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Military Secret Exposed

Valley Veteran Says He Was Just Following Orders

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PHOENIX -- It's a secret the military does not want you to know -- something so dangerous that a Valley man says it's slowly killing him and could be poisoning countless others. "Yeah, it haunts me," said veteran Steve House. "We basically buried our garbage in their back yard."

The year was 1978. Spc. Steve House was stationed at Camp Carroll in South Korea. He worked as a heavy equipment operator, and one day, says he got orders to dig a ditch - nearly the length of a city block. "They just told us it was going to be used for disposal," said House.

But it was what House buried that he's never been able to forget. "Fifty-five gallon drums with bright yellow, some of them bright orange, writing on them," said House. "And some of the cans said Province of Vietnam, Compound Orange."

Compound Orange, also known as Agent Orange, is a toxic herbicide that was used to wipe out the jungles during the Vietnam War. The military also admitted using it years later around demilitarized zones in Korea. The government says the leftover Agent Orange was incinerated at sea.

House claims that's not the whole truth. But 30 years later, it's one man's word. Unless other soldiers remember the same thing. "I can tell them what we did with it," said Robert Travis, who served side-by-side with House and now lives in West Virginia. "There were approximately 250 drums, all OD green," said Travis. "On the barrels it said 'chemicals type Agent Orange.' It had a stripe around the barrel dated 1967 for the Republic of Vietnam."

Travis said he remembers hand-wheeling each barrel out of the warehouse. "This stuff was just seeping through the barrels," he said. "There was a smell; I couldn't even describe it, just sickly sweet."

And shortly after, Travis said he developed a red rash all over his body. His health has since deteriorated. "I have arthritis in my neck and back," he said. "My wrists and feet, I don't know how many times they just snap because they're weak."

Dr. Nanette Auriemma decides which soldiers qualify for the National Agent Orange registry. "There's no way to specifically diagnose a patient (who) has been exposed to Agent Orange," said Auriemma, who works for the Veterans Affairs Medical Center and Clinics. "

The birth defects it can cause are well-known. But there are also 15 cancers and diseases linked to Agent Orange, including diabetes and neuropathy. House suffers from both. "There are also many guys that say they developed extreme numbness of their feet while they were in the jungles," said Auriemma.

That brings us to the small town of Decatur, Ill., where CBS 5 Investigates tracked down yet another soldier whose story matches up, and he has similar health problems. "My foot swelled up basically overnight, and I couldn't walk, and that's when, basically my troubles started," said Richard Cramer, whose feet began to go numb while burying barrels of chemicals at Camp Carroll, he said.

Cramer spent two months in a military hospital. Now, decades later, he still has unexplainable pain. "I have swelling of the ankles and toes," said Cramer. "I have chronic arthritis in my back. I get eye infections. It also has affected my hearing."

If the exposure to Agent Orange has made these soldiers this sick, could it also have affected the Koreans who live around the post? "What will happen is the contaminant will reach the groundwater," said Dr. Peter Fox, an Arizona State University professor of environmental engineering and expert in groundwater contaminants. "If they're using that water for irrigation, the contaminates could be getting into the food supply, on top of just the drinking water supply," said Fox.

And to clean up this mess would take years. "The only way to clean that up is to pump the water out and do a pump and treat," said Fox. "Which, with an insoluble compound like that, could take 50 years."

These veterans don't have 50 years. The clock is already ticking on their final mission: exposing the truth about the toxic chemicals they once covered up. "So what were we?" asked Travis. "I think we were guinea pigs. That stuff is still sitting over there. I mean, it's not going away."

"If we prove what they did was wrong, they should fess up and clean it up and take care of the people involved," said Cramer.

"I just recently found out that I have to have some major surgery," said House. And because my liver is so weak, they don't think I'm, going to make it through. If I'm going to check out, I want to make sure I'm checking out with a clean slate."

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