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Veterans attribute litany of diseases to Agent Orange

BY MAR-VIC CAGURANGAN | VARIETY NEWS STAFF Thursday, 22 Aug 2013

Fighting a battle they cannot win

VETERANS who were stationed on Guam between the 1960s and 1970s suffer from a litany of diseases they believe were the result of their direct exposure to Agent Orange.

George Cager, who worked as an aircraft mechanic on B52s at Andersen Air Force Base in 1968, is afflicted with cancer and edema.

Claude Begin, who was stationed on Guam in the 1960s, was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins Lymphoma and type 2 diabetes.

Afflictions are not confined to the veterans; they extend to their families, who were with them during the deployment period.

JoLynn Cooley Swenson, who lived on Guam from 1974 to 1978, had two miscarriages and one stillbirth and is suffering from fibromyalgia, arthritis, thyroid problems, reflux problems, high cholesterol, and breathing problems. Her mother, who worked at AAFB near the flight line, passed away in May 2010 from a lung disease. “My father remembers seeing barrels of Agent Orange leaking at the runways waiting to be shipped,” she said.



Guam veterans Ralph Stanton and Leroy Foster have been researching and compiling documents related to Agent Orange on Guam. Contributed photo

Nathaniel Oden, whose parents both worked at AAFB from 1967 to 1968, was born with a cleft pallet.

These are among the more than 100 testimonies collected by Guam veterans Ralph Stanton and Leroy Foster, who have been researching and compiling documents related to Agent Orange on Guam.

Previous reports confirmed the damage caused by Agent Orange dioxins extends to successive generations.

Foster, who sprayed Agent Orange within AAFB premises while stationed on Guam from 1969 to 1978, believes the result of his direct exposure to Agent Orange affected his daughter, who had to undergo cancer treatment as a teenager, and his grandchild, who was born with 12 fingers, 12 toes and a heart murmur.

Unwinnable war

Guam veterans, who have long retired, continue to fight a battle they seemingly can't win.

“Our country called us to serve. We proudly did our part. Nobody shot at us with bullets, just dioxin and other deadly chemicals, and now we are denied and told to go away and die,” said Stanton, who was stationed at Andersen Air Force Base from 1969 to 1970 and is now living in Savannah, Mo.

Available records compiled by Stanton and Foster include 264 cases that have been dismissed by the Department of Veterans Affairs. These include Stanton's own case, which is currently on appeal.

Stanton believes his illnesses were the result of his direct exposure to the defoliants used by the U.S. military as part of its chemical warfare program, Operation Ranch Hand, during the Vietnam War from 1961 to 1971.

While stationed on Guam, Stanton and Foster said they sprayed Agent Orange on tank farms, a cross-island pipe line, pump houses, hydrant pits, and filtering systems at AAFB.

Stanton is afflicted with type 2 diabetes mellitus complicated by peripheral neuropathy and nephropathy.

Despite records proving the details of his job, the VA Central Office dismissed his claim, saying “data from the Department of Defense does not show any use, testing or storage of tactical herbicides such as Agent Orange at any location on Guam.”

The VA office also said, “The Joint Services Records Research Center informed us that research of available historical information does not document the spraying, testing or storage of Agent Orange at Anderson Air Force Base, Guam.”

“Thousands of veterans have died of Agent Orange-related diseases,” according to Stanton. “Most never even knew what had happened to them. Just like the local people (on Guam). The herbicide problem is a huge killer, but the TCE & PCE poison is even worse,” Stanton said.

Inconsistent decisions

The Pentagon has denied that the U.S. military used Agent Orange outside of Vietnam.

During a 2003 inquiry conducted by Congressman Lane Evans, D-Ill., a ranking member of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, the Department of Defense confirmed about 5,000 drums of herbicide Agent Purple were transported to Guam and stored in an undisclosed area in 1952 in anticipation of use on the Korean peninsula but claimed they were never used and were returned to the United States.

"The department has no record of the use, storage or testing of herbicides Orange, Blue or White on Guam," Phillips W. Grone, then-deputy undersecretary of the Department of Defense, said in a Sept. 23, 2003 letter to Evans.

This defense department claim, however, was inconsistent with the findings of the Department of Veterans Affairs, which issued the first decision in 2005 approving a claim by a Guam veteran who was afflicted with an Agent Orange-related disability.

The decision, which was seen as the first official acknowledgment by a federal government that Agent Orange was used on Guam, prompted Sen. Benjamin Cruz to call for a congressional investigation into the U.S. military's use of toxic chemicals on island.

No congressional investigation ever took place and despite the precedent ruling, DVA has since been issuing inconsistent actions on subsequent claims filed by other veterans.

Most cases are dismissed and claims about Agent Orange are practically shrugged off as a myth.

'So many have died'

Foster is one of the few whose claim for direct exposure has been approved.

Foster, who was stationed on Guam for about 10 years from 1969 to 1978, sprayed along the Air Force fuel pipelines and Marbo Barracks Complex as well as fuel tank farms at Tumon, Potts Junction, and AAFB.

He now lives in Pennsylvania and suffers a host of Agent Orange-related autoimmune and inflammatory diseases. Leroy believes the chronic health problems of his daughter and the multiple birth defects of his granddaughter are also related to his AO exposure.

Foster has been working full-time trying to assist other veterans, often firing off letters to congressional officials hoping to get attention "before it's too late."

"So many children have died; so many veterans have died. So many families torn apart with multiple miscarriages, still births and birth defects, so many Guam young adults dying from Agent Orange," he said.

Stanton said the scourge of Agent Orange also hit veterans stationed in other military bases. "But the Guam problem is larger than most because of so much military in such a small confined area," Stanton said. "The passing of time and the false information that has been added makes it hard for most people to figure this all out."

Online resources

Stanton is currently in the process of completing a website containing thousands of Agent Orange-related documents and individual cases.

"I started out doing this just for my VA case and the more the VA has moved the goal posts and suppressed evidence and outright lies, the harder I would dig," Stanton said.

"I have been researching this info for about eight years, full-time. I am disabled and spend most of my time on the sofa. The subject is so large and has so many different aspects to it, I feel the facts need to be available to anybody that is interested. Some are veterans, some are Guam residents, but the facts are we have all been poisoned," he said.

[Web Site = Guam and Agent Orange - TCE](#)

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