control the following year.

This is not the first time that Agent Orange has been linked to Red Hat. According to a 2009 statement from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, "The records pertaining to Operation Red Hat show herbicide agents were stored and then later disposed in Okinawa from August 1969 to March 1972." However, attempts to access the sources the V.A. used to make that statement—including the filing of multiple Freedom of Information Act requests—have been hampered by U.S. authorities, and the Pentagon has refused to help former service members who claim they were exposed to toxic defoliants during the operation.

Lending weight to suspicions that the barrels were shipped as part of Operation Red Hat was the discovery by independent researcher Nao Furugen of a set of photographs in the Okinawa Prefecture's archives. The images were taken during a U.S. military public relations event designed to assure the local media that the safety procedures in place for Operation Red Hat were sound. In the background of the shots, there is a large stack of barrels. Apparently striped with painted lids, they are consistent with the way in which the U.S. military shipped herbicides during the Vietnam War.

But according to documents supplied by veterans involved in the shipment of stocks of Agent Orange to Johnston Island, the barrels arrived in various stages of deterioration. Some accounts show that almost 9,000 of the 25,000 barrels developed leaks on Johnston Island, leading to the contamination of large areas of land.

These accounts have caused alarm in Okinawa, where local residents have been urging the authorities to conduct environmental tests within the bases where U.S. veterans allege Agent Orange was stored. However, both Tokyo and Washington have refused these requests.

During the past year and a half, dozens of U.S. veterans have spoken out about the use, storage, and disposal of Agent Orange on Okinawa during the 1960s and 70s. During this period, the island was a major staging point for the U.S. war in Vietnam—where the United States 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 that they are suffering from similar illnesses due to exposure to the herbicide. However, the U.S. government is only known to have paid compensation to three of these veterans, including a former soldier who was poisoned while handling thousands of barrels of Agent Orange at Naha Port between 1965 and 1967.

Exposing the Truth

There is increasing evidence to suggest that ordinary Okinawans, including the 50,000 employed by the U.S. military during the Vietnam War, were also affected. However, attempts to organize health surveys have been stymied by the authorities. According to Masami Kawamura—cofounder of Okinawa Outreach, the citizens' group at the forefront of demands for a full inquest into Agent Orange use on the island—the Okinawan Prefectural government “claimed that if they ‘investigated blindly’ without identifying locations with ‘high probabilities’ of being contaminated with [Agent Orange], this could just create rumors harmful to the communities.”

Following the discovery of the army report, 10 former service members wrote a letter to the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs demanding a full investigation into the military's use 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, which was organized by former Air Force sergeant 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 on the issue. The former service members were angered last year when the U.S. government and Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs suggested that the veterans' accounts of herbicides on Okinawa were dubious.

“That is insulting to the credibility and integrity of the men and women 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 said 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 the Pentagon's denials about the presence of these herbicides on Okinawa have prevented hundreds of these veterans from receiving aid. Now it would appear those denials are losing currency.

John Olin, the Florida-based researcher who discovered the 2003 army report, says he will keep investigating the military's use 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,” he said. “There is an obvious disinformation campaign on this issue that only makes me want to look closer.”