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ALBUQUERQUE JOURNAL

Not all Agent Orange victims were in Nam

By [Diane Dimond / Crime and Justice](#) 9-27-2013

For this Band of Brothers, the Vietnam War never ended. Forty years after the fighting stopped, they continue their struggle to be recognized as part of the unenviable group poisoned by the deadly herbicide Agent Orange.

These men who dedicated years to the U.S. military were stationed at Andersen Air Force Base in Guam. In the mid-60s, it was an important stop-over on the way to war zones in Southeast Asia. B-52 bombing missions targeting the Viet Cong – with names like Operation Arc Light and Operation Linebacker II – were launched from Andersen. Two years after the conflict, the base became a way-stop for more than 100,000 Vietnamese refugees seeking a new life in America.

DIANE DIMOND



Crime and Justice

Andersen AFB was a well-oiled machine, thanks to the dedicated airmen stationed there. Two of those men – Master Sgt. LeRoy Foster and Sgt. Ralph Stanton – found each other late in life and began to compare their multitude of similar health problems.

Foster served at Andersen from 1968 to 1978 as a fuels specialist assigned to the 43rd Supply Squadron. Part of his duties, he told me, was to get rid of the weeds and vegetation on the base. Foster says Agent Orange – which contains deadly TCDD dioxin – was among the herbicides he regularly mixed and loaded into his 750-gallon trailer-mounted sprayer.

Back then, no one knew how deadly it was.

Stanton worked at Andersen's fuels maintenance shop. He says he remembers the skinny little Foster always driving by, spraying herbicides that left him and his fellow soldiers with a stomachache or headache. Stanton also recalls using discarded 55-gallon Agent Orange barrels to burn off excess fuels.

He showed me photographs of an old herbicide drum he had fashioned into a BBQ for cook-outs.

Today, both these men – and approximately 270 others once based in Guam – have applied to the Veterans Administration for Agent Orange benefits. Many of their diseases are found on the VA’s official list of 15 ailments recognized as being tied to Agent Orange exposure.

Among them are Hodgkin’s disease, Parkinson’s disease, prostate or respiratory cancers, soft tissue sarcoma, diabetes mellitus (Type 2), chronic B-cell leukemia, ischemic heart disease and Chloracne, an oily, painful condition of cysts and pustules that erupt on cheeks, arms, chest and groin areas.

Although the VA’s rules say the benefit of the doubt should always go to the diagnosed veteran, fewer than a dozen Guam-based vets have been granted benefits. Why?

Here’s the rub: The Defense Department has long maintained – and told me again last week – that there are no surviving records to prove that Agent Orange was ever sent to Guam. No proof, no benefits – except in the case of about nine claimants, including Foster. He stands as a modern-day, human Catch-22.

The DOD denies he could have been exposed to Agent Orange on Guam, yet the VA has awarded him disability payments specifically tied to the deadly herbicide’s effects. Foster never set foot in Vietnam.

Foster told me he thinks his claim was approved because he’s been so vocal. He has sent mountains of compelling research and sad testimonials to Congress. He has testified before House and Senate Veterans Affairs committees in 2010 and again in 2012.

He has written directly to President Obama asking that personnel stationed on Guam be given the automatic benefits awarded to soldiers who had boots on the ground in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Foster told me he is motivated by the overwhelming guilt he feels for spraying the poison at Andersen for so many years.

As I researched this story, I discovered it is not just the veterans who believe Agent Orange was used on Guam.

In 2008, the legislature of Guam passed a resolution asking Congress to include the island on the list of those locations due benefits under the “Agent Orange Equity Act” saying, “The VA procedures have resulted in an unjustified withholding of benefits for military and civilian workers in staging areas for the Vietnam War such as Guam through which military personnel, munitions, equipment and supplies – including herbicides containing Agent Orange – were shipped.”

The resolution has been ignored.

A Public Health Report issued by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry in 2002 reported water and dioxin soil contamination at Andersen AFB was at an astronomical 19,000 ppm (parts per million). The EPA puts the safe level at below 1 part per billion.

Even today, Andersen remains on the EPA's Superfund contamination list. Currently, there is a population of about 8,000 living at Andersen, with an 5,000 Marines set to be transferred in soon.

I found another compelling outside opinion in financial advisory reports for potential investors in Monsanto and Dow Chemical, two manufacturers of Agent Orange.

The 2004 report stated, "Soldiers stationed on Guam who handled Agent Orange have become ill and symptoms of TCCD (dioxin) poisoning are apparent in the general population of the island as well."

Indeed, Guam does have a higher-than-normal cancer rate, especially rare leukemia-type cancers in children.

The saddest part of this story to me has to do with the birth defects reported in children born to these Andersen vets.

Foster says his daughter was a victim. Her child, Foster's granddaughter, was born with 12 toes and fingers and is feared to be autistic.

These birth defects mirror what has happened to generations of children born in Vietnam.

The latest Institute of Medicine report on Veterans and Agent Orange says more study is needed on the question of "paternally transmitted effects to offspring."

It has been 40 years and these vets wonder how much longer it will take. Many believe the VA is engaged in a program of, "Deny, deny until they die."

I find it hard to argue with that.

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<http://www.abqjournal.com/270614/opinion/not-all-agent-orange-victims-were-in-nam.html>