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## Detrick likely exposed man to Agent Orange, VA says

Originally published August 07, 2010

By Megan Eckstein  
News-Post Staff

Gary Abram receives compensation from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs for his military service-connected exposure to Agent Orange, a defoliant used in Vietnam that has since been linked to numerous health problems.

But Abram never set foot in Vietnam.

He served at Fort Detrick, which, according to the VA, likely exposed him to Agent Orange.

Abram, 68, was drafted into the Army and served at Fort Detrick from November 1962 to 1964. He is not allowed to talk about the work he did at Fort Detrick, but Abram said he enjoyed walking around the greenhouses in his spare time.

He still gardens to this day, and he liked seeing the different flowers the Army grew -- which were often healthy and beautiful one day and dead the next.

Abram had no idea that Agent Orange was tested in those greenhouses until a man he knew through work told him in the 1980s.

"Before that, I knew plants lived and died in the greenhouses," he said. "I used to go out to the greenhouses and look at (the flowers), so ... I was probably there the day they sprayed, and the stuff was probably leaking through the cracks in the greenhouse."

By the early 2000s, when Abram was nearing retirement, he finally started to piece together what happened to him. He realized that the perimeters of dead grass around the greenhouses may have been from chemical leaks.

In talking to Vietnam veterans, he realized his health problems matched theirs closely. Abram was treated for lymphoma in 1996 and has been on Synthroid for thyroid problems since the 1970s. He also has diabetes.

Abram filed for compensation in 2007. His lymphoma treatment burned his spinal cord and limited his feeling from the waist down. The radiation also caused a tumor in his left ear that forces him to use a hearing aid.

It took about a year for Abram to get the VA to process his claims. He had many medical appointments to set up. He compiled a list of every doctor he had seen since he left the Army in 1963. He spent the better part of the year searching for old medical records -- many of which don't exist anymore, were held by doctors who have long since died, or are in military warehouses and difficult to track down.

"If you sneezed and went to a doctor about it, they want those records," Abram said. "So if somebody's lucky enough, and they're young enough and they know all the doctors they went to and they're still alive," then the process may go smoother than it did for him.

"When you're trying to gather them over a 40-year period, past eight, 10 years back it gets very, very difficult."

On Aug. 18, 2008, Abram finally received a letter from the VA that acknowledged his presence at Fort Detrick during a time when the Department of Defense told the VA it spray-tested 1,410 compounds at Fort Detrick greenhouses, including Agent Orange.

"Because you were stationed at Fort Detrick during the spraying of these compounds, we conclude the likelihood of exposure to Agent Orange," the letter from the VA states.

Fort Detrick spokesmen could not say how many people may have worked at Fort Detrick during the time it tested Agent Orange and may be eligible for benefits. More information should be available in the coming weeks, as Fort Detrick officials wrap up a government-wide archives search to learn more about what chemicals were sprayed, in what quantities, and where on-post and in [Frederick](#).

That information may help a few of Abram's friends, who worked with him at Fort Detrick but now live in other states, who are still fighting with the VA for compensation.

Abram said West Virginia, where he now lives, has a good record of getting veterans' claims moved quickly, in part because Sen. Robert Byrd was so pro-veteran, Abram said. But he was told during the yearlong process that the VA needed Fort Detrick and the Department of Defense to provide records of service and possible exposure to Agent Orange, and VA offices in other states have had a hard time getting any response to their inquiries.

Abram said two of his friends who served with him at Fort Detrick -- one now lives in Oregon and the other in Nevada -- are still fighting for their compensation.

"If they were in country, in Vietnam, I've heard this stuff gets processed pretty quick," he said, mentioning his neighbor's brother, who was physically sprayed with defoliants and whose claim was processed in only four months.