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Military Contamination on Okinawa: PCBs and Agent Orange at Kadena Air Base

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Jon Mitchell/ March 24, 2014

In January, U.S. service members and their families stationed on Kadena Air Base, Okinawa, rallied together to demand an investigation into a dioxin dumpsite located near two Department of Defense schools.¹

For decades, Kadena Air Base has been the largest US Air Force (USAF) installation in the Pacific region - and this dioxin usage has taken its toll on the health of the land, nearby residents and on-base service members.

The Pentagon is notoriously secretive as far as military pollution on Okinawa is concerned² - it allows neither the Japanese government nor Okinawa officials to conduct environmental checks on its installations - but now two U.S. government documents offer a glimpse behind the wire.

The first - a leaked 1987 report on contamination of toxic polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) at Kadena - offers a glimpse into how U.S. forces attempt to limit PR damage from on-base accidents. And the base's failure to release the report, suggests a high-ranking cover-up.

The second document - a recently-revealed ruling by the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA) - shows that the U.S. government has awarded damages to another former marine whose health was damaged transporting Agent Orange to a warehouse on Kadena Air Base in the 1960s. The ruling comes less than a year after the U.S. government released a report stating that the Vietnam War defoliant was never on the island.

Taken together, the PCB report and the Agent Orange ruling suggest that the contamination of Okinawa is worse than feared - and will continue to damage the health of both civilians and service members for decades to come.

PCBs at Kadena Air Base

In the late 1980s, the U.S. military discovered levels of PCBs on land at Kadena Air Base which exceeded safe standards by many hundreds of times, suggests an in-house report available in full. Despite the possible risks to service members and local Okinawa residents, it appears the USAF failed to alert Japanese authorities and it may have concealed information about the contamination - which potentially remains dangerous today - for more than 25 years.

According to the documents, base officials discovered the pollution following a November 1986 accident in which 20 gallons (76 liters) of oil spilled from an electrical transformer at an open storage area within Kadena Air Base. Subsequent environmental tests conducted by a military laboratory in the U.S. revealed in March 1987 that the spilled oil contained PCBs at a concentration of 214 parts per million (ppm) - but the soil was contaminated at 2290ppm. A second round of tests, returned in October 1987, showed soil contamination of 5535ppm.

SURNAME OF ACTION OFFICER AND GRADE		SYMBOL		PHONE		TYPIST'S INITIALS		SUSPENSE DATE	
McCarty, 1Lt		PA		41509					
SUBJECT								DATE	
Environmental Pollution Incident								1 Dec 87	
SUMMARY									
<p>1. In mid-November 1987, 18 CECS/DEEJE (Environmental Planning) notified my office of a PCB contamination incident -- and accompanying problems -- which occurred in the base supply open storage yard 25 Nov 86. The accompanying health, environmental and political concerns associated with this incident require prompt attention.</p> <p>2. In order to avoid embarrassment and accusations of a "cover up," it is critical that we rapidly forward this information to Japanese government officials and try to minimize the "damage" which will inevitably result.</p> <p>3. Tab 1 contains background information about the situation. Tab 2 details problems which have developed because of the spill. In tab 3, you'll find a list of questions likely to be asked by Japanese government officials and news media. Each question is followed by a recommended answer. Tab 4 holds a "game plan" for minimizing the damage which will follow notification of GOJ, OPG and municipal officials. Annex 1 to tab 4 is a summary paper of the incident.</p> <p>4. Direct questions about this subject to myself or 1Lt McCarty, Ext. 41509.</p>									
<p>5 Atchs:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Background 2. Problems 3. Q and A 4. Game Plan a. Summary 									
<p>Chief, Public Affairs</p>									

The report concluded that the pollution must have predated the accident: "It appeared that the incident (the November 1986 spill) merely 'opened a can of worms'. Soil sampling in the open storage yard would have yielded high PCB levels whether the spill had occurred or not."

The cited results of both the soil and oil tests are far above international safe levels. For example, at the time the pollution was discovered, Japan's clean-up standard for PCBs in soil stood at 3ppm; whereas in the U.S., it was 25ppm. Today, Japan's regulations are much stricter - as low as 0.03ppm - and the U.S. allows the 25ppm level only for industrial areas in which people spend short amounts of time that lessen their risk of exposure.

Damage control - the front page of the 1987 action plan detailing unprecedented levels of PCB contamination at Kadena Air Base and how best to handle the PR repercussions.

as being linked to cancers. PCBs do not deteriorate in the environment and they can continue to contaminate the soil for many decades.³

After Kadena officials discovered the contamination in 1987, they tasked First Lieutenant Bob McCarty, Deputy Chief of Public Affairs for the 313th Air Division, with preparing a plan of action to deal with the crisis. The 7-page document which McCarty wrote - and made public last month - details the levels of contamination as well as the possible political, financial and health ramifications of the discovery.

C. ENVIRONMENTAL CONCERNS -- It appears that the incident merely "opened a can of worms." Soil sampling in the open storage yard would have yielded high PCB levels whether the spill had occurred or not. The 214-ppm oil could not have produced results of 2,290 ppm or 5,535 ppm.

RESULT: We will be asked to explain the high levels of PCB found? Since PCB has been used as an insulation and fire retardant property since the 1940s and was not determined to be a carcinogen until the early 1980s, the potential for soil contamination at sites on other USFJ installations on Okinawa exists.

D. HEALTH CONCERNS -- The potential for soil contamination at sites on other USFJ installations on Okinawa exists.

RESULT: Since the level of islandwide PCB contamination, if any, has not been determined, both USFJ and GOJ officials will be pressured to test soil samples from high-risk sites (i.e., open storage yards, hazardous waste storage areas) at all USFJ installations.

"Can of worms" - Kadena Air Base officials feared the revelations would force the military to conduct tests on all of its Okinawa bases.

Politically, the report spelled out concerns that news of the contamination might damage the standing of Governor Nishime Junji, a supporter of the U.S. military presence on Okinawa, in the run-up to prefectural assembly elections in June 1988.

“As a leader of conservative politics on Okinawa faced with a matter holding much potential for scandal, his constituents and fellow conservatives will force him, at least in appearance, to put pressure on USFJ commanders and demand answers to tough questions about the incident,” stated the documents.



Calculating the financial repercussions, the report estimated that clean-up costs at the contaminated storage site might reach \$190,000, approximately \$400,000 in today's terms.

However, perhaps the most serious concern raised in McCarty's report was the fear that Kadena's contamination - if made public - would prompt demands for widespread tests on other U.S. bases.

“Since the level of islandwide PCB contamination, if any, has not been determined, both USFJ and GOJ (Government of Japan) officials will be pressured to test soil samples from high-risk sites... at all USFJ installations,” stated the report. “The potential for soil contamination at sites on other USFJ installations on Okinawa exists.”

Bob McCarty, former Deputy Chief of Public Affairs at Kadena Air Base, believed honesty was the best policy... apparently his superior officers disagreed.

In 1987, according to the document, USAF owned 1480 pieces of equipment which were potentially contaminated with PCBs.

With the stakes so high and U.S. forces vulnerable to accusations of a cover-up, McCarty felt transparency was the best way forward. He recommended briefings to explain the situation to Governor Nishime, and the mayors of Okinawa City, Kadena and Chatan - the municipalities bordering the Kadena base.

Apparently, the merits of this approach were not recognized by his superior officers. “I do not believe the report was ever passed along to GoJ or OPG (Okinawa Prefectural Government) officials. If it was, then I was not informed about it,” McCarty said in a recent interview.

Enquiries with Okinawan authorities appear to support his suspicions. For example, Arakaki Seiryō⁴, the current chairman of Okinawa Prefectural Assembly's special committee on U.S. bases, said that he had never heard of the contamination.

“When the U.S. military discovered the pollution, it should have released the information immediately and it should have clarified their clean-up efforts - if any - of the site,” he said.

Arakaki also expressed concerns the PCBs continue to pose a risk. “A new survey must be conducted to find out whether the contamination still exists as well as the extent of the soil pollution. It is questionable whether the U.S. would disclose facts of the environmental contamination so third party, non-governmental checks are necessary.”

Ikeda Komichi, advisor at Environmental Research Institute Inc., Tokyo, believes Arakaki's fears are justified. Her organisation has conducted more than 1000 tests for PCBs - most involving electrical transformers - but she says she has never encountered levels of soil contamination as high as those reported on Kadena.

"The soil needs to be investigated to see what other dangerous substances - such as dioxins - may be present. PCBs are stable so there may be a long-term risk for the area. With this in mind, groundwater samples need to be taken to assess whether any contamination has spread," Ikeda said.

She urged health checks for both the workers potentially exposed in the 1980s and those currently assigned to the storage site.

A number of previous incidents have highlighted PCB pollution on Okinawa. In the 1990s, trunks of contaminated electrical transformers were reportedly abandoned outdoors on Kadena Air Base and the poisons were also detected on land that, until 1995, had been part of Onna Communication Site. Last year, traces of PCBs nine times higher than normal were discovered in wild mongoose tested near MCAS Futenma and Makiminato Service Area (Camp Kinser).⁵

McCarty's report appears to be the first time that in-house military documents have been made public and the Pentagon's alleged failure to disclose the findings to Japanese authorities suggests the lengths to which it will go to hide contamination on Okinawa.

"I kept copies of my action plan for more than 20 years because I knew the information the plan contained might vanish if I didn't keep it," McCarty said.

In recent years, growing awareness of military contamination has angered many Okinawans and mainland Japanese people. Under the U.S.-Japan Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), the U.S. military in Japan is not responsible for the remediation of any pollution within its bases, nor is it obliged to allow Japanese officials access to its installations to conduct environmental tests.

In December, U.S. Secretary of Defense, Chuck Hagel, announced the two countries would negotiate an environmental stewardship agreement to supplement the existing SOFA with the "shared goal of reducing impact to Japan's precious natural landscape." The first round of talks between the Japanese and U.S. governments took place on February 11 in Washington with further discussions planned for Tokyo in the near future.⁶

Next month, Okinawa Prefecture will open a new division dedicated to investigating environmental pollution on former base land scheduled for return to civilian usage.

On March 12, USFJ was asked for comment on the issues raised in this article but, at the time of publication on March 23, no statement had yet been made.

Another U.S. veteran wins claim for Agent Orange

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has granted compensation to another former service member for exposure to Agent Orange while stationed on Okinawa during the Vietnam War era. Dated October 2013, the award was made to a retired marine corps driver suffering from prostate cancer which, the presiding judge ruled, had been triggered by his transportation and usage of the toxic defoliant on the island between 1967 and 1968.⁷

The decision to grant the claim comes in spite of repeated Pentagon denials that Agent Orange was ever present on Okinawa.

According to the ruling of the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA), the winning marine alleges he came into contact with Agent Orange while transporting it in barrels and rubber bladders between U.S. military ports at Naha and White Beach - a Navy installation on the island's east coast - and a warehouse located on Kadena Air Base. He also claims to have sprayed the defoliant in the Northern Training Area to keep back foliage and reduce the risk of forest fires.

The former marine was able to identify the barrels he helped to transport as the infamous Vietnam War defoliant due to the tell-tale orange stripes painted around their middles.

The retired service member had first applied for compensation in 2004 but his claim was initially rejected. Following appeals by the veteran, last October, Judge Mary Ellen Larkin ruled in his favour, stating, "While neither the service department nor DOD confirms the presence of Agent Orange on Okinawa

during 1967 and 1968, the Veteran offers a highly credible, consistent account that he was directly exposed thereto during those years while performing his assigned military duties."

He alleges that he encountered Agent Orange when leaking barrels and rubber bladders were transported by him by truck from ships at White Beach or the port at Naha to and from a warehouse at Kadena Air Force Base, noting that the barrels were identifiable as Agent Orange based on an encircling orange band. He also reports that he and other members of his squad of Marines were ordered to mix and spray the herbicide around various areas in the Northern Training Area in Okinawa, where there was a guerilla warfare school, in order to eliminate any undergrowth and diminish fire potential. The foregoing was set forth in sworn testimony offered at hearings before the RO and Board and is found to be competent, probative, and persuasive.

Sworn testimony: an excerpt from the October 2013 ruling which awarded compensation to the former marine exposed to Agent Orange on Okinawa.

According to U.S. government records and interviews conducted by the author, more than 250 former service members claim to have been sickened by exposure to Agent Orange on Okinawa but only a handful have ever been given help by their government. Previous winning veterans include a former marine stationed on the island during the early 1960s and a retired army truck driver exposed while driving the defoliant from Okinawa's ports to Kadena Air Base between 1965 and 1966.⁸



A USMC helicopter sits next to a stack of unidentified barrels at Naha Military Port in the late 1960s.

Courtesy of Michael Jones.

"This BVA decision was case specific, giving the benefit of doubt to the Veteran claimant, and has no impact on Dr. Young's report."

This latest victory is believed to be the first time a veteran has been awarded compensation since the Pentagon issued a 29-page report last February denying Agent Orange had been present on the island. That report, written by former USAF colonel, Alvin Young, came under fire from experts for its failure to conduct environmental tests or interview any veterans alleging exposure on Okinawa.⁹

In comments regarding the latest VA ruling, DoD spokesperson, Mark Wright, reaffirmed the Pentagon's confidence in the credibility of Young's report. "The research showed that there are no source documents that validate the claims that Herbicide Orange was shipped to or through, unloaded, stored, used or buried on Okinawa," Wright replied by email.

Genevieve Billia, VA Public Affairs Specialist, added

Billia apparently ruled out the possibility of the decision opening the floodgates to similar pay-outs by explaining that such rulings do not set a precedent for other cases.

However Don Schneider, a former military veterinary technician who believes he was exposed to defoliants on Okinawa in 1968, the same year as the winning marine, is hopeful the ruling will make a

difference. "This will hearten and encourage other Veterans to re-submit their claims for consideration. The VA has continued to ignore other valid claims but I think this decision will eventually prove to be as meaningful for the people of Okinawa as it is for the Veterans who served on the island during the Vietnam War era," Schneider said.

During the Vietnam War, Kadena Air Base - the installation cited in the winning ruling as the location of the Agent Orange warehouse - was one of the Pentagon's primary launch pads for the conflict. A 1971 U.S. Army report on Agent Orange cited a herbicide stockpile at Kadena and it has been reported that the C-123 airplanes which sprayed defoliants over Vietnam were sent to the base for maintenance.¹⁰

Recently, the installation has been the focus of public health fears following the discovery of 83 barrels - some stenciled with markings of defoliant maker, the Dow Chemical company - on land that was formerly part of the base. Tests on 22 of the barrels revealed some of them contained high levels of herbicide and dioxin, leading some scientists to assert that they may have contained military defoliants.¹¹

The results of tests on the remaining 61 barrels are expected to be made public in mid-April.

Meanwhile, in February, Kadena Air Base officials gave the all-clear to two DoD schools adjacent to the dumpsite following environmental tests on the surface soil of their grounds.

Jon Mitchell is a visiting researcher at the International Peace Research Institute of Meiji Gakuin University, Tokyo and an Asia-Pacific Journal associate. In 2012, "Defoliated Island: Agent Orange, Okinawa and the Vietnam War" - a Japanese TV documentary based upon his research - was winner of an award for excellence from Japan's Association of Commercial Broadcasters. A Japanese-language book based upon his research into Agent Orange on Okinawa is scheduled for publication in Tokyo in 2014.

Recommended citation: *Jon Mitchell, "Military Contamination on Okinawa: PCBs and Agent Orange at Kadena Air Base", The Asia-Pacific Journal, Vol. 12, Issue 12, No. 1, March 24, 2014.*

Notes

Many thanks to Bob McCarty, author of *Three Days in August* and *The Clapper Memo*, for speaking out about the PCB contamination at Kadena Air Base.

1. See for example Jon Mitchell, "Okinawa - The Pentagon's Toxic Junk Heap of the Pacific," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 11, Issue 47, No. 6, November 25, 2013

2. For an interview with Arakaki Seiryō regarding the wider implications of military pollution on Okinawa, see "Jon Mitchell, "Pollution rife on Okinawa's U.S.-returned base land", *The Japan Times*, December 4, 2013

3. See Mitchell, November 25, 2013.

4. USFJ Media Advisory #2014003, "First Round of Environment Stewardship Consultations Begins," February 12, 2014.

5. See Jon Mitchell, "U.S. Vets Win Payouts Over Agent Orange Use on Okinawa," *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol. 10, Issue 8, No 2, February 20, 2012

6. See Jon Mitchell, "'Deny, deny until all the veterans die' - Pentagon investigation into Agent Orange on Okinawa," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 11, Issue 23, No. 2. June 10, 2013.

7. See Jon Mitchell, "Herbicide Stockpile at Kadena Air Base, Okinawa: 1971 U.S. Army report on Agent Orange," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 11, Issue 1, No. 5, January 14, 2013.

8. See Jon Mitchell, "Okinawa Dumpsite Offers Proof of Agent Orange: Experts Say," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol. 11, Issue 38, No. 1, September 23, 2013.

9. See Travis Tritten, "New soil tests at Kadena Air Base schools find no herbicide, dioxin", *Stars and Stripes*, February 27, 2014.