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House of Lies: Agent Orange and the Government's Policy of Cover-up

Posted on May 26, 2014 by Donnie La Curan in Veteran News

The Department of Veterans Affairs has an image problem. Recently the VA has been vilified because its backlog of cases has grown to mindboggling levels. By July 2013, more than 600,000 veterans had been waiting more than 125 days, some of them for more than two years, to get the help they needed. And while it's no news flash that bureaucratic gears grind slowly (a problem, in this case, exacerbated by long-outdated computer processing systems), Peter Sills says there's a lesser-known reason for the backlog: decades' worth of government refusal to do the right thing.

What's worse, he adds, this line of long-suffering veterans is a shameful testament to the government's unofficial policy on veteran woes: lie, deny, and cover up.

"The long waiting list is actually a good news/bad news kind of thing," says Sills, author of *Toxic War: The Story of Agent Orange (Vanderbilt University Press, 2014, ISBN: 978-0-8265-1962-7, \$39.95)*. "The good news is that after decades of stalling, the VA is finally granting benefits to Vietnam veterans suffering from ischemic heart disease, Parkinson's disease, and certain types of leukemia, on the grounds that their conditions may have been caused by exposure to military herbicides, such as Agent Orange. This means that hundreds of thousands of Vietnam vets have been added to the rolls and are finally getting the help they deserve.

"The bad news is what came before—and what that says about our government and military," he adds. "For decades, the VA refused to acknowledge that anyone could have been harmed by military herbicides used during the Vietnam War. It willfully ignored any and all evidence of that harm and then conducted its own research to prove these chemicals were safe—research that was intentionally flawed and that is largely disregarded today."

In *Toxic War*, Sills describes the production and use of Agent Orange and other American poisons used in Vietnam and how the VA and the military, with the help of other federal agencies (including the White House), denied that these chemicals were capable of causing harm.

"It is extremely unfortunate that political expedience has consistently trumped the proper care of our veterans," says Sills. "It isn't just that their health problems have been ignored. The government has actively covered up the truth about what really happened to our troops."

Six Damning Facts about the Agent Orange Cover-up

During the Vietnam War, the government hid the truth about Agent Orange from the world. The U.S. government began planning to use herbicides in Vietnam even before sending any troops to Southeast Asia. The belief that American technology could overwhelm the backward Communist peasants remained strong throughout the war, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

“No one knew whether spraying herbicides violated the Geneva Convention against chemical weapons,” says Sills. “But even if these compounds really were legal, the U.S. still assumed that most of the world, even its allies, would be horrified by their use. So it did its best to conceal the program’s existence. When shipping herbicides to Vietnam, the U.S. never notified the international agency that was supposed to approve all weapons arriving there. It hid its spray planes from view. For a while, it even tried to pretend that this was a Vietnamese, not an American, operation.

“Later on, when the existence of the herbicide program became too obvious to deny, and when many Vietnamese began claiming that American chemicals were making them sick, the military refused to release any information about these compounds,” he adds. “And it wouldn’t admit, even though diluted, commercial versions of these same herbicides sometimes caused harm, that they posed any danger in Vietnam.”

The dangerous chemicals were sent overseas without any warning labels. The herbicides in Vietnam received their names from the colored stripes placed on their 50-gallon containers (Agents Orange, White, Blue, Purple, and Pink). Sills explains that “these stripes were the only identification the troops in Vietnam ever saw.” Originally, the chemicals were to be shipped with the same warning labels as their milder commercial cousins—advising people not to touch or swallow the stuff and to wash it off after any exposure. But without explaining why, the government decided not to use those labels, just the colored stripes.

“American servicemen were told that these herbicides were completely harmless, so no one took any precautions when handling them,” says Sills. “Some Air Force personnel even ‘spray fought’ with them. The barrels were used as tables, showers, barbecue pits, etc. The Vietnamese stored fuel for their vehicles in them, inadvertently spraying these chemicals all over Vietnam. Essentially, Americans and Vietnamese were unnecessarily exposed to poison so the U.S. could be protected from bad publicity.”

When veterans became sick, the VA ignored their problems. Some soldiers began suffering from odd symptoms while still in Vietnam, but military doctors never considered the possibility that chemical exposure could be responsible. The doctors probably didn’t know any better as they had been told that the herbicides were completely non-toxic.

But after these men and women came home, the VA systematically covered up the truth about military herbicides. When Maude DeVictor, a VA claims administrator, first recognized a bizarre pattern of illness in veterans who remembered being exposed to herbicides, she contacted an Air Force scientist and was given at least some honest information about these chemicals. As soon as she acted on that information, she was transferred.

Toxic War shows how the VA dodged the evidence and manipulated facts to make it appear that these herbicides were harmless. Sills says, “It’s obvious that the agency’s mission was to deny that these chemicals could ever have hurt anyone in Vietnam.”

The government sponsored deliberately bad science to cover up the truth. The federal government, including the VA, the Air Force, and the Centers for Disease Control, conducted many studies on veterans who’d potentially been exposed to herbicides in Vietnam. Almost all of them were terribly done and are now largely discredited. Sills believes this was fraud, not negligence.

“If government scientists had merely done a bad job, then their results would have been all over the place,” notes Sills. “But all those wrong findings pointed in just one direction—that Vietnam vets weren’t harmed by these chemicals. This couldn’t have been a coincidence. And if the research provided any evidence that veterans might be at risk, they were still publicly described as proving that there was no danger. Also, one study showing increased birth defects in the children of potentially exposed veterans was simply kept secret.”

The Reagan Administration tried to stop legislation designed to help the veterans. During the 1980s, Vietnam veterans began shedding the image of losers and baby killers and gained real political power. Some were even elected to Congress. Those Congressmen began championing and passing laws designed to help people who’d been exposed to military herbicides—or to at least conduct appropriate research to determine who, if anyone, was at risk. The Reagan Administration bitterly fought that legislation. Government officials privately complained that these bills would cost the government too much money; and even worse, the herbicide industry would face claims from civilians who’d been exposed to pretty much the same compounds.

In a hearing in 1988, Senator John Kerry railed against the government’s efforts to dodge responsibility for the damages caused by Agent Orange and other herbicides. He stated, “To those who say, ‘We don’t have enough evidence,’ I would ask—how high does the body count have to go? How many Vietnam veterans have to die before we have ‘enough evidence’ to start admitting the truth and compensating veterans? This Administration’s rhetoric is out of touch with reality. They tell us that Vietnam veterans are ‘national heroes.’ But they continue to turn a deaf ear to Vietnam veterans who need help.”

Toxic War cites internal government memos that prove all this, along with others showing that no research findings were allowed to reach the public unless they were first vetted by the White House.

The government consistently tried to prevent “Agent Orange” veterans from getting the help they’ve needed. Edward Derwinski, who was appointed by George H.W. Bush as the first secretary of the new cabinet-level VA, was also the first agency head to ignore the government’s bad science and acknowledge that Vietnam veterans might have been harmed by military herbicides. But the VA still resisted paying Agent Orange claims, even after being continually ordered to do so by federal courts.

“This was more than reluctance,” Sills says. “Whenever the agency lost a round, it would fight the same battle again and again, and keep losing over and over. It didn’t give up until Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric Shinseki finally agreed to grant benefits to anyone who suffered from diseases that could have been caused by herbicide exposure, according to the best available science. It still amazes me that it took so long to make this happen.”

The Cover-ups Didn’t Stop With Vietnam

Sadly, the government’s unwillingness to accept responsibility wasn’t an aberration. It has also tried to minimize the harm caused by toxins in the Middle East. Any veterans of the wars in Kuwait, Iraq, and Afghanistan whose health problems may have been caused by chemical exposure, instead of bombs and bullets, have faced similar resistance.

These troops were exposed to depleted uranium, low levels of chemical weapons, sulfur, chromium, and other toxic chemicals. The VA told many of them that they were psychologically, not physically, ill. (The same thing had happened to Vietnam veterans.) The agency also failed to keep accurate records about who was sick, who'd been treated, or even how many people had actually seen combat. Amputation records, which would seem to be relatively straightforward, were also unreliable. After a while, people who'd lost only a finger or toe weren't included, perhaps to make the number of amputees seem smaller than they really were. And the research on chemical exposure was, once again, pretty much worthless.

Perhaps worst of all, the government allowed its major outpatient unit for wounded veterans at Walter Reed Hospital to become a shambles. Senator Jon Tester of Montana complained at a January 2008 Congressional hearing, "It is almost as if no one told the VA back in 2004-2005 that there were two wars going on."

"Fortunately, most of these veterans won't be forced to wait for decades to get the help they need," says Sills. "The VA now acknowledges that many troops really were exposed to toxic chemicals. But the quality of that help will depend largely on who runs the VA in the future."

"There is a terrible disconnect between the inevitable demand to support our troops in wartime and how we treat those same troops after they come home," Sills adds. "The people who are most eager to go to war tend to be the least eager to help soldiers once the war is over. The harm suffered by our veterans offers too much proof that war is more costly and dangerous than anyone is willing to admit, and no one wants to acknowledge this—except for the people who opposed the war in the first place."

About the Author

Peter Sills is the author of Toxic War: The Story of Agent Orange. He is an attorney and helped represent the Vietnam Veterans of America in the Agent Orange class action lawsuit. Today, he is active in environmental causes.

<http://www.veteransresources.org/2014/05/house-lies-agent-orange-governments-policy-cover#.V1bkq-QW59K>