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Study Questions Whether Agent Orange Exposure from Westover Planes Was Enough to Make Air Force Crews Sick

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By **Jeanette DeForge, The Republican**



This undated photo shows five members of the 74th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron standing in front of one of the C-123 Providers at Westover Air Reserve Base in the early 1980s. All were medical technicians at the time. From left are: Debbie Asamoah, Maj. Gail Mas Harrington of Shrewsbury; Susan Linenkemper of Lancaster; Cindy Lapa; and Marlene Wilson.

An Air Force study determined Westover Air Reserve crews were unlikely to have fallen ill from being exposed to Agent Orange while flying planes formerly used in

the Vietnam War.

At the same time, the study said there is not enough data to made a definite determination if mechanics, pilots, medical crews and others were exposed to a high enough level of the dangerous chemical in the 10 years they flew the C-123 Providers.

The Air Force report, released Monday, was sparked by congressional inquiries and lobbying from crew members who served at Westover in Chicopee and flew the planes from 1972 to 1982.

“At this time we conclude that the discernible information suggests the potential Agent Orange exposures!...!were unlikely to have exceeded acceptable regulatory standards or have predisposed persons!...!to experience future adverse outcomes,” the report said.

But it said the tests were too few, too limited and too late — most were not taken until 12 years or more after the planes were flown at Westover.

The first known air samples were taken in 1979, but they did not test for dioxin, the hazardous chemical in Agent Orange. Surface samples taken in 1994 on one former Westover plane came back saying the plane was “highly contaminated.” In 1996, samples taken on 17 planes tested positive for dioxin.

In 2009, air was analyzed for a variety of chemicals and dioxin in four aircraft and no detectable levels were found, the report said.

“They say the testing results were inconclusive, yet there were enough scientific findings so they can infer there was no exposure,” said retired Air Force Major Wesley T. Carter, who served as an air medical technician and flight instructor with Westover’s 74th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron for 20 years and flew in the C-123s from 1974 to 1980.

“How can you say there are not enough tests to made a determination and then make a determination,” he said.

It wasn’t until last year Carter and other crew members learned the planes they flew for a decade had been used to spray Agent Orange. At least 50 members have reported suffering from illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes and several types of cancer that can be caused by the chemical.

Since then some of the former members of the airlift wing have been fighting to win medical and financial benefits from the Department of Veterans’ Affairs based on their exposure.

So far, the department has rejected their claims, saying the Agent Orange residue

could not infect the crew members.

Carter said he was hoping the new Air Force report would provide more support for those who fear they were exposed to Agent Orange, and persuade the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide benefits to those who need them.

“We thought they would rely on their own testing data to reach a more supportive conclusion,” he said. “Without their support we will continue to be denied benefits.”

Officials for the Department of the Air Force could not immediately comment on the results of the report.

Carter said he still has some hope.

“I would say the report is somewhat supportive of our position,” he said, pointing out that the report does confirm that the planes were contaminated.

Frederick W. Berman, director of the Toxicology Information Center for Research on Occupational and Environmental Toxicology at Oregon Health and Science University, who has been following the issue, questioned how experts determined the amount of dioxin the crews were exposed to was not dangerous.

He also questioned why people who flew in the planes for 10 years have to meet a higher standard than those who served in Vietnam and simply have to show they were in the country for one day.

The Department of Veterans Affairs does grant assistance to anyone who spent a day in Vietnam and later fell ill with one of the so-called presumptive illnesses believed to have been caused by Agent Orange.

“These people are having to prove beyond a shadow of doubt that they were exposed and they were exposed to levels beyond some occupational standard that does not exist,” he said.

It is impossible to even know how much Agent Orange they were exposed to because it can be cumulative and the crews flew in and worked on the planes for 10 years. Testing was not even done on most of them until another 12 years after the last one was retired, he said.

“My feeling is the levels were likely higher and they could have been much higher but we will never know,” Berman said.

http://www.masslive.com/news/index.ssf/2012/04/study_questions_if_agent_orang.html