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***If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?***

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# The Columbus Dispatch

## Veterans Issues: Agent Orange Pressure Mounts

By Holly Zachariah / The Columbus Dispatch • Saturday May 2, 2015 5:56 AM



*AP file photos At left is a mangrove forest about 60 miles from Saigon, Vietnam. At right is what is left of a mangrove forest in 1970 after the U.S. Air Force sprayed it in 1965 with Agent Orange, which contained dioxin. The dark spots are surviving trees.*



*AP file photo U.S. Air Force planes spray the defoliant Agent Orange over dense vegetation in South Vietnam in 1966.*

As a young man, Ralph DeSanto Jr. took apart the valves in front of him, valves that had come from C-123 aircraft that had repeatedly sprayed Agent Orange over Vietnam.

Each time he popped a rubber seal, he said, a tiny plume of red dust rose up. Inside each valve was the crystallized chemical from the herbicide that was widely deployed to kill the vegetation that concealed the enemy in the jungles and forests during the Vietnam War.

DeSanto never once thought that he should be worried, that he may be putting himself in danger, that with every touch of those airplane parts or with any swipe of residue he might have been increasing his risk for diseases.

But pressure is increasing by the day for the Veterans Administration to heed its own commissioned report released in January by the Institute of Medicine that said flight and maintenance crews such as the one that DeSanto was part of were exposed to high levels of dioxin. Advocates say the VA should expand the list of those eligible to receive benefits and care for Agent Orange-related claims to include them.

Until now, because those crew members were Air Force reservists and not classified as active-duty personnel, the VA has denied them veteran status and has not allowed their claims to any Agent Orange-related illnesses.

U.S. Sen. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio, and six other senators last week sent a bipartisan letter to VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald, urging him to immediately use his executive authority to clear the way for the reservists' claims.

"The VA's position has been disappointing," the letter reads. "It is our desire to see that C-123 veterans who suffer today because of service-related exposure to Agent Orange receive the help they need."

Such a move could include as many as 2,100 former Air Force reservists from three bases, including perhaps as many as 1,200 who worked at Rickenbacker from 1972 to the mid-1980s, when the last C-123 that had been used to spray the chemical left the base.

DeSanto, 68, is among them. A former Air Force reservist and civilian aircraft electrician, he spent more than a decade as part of the maintenance crew that worked on the fleet of as many as 32 C-123 airplanes that returned to Rickenbacker Air National Guard Base (known as Lockbourne Air Force Base and Rickenbacker Air Force Base during that time frame) after their use in the war.

He said if he tries hard enough he can still smell the odor that came from the chemicals that permeated the planes and parts he touched every day.

"Nobody told us to wear gloves. Nobody told us to wear masks. Nobody told us anything at all. I was never boots on the ground in Vietnam, but I worked on those airplanes every damn day," said DeSanto, who is retired and lives in Whitehall. "And even after the government knew that even the metal skin on those planes was contaminated, nobody worried about us at all."

In their letter, the senators urged McDonald to order the VA to review all denied claims on the issue, and to add these veterans to a category under which it is presumed that their illnesses or conditions are service-connected.

For Vietnam combat veterans, the VA has a list of illnesses and diseases for which it is presumed that exposure to Agent Orange played a role. They include Type 2 diabetes, multiple myeloma, Hodgkin's disease, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, Parkinson's, and prostate and lung cancer.

“These men and women aren’t 20 anymore, and they are developing illnesses. The burden shouldn’t be on the veteran to prove exposure,” Brown said yesterday. “I think Secretary McDonald will do the right thing.”

The VA has said it is reviewing its position.

Even though he has diabetes and non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, DeSanto considers himself one of the lucky ones. He has insurance and has not yet filed a VA claim. But he expects to.

This is about him and his friends getting the medical care and benefits they deserve, yes, but it also is a matter of principle, he said.

Tom McVey is president of the Buckeye Wing Association, the nonprofit organization composed of the men and women who served with the 302nd Tactical Airlift Wing (known as the Buckeye Wing) at Rickenbacker.

As an Air Force reservist, McVey’s job was to load the plane’s cargo — people or equipment. He flew about 200 hours a year starting in 1974 (the cargo planes continued to be used for missions, such as spraying for mosquitoes in Panama). The association is trying to help collect claim information so its members have what they need when they ask the VA for help. The “Agent Orange Form” is prominent at the top of its website.

McVey, 63, said he is healthy and hasn’t filed any claims of his own. But that doesn’t mean he isn’t worried about the future. For now, he works closely with the national C-123 Veterans Association, led by a retired Air Force major general, and he stays in contact with those who worked on flight and maintenance crews at the other two bases — the 911th Air Base in Pittsburgh and Westover Air Reserve Station in Massachusetts — that received C-123s after the war.

This fight has been disheartening for many who served on the crews, McVey said, especially for those who have watched friends die of illnesses that many believed came from the exposure, or at the very least were worsened by it.

“As reservists, we wore the uniform, we went through the same training, we flew missions in those same planes even if it wasn’t to Vietnam,” McVey said. “How are we any different? The bottom line is that we’re not.”

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