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Stateside Pilots Say They Were Exposed to Agent Orange

By Lisa Chedekel - C-HIT
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Air Force Lt. Col. Aaron Olmsted of Ellington, in a C-123 plane.

In the years since they flew together out of Westover Air Force Base in Massachusetts in the post-Vietnam War era, Wes Carter and Paul Bailey have stayed in close touch, swapping information about families, jobs, and their former crewmates in the 74th Aeromedical Evacuation Squadron.

This year, the conversation took a strange turn: Bailey, who lives in New Hampshire, was diagnosed with prostate cancer in February. Two months later, Carter, a former Massachusetts resident who now lives in Oregon, got the same diagnosis.

Curious about the coincidence, the two men began checking around with members of their Air Force Reserve squadron – particularly those who had flown the C-123 Provider, a plane that was used to spray Agent Orange during the Vietnam War and then was reassigned to domestic missions at Westover and two other U.S. bases.

Carter was stunned: the first five crewmen he called had prostate cancer or heart disease.

The sixth man he tried had died.

Since then, he and Bailey have found dozens more former Westover reservists who are sick – with prostate cancer, diabetes, heart disease, peripheral neuropathy and other illnesses connected to exposure to Agent Orange [AO]. In just a few months, they have compiled a list of close to 40 of their fellow pilots, medical technicians, maintenance workers and flight engineers who are sick or have died of such illnesses, many of them from Connecticut and Massachusetts.

"I've had trouble finding guys who don't have AO-related illnesses," said Carter, who also suffers from heart disease.

Now, Carter and Bailey are spearheading an effort to get the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to recognize that the crews who manned the "spray planes" stateside from 1972 to 1982 were exposed

to lingering Agent Orange contamination and should receive compensation for their illnesses, as their fellow veterans who served in Vietnam do.

Under current policy, veterans must have set foot in Vietnam to be eligible for compensation for exposure to Agent Orange, a toxic herbicide sprayed in the jungles to destroy foliage and crops. Diseases related to exposure to Agent Orange include prostate cancer, neuropathy, ischemic heart disease, diabetes mellitus and respiratory cancers.

“For years, for many hundreds of hours, we flew that aircraft,” Carter said. “We ate in it. We worked in it. We fixed it. We slept in it... Most of us total thousands of hours inside the fuselage—inside that area the Air Force considers, even 25 years after the aircraft were retired, to be contaminated.”

In recent complaints to the Air Force Inspector General, the chief of the Air Force Reserve, the Institute of Medicine and other officials, Carter has cited documents showing that the Air Force knew, at least since 1994, of Agent Orange contamination aboard C-123 aircraft flown at Westover and other bases — but failed to warn personnel of the health risks.

Among the documents is a 1994 Air Force report that found one of the airplanes, known as Patches, was “heavily contaminated” with dioxins. Tests on other planes showed similar contamination, records show. In a 2000 legal brief, the General Services Administration argued that the proposed sale of C-123s to a private buyer should be canceled, dubbing the planes “extremely hazardous” and saying their release would carry “the risk of dioxin contamination to the general public.”

In a 1996 internal memo, an official in the Air Force Office of the Staff Judge Advocate, Directorate of Environmental Law, had expressed similar concerns about the possibly contaminated aircraft being sold to third parties, but said: “I do not believe we should alert anyone outside of official channels of this potential problem until we fully determine its extent.”

So far, attempts by Westover reservists to claim veterans’ benefits linked to Agent Orange exposure on C-123s have been stymied.

One of the veterans who tried was Aaron Olmsted of Ellington, CT, a retired Air Force Lieutenant Colonel who flew the C-123. Olmsted, 60, was killed in a plane crash in Pennsylvania in May, four years after he had lost a battle with the Board of Veterans Appeals to prove that he was sick from exposure to Agent Orange.

While Olmsted had logged hundreds of hours piloting C-123s at Westover, the veterans’ appeals board in 2007 rejected his claim that his diabetes mellitus was connected to Agent Orange exposure.

“The Board acknowledges that the veteran maintains he was exposed to Agent Orange while flying aircraft from 1979 to 1982 in the Air Force Reserves because the aircraft were used to spray Agent Orange in Vietnam from 1962 to 1971 and that he was thus exposed to Agent Orange residue,” Veterans Law Judge Steven L. Cohn wrote in dismissing Olmsted’s claim.

“[But] the veteran has not submitted any evidence substantiating his contention that there was any residual Agent Orange material on the aircraft he served on. His contention, standing alone, is not sufficient to show he had actual exposure to Agent Orange.”

Olmsted's widow, Diane, said she was frustrated that the VA had denied her husband's appeal on the grounds that he had not provided specific tail numbers of the C-123s he flew. He flew Patches and other planes that were found to be contaminated with dioxins, flight records and photographs show.

"I don't understand why they would put him through this, when it was clear he flew contaminated planes," she said. "Why would they turn their backs on him after he had served his country so long and so well? I feel like it's such an injustice."

She said federal aviation officials are now investigating whether her husband had a medical crisis that caused the small plane he was piloting to crash this spring. "We always joked he could have landed a refrigerator with wings," she said. "The plane was fine, the weather was good – [the crash] makes no sense."