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U.S. Tested Agent Orange In Panama, Reports Say

By [Tod Robberson](#)
The Dallas Morning News

PANAMA CITY - The United States military conducted secret tests of Agent Orange and other toxic herbicides in Panama during the 1960s and '70s, potentially exposing many civilians and military personnel to lethal chemicals, according to documents and eyewitness accounts.

According to these accounts, hundreds of barrels of Agent Orange were shipped to Panama at the height of the Vietnam War, then sprayed on jungle areas to simulate the battlefield conditions of Southeast Asia.

The U.S. Southern Command, the U.S. military authority in Panama, said it was unaware of any tests involving Agent Orange there.

If Agent Orange was sprayed, said Raul Duany, a Southern Command spokesman, "it wouldn't pose a threat today because it should have dissipated by now."

The Panamanian government has tried to obtain proof that the United States used lethal chemical weapons and herbicides in Panama in an effort to obtain compensation for cleanup and possible damages. The U.S. military will complete a scheduled withdrawal from Panama on Dec. 31.

Agent Orange is a nickname given to a chemical herbicide sent in 55-gallon drums to Vietnam in the 1960s and '70s for use in defoliating forests to expose movements of Viet Cong guerrillas. The nickname came from the drums, which were painted black with an orange stripe.

The Veterans Affairs Department (VA) has acknowledged that the use of Agent Orange or similar toxic herbicides contributed to the deaths of at least three U.S. servicemen stationed in Panama in the 1960s and '70s, said Bill Russo, of the Vietnam Veterans of America. Their survivors are receiving service-related death benefits as a result.

One such case was that of Army Spec. Donald Jones, whose survivors say he was exposed to Agent Orange while serving in Panama from 1971 to 1974. He died in 1997 of non-Hodgkins lymphoma. The VA agreed that Jones had been exposed to the herbicide, said his widow, Pamela Jones of Pleasanton, Texas.

In testimony at a VA hearing on Jones' case in November 1997, Charles Bartlett, former operations officer for herbicide research at the Army biological research-and-development laboratories at Fort Detrick, Md., stated that Agent Orange was shipped to Panama in the late 1960s for tests.

"All of the material was originally shipped . . . to Fort Clayton in (the) Canal Zone. That was an area under U.S. control, and it was a safe area with vegetation similar to Vietnam, and so we wanted to test it there," he said, adding that a number of drums were left there after the tests.

Bartlett could not be reached for comment.

Panamanians as well as Americans may have been exposed to Agent Orange sprayed on at least one test site in Panama, according to documents and eyewitness accounts.

An American veteran who served in Panama from 1968 to 1971 said he witnessed the spraying at a test site close to the Panama Canal and near a popular beach, a recreation center, a sporting club and a lake from which Panama City's drinking water is drawn.

Army Col. David Hunt, the chief liaison officer coordinating the handover of all U.S. military bases to Panama, said that this year, the government provided Panama enough information on its tropical field tests to fill 23 CD-ROM disks.

"We looked through all available documentation on the Tropical Test Center of the U.S. Army from the 1960s through the mid-1990s," he said. "We found no information on the testing of Agent Orange in Panama."

Arnold Schechter of the University of Texas, a leading authority on herbicides that employ a cancer-causing chemical dioxin, such as Agent Orange, said the plant-killing component of Agent Orange would have dissipated quickly if applied in Panama's rainy, tropical climate.

But Agent Orange's highly toxic dioxin component, he said, "lasts in soil and sediment for decades."