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The World's Window on Japan

The Japan Times

ONLINE

Evidence for Agent Orange on Okinawa

U.S. veterans speak about its harm to their health and their struggle for justice



Carefree: Joe Sipala rides his motorcycle past a barrel of Agent Orange (the third one from the left) while serving in the military on Okinawa.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF JOE SIPALA

THE ZEIT GIST

By JON MITCHELL

Special to The Japan Times

In the late 1960s, James Spencer was a United States Navy longshoreman on Okinawa's military docks. "During this time, we handled all kinds of cargo, including these barrels with orange stripes on them. When we unloaded them, they'd leak and the Agent Orange would get all over us. It was as if it were raining."

Between 1965 and 1967, Lamar Threet was a medic at the island's Camp Kue. "Agent Orange was stored at Kadena (Air Force Base) and it was used on Okinawa for vegetation control. I personally observed the spray crews around the hospital grounds, and was present when they brought a guy into the ER that had his clothes soaked in herbicide."

In 1970, Joe Sipala was stationed at the Awase Communication Site in central Okinawa. "The antennas were classified as 'mission critical,' so that meant no vegetation was allowed to grow around them. Every few weeks, a truck would come and refill our barrel of Agent Orange. It was my responsibility to mix it and spray the weeds around the perimeter fence."



Joe Sipala

In addition to these three veterans interviewed for The Japan Times, records from the United States Department of Veteran Affairs (V.A.) contain hundreds of similar accounts of Agent Orange on Okinawa during the late 1960s and early '70s, a time when the island was under U.S. rule and served as a forward base for the American war in Vietnam. The testimonies reveal that the dioxin-laden herbicide was not only stored in large quantities on Okinawa before being transported to the war zone, but also that it was routinely used to clear weeds on military installations and tested in the northern Yanbaru jungle.

This protracted, widespread use of Agent Orange on the island has left many of the service members who handled it seriously ill. Spencer, Threet and Sipala are today suffering from a litany of dioxin-related sicknesses including cancer, type 2 diabetes and ischemic heart disease. Moreover, Sipala's first child died in the womb — so misshapen that the doctor said he should be thankful the baby didn't see the light of day — and his two surviving children suffered from deformities consistent with Agent Orange-poisoning.

If these veterans' exposure had occurred in Vietnam, where the U.S. government assumes that all service members came into contact with harmful herbicides, they would be eligible for V.A. assistance with health care costs. However, because their exposure occurred on Okinawa, their claims for compensation have been repeatedly rejected due to Department of Defense denials that Agent Orange was ever on the island. The most recent assertion of this stance came in July 2004 when Gen. Richard Myers, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, declared that government "records contain no information linking use or storage of Agent Orange or other herbicides in Okinawa."

Denials such as this make it almost impossible for U.S. veterans to win compensation from the V.A. Sipala's case highlights the challenges that veterans face. His military orders prove he was on Okinawa at the time, and his medical history is consistent with dioxin exposure — a photograph of him riding his motorbike past to a barrel of Agent Orange even convinced his veteran's representative that he had a "slam-dunk case."

After 11 months of deliberations, though, the V.A. denied Sipala's claim, citing two grounds. First, it stated there was no proof of him having developed illnesses due to exposure. Sipala refutes the notion. "My medical records clearly show that I developed diabetes right after I returned from Okinawa. Why didn't the doctors state it was due to Agent Orange at the time? This was 1970 and no one really knew about the dangers of exposure."

Second, the V.A. stated, "We were unable to find any evidence of spraying, testing, storage (or) usage of Agent Orange in Okinawa, Japan, by the personnel in your unit."

This phrase is common among denials issued by the V.A., and it baffles Sipala. "I don't understand how they can keep rejecting claims due to lack of data. Do they expect us to believe that the 1998 ruling was the one time anyone ever used the herbicide on Okinawa?"

The V.A. decision to which Sipala is referring made world headlines when it was reported in 2007. Dated January 1998, the case concerned an unnamed veteran who claimed he was exposed to Agent Orange between 1961 and 1962 while spraying it on the sides of Okinawa's roads and transporting it by truck. As a result, the serviceman developed prostate cancer. Deciding in the veteran's favor, the V.A. concluded, "Credible evidence sustains a reasonable probability that the veteran was exposed to dioxins while serving in Okinawa."

The case raised hopes that this would finally pave the way for the U.S. military to admit using Agent Orange on the island. To date, however, the 1998 decision remains the sole successful claim by an Okinawa-stationed service member. In the ensuing years, the V.A. has rejected hundreds of similar claims on the basis that previous decisions do not set a precedent. In the words of one denial of a claim in 2010, "Each case will be decided on the individual facts."

Often, the evidence demanded by the V.A. includes written documents pertaining to the veteran's use of Agent Orange. Such papers, though, have proven impossible to track down. Threet recalls how the admission records for the serviceman who was doused by chemicals went missing soon after the incident. Sipala added: "There was no such thing as written orders. We were told what to do and we did it. This makes it very easy for the Department of Defense to forget whatever happened."

Exacerbating veterans' difficulties in obtaining information about Okinawa is the degree of secrecy under which the U.S. military operated at the time. Throughout the 1960s, for instance, Okinawan residents suspected that America was storing biochemical munitions on the island. But the authorities denied these claims — until a 1969 leak of nerve gas sickened 23 U.S. soldiers. Due to the international uproar that surrounded the accident, the military launched Operation Red Hat — an eight-month-long campaign to remove over 12,000 tons of poisonous munitions from Okinawa to Johnston Island in the middle of the Pacific Ocean.

Many veterans believe that the military also shipped the majority of its Agent Orange supplies from Okinawa during Operation Red Hat. Their speculation was seemingly vindicated by a V.A. ruling in 2009 that stated, "The records pertaining to Operation Red Hat show herbicide agents were stored and later disposed in Okinawa from August 1969 to March 1972."

Statements such as this, which directly contradict Myers' 2004 denial, continue to frustrate veterans seeking help. However, there is some cause for optimism. Until 2000, the U.S. government had asserted that military herbicides were solely used in Vietnam. But when evidence was uncovered of their usage along the Korean demilitarized zone between 1968 and 1971, veterans who had been stationed there were able to receive dioxin-related health care benefits. Likewise, following V.A. rulings in favor of veterans exposed to Agent Orange on Guam, President Barack Obama is under increasing pressure to add the Micronesian territory to its list of places military herbicides were deployed.

Asked about the probability of adding Okinawa to this growing list, Jeff Davis, senior legislative advocate for the Veterans Association for Sailors of the Vietnam War, suggests former service members adopt a tripartite approach. "First, (it is necessary to collect) many sworn statements that the individual personally put on a backpack sprayer, loaded a truck or helped load and unload herbicide barrels from cargo ships on the way to or from Vietnam. Next, a survey of veterans who served on Okinawa showing a much higher incidence of the official listed Agent Orange related diseases. Finally, scientific evidence in the form of drinking water and ground samples that show the presence of dioxin."

This final point opens up a possible path for veterans hoping to prove herbicide-related sicknesses, but it also raises a more frightening prospect: that dioxin exposure might extend to the American service people and their families currently stationed on the island. The areas most commonly mentioned in veterans' accounts — Kadena Air Force Base and the Northern Training Area — continue to be controlled by the U.S. military. Ironically, this might have protected the majority of Okinawan civilians from dioxin-exposure by confining the dangers to American-controlled areas. In 2009, scientists discovered dioxin hot spots in Vietnam where the U.S. had stored Agent Orange during the war. If comparisons are accurate, Okinawa's current bases will still be as heavily tainted with military herbicides.

Meanwhile, as the hundreds of veterans whose appeals have been denied by the V.A. continue to grow sicker and sicker by the day, Sipala believes that the government is neglecting its duties to those who once served their country. "Among vets, the unofficial motto of the V.A. is 'Deny, Deny . . . until they die.' The only way that we can force the government to recognize what they did is for more of us to come forward and tell our stories to the world."

Neither the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs or the Department of Defense had responded to The Japan Times' requests for statements by the time of publication.

Send comments on this issue and story ideas to community@japantimes.co.jp.

A timeline of Okinawa and Agent Orange

- 1952: Treaty of San Francisco gives U.S. control of Okinawa.
- 1962: U.S. Air Force conducts biological weapons test on Okinawan rice crops.
- 1963: U.S. ships approximately 12,000 tons of bio-chemical weapons to Okinawa.
- 1969: Nerve gas leak on Kadena Air Force Base hospitalizes 23 U.S. service members.
- 1971: Operation Red Hat removes bio-chemical stockpile to Johnston Island.
- 1972: Okinawa reverts to Japanese control.
- 1998: V.A. awards veteran claim for exposure to Agent Orange on Okinawa .
- 2004: U.S. government denies Agent Orange was ever on the island.
- 2009: V.A. ruling states Agent Orange was included in Operation Red Hat.

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