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If Veterans don't help Veterans, who will?

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24 February 2009

TO: Major Carol L. McCrady
Director of Operations
505 Aircraft Sustainment Squadron
Hill Air Force Base, UT

SUBJECT: Decision Memorandum for Contaminated UC-123K Aircraft

FROM: Dr. Alvin L. Young
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Colonel, USAF, Retired
Senior Executive Level V, Retired

BACKGROUND: There are currently 18 UC-123K aircraft stored at the 309th Aerospace Maintenance and Regeneration Group (AMARG) at Davis Monthan Air Force Base, AR. At least 14 of these aircraft were assigned to Operation RANCH HAND, Vietnam 1962 – 1971. These aircraft were part of the UC-123 aircraft deployed to Vietnam for aerial application of Tactical Herbicides, including Agent Orange. Many of these aircraft were subsequently assigned to the Aerial Spray Flight after returning to CONUS and were used in pesticide programs worldwide. Others were used in transport operations for various Air Force Reserve Units.

ISSUE: Upon departure from Vietnam or after use by the Aerial Spray Flight, some decontamination actions were taken; however, sampling of the internal areas of some of these aircraft in 1996 confirmed the presence of residual 2,3,7,8-tetrachlorodibenzo-*p*-dioxin (TCDD, Dioxin), and chlorophenoxy acetic acid herbicide. Recent actions by the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) have established that no level (zero tolerance) of TCDD should be considered safe. Moreover, the recent worldwide publicity associated with Agent Orange means that any continuing contamination reported in these aircraft will likely draw rapid and intense media coverage. The March/April 2008 issue of Orion Magazine covered a story of the UC-123K aircraft at Davis Monthan AFB (Agent Orange: A Chapter from History that Just Won't End by Ben Quick). In describing why the aircraft were "fenced off", Quick stated because "it is the toxin!" He goes on in the article to describe the plight of the Vietnam veteran and the horror stories of birth defects in Vietnam. Although the Orion Magazine story received little media coverage, any new publicity on the aircraft may trigger a "storm" of articles that will eventually involve the health effects of previous aircrews and mechanics. The Department of Veteran Affairs (DVA) now provides "presumptive compensation" for exposure to Agent Orange and other Tactical Herbicides used in Vietnam. This "presumptive compensation" is no longer focused only on Vietnam veterans, but veterans who can claim exposure in other situations, e.g., testing of the herbicides or aircraft spray systems involving the tactical herbicides in CONUS and OCONUS locations. What this means is that a whole new class of veterans may claim that their exposure was due to the fact they were members of aircrews or

mechanics associated with the contaminated aircraft that returned from Vietnam and are now located at Davis Monthan AFB. The DVA provides presumptive compensation for such common conditions (in older men) of diabetes and prostate cancer, regardless of cause and effect.

POTENTIAL ACTIONS:

- It should be understood that there are no “win-win” scenarios. Whatever action is taken is going to draw publicity and will incur expenditure of funds.
- No action is unacceptable. Many of the aircraft have been in “*The Boneyard*” for 20 years and a resolution as to their fate is overdue.
- Contract for additional wipe and residue samples to be taken from the aircrafts to establish current levels of contamination. Although this action may result in the findings of “positive” levels of TCDD, any interpretation as to the risks will be very difficult and likely disputed. Nevertheless, this action may be required for any disposal action.
- Sale of functional aircraft, and or sale of parts, via bids to perspective buyers. Even if some of the aircraft can be considered “clean”, the extent of sampling will be questioned. If the aircraft had been used in Vietnam to spray Agent Orange, it is likely that even the engines will have some residual contamination. Perspective buyers are going to require some certification that the aircraft or aircraft parts are “safe” to aircrews and mechanics. What organization is prepared to provide such certification?
- The immediate destruction by incineration/smelting of all 18 of the aircraft at Davis Monthan AFB. The spray tanks and spray booms that are in two of the aircraft should be removed and set aside for separate disposal action. Since, any company contracted to destroy the aircraft will want to know if there are handling risks to their employees, or if their employees will need to take hazmat protection, discussions of the extent of sampling will be required. Any additional state or federal regulations that are required for the destruction of aircraft will need to be carefully followed.

RECOMMENDATION: The immediate destruction of the 18 aircraft is likely the best scenario, particularly if this action is selected on the basis that these are old aircraft and have been in storage for many years, and any significant remuneration to the government by their sale will be minimal. Any additional sampling should be in concert with requirements by the contractor, appropriate regulations or regulatory agencies. Because the destruction of these aircraft will likely involve some publicity, the media specialists at both Hill AFB and Davis Monthan AFB should be involved in discussion of the actions and should prepare carefully-worded statements for the media, if any inquiry should occur.

Al Young

24 February 2009