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U.S. Vets Win Payouts Over Agent Orange Use on Okinawa□□元米兵、沖縄でのエイジェント・オレンジ使用の件で保証金を勝ち取る

Jon Mitchell

U.S. Vets Win Payouts Over Agent Orange Use on Okinawa

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A Japanese translation of the article is also available here.



Toxic legacy: Ronald Frazier — seen here on Camp Schwab in the early 1970s — is one of several former U.S. Marines who claim to have seen hundreds of barrels of Agent Orange on the camp in northeastern Okinawa during that period. COURTESY OF DAN CURRY

Introduction

The issue of U.S. military use of Agent Orange on Okinawa, suppressed for forty years is now coming to public attention in the face of strong Pentagon resistance. On February 14, 2012, *The Japan Times* published the following article concerning two more US veterans who have been awarded government compensation for illnesses caused by their exposure to Agent Orange on Okinawa in the 1960s and '70s. Having interviewed over 30 former service members during the past 12 months – all of whom have had their claims refused by a collusion of Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) incompetency and Pentagon deceit – the discovery of these new successful cases struck a rare, positive note. Although the VA repeatedly contends that previous awards are non-precedential, these claims suggest cracks in the government's wall of denial which hopefully other ailing veterans will be able to parlay into long-overdue justice for themselves, too.

However, at the same time, it is important to frame these veterans' struggles alongside the likely exposure of thousands of Okinawan civilians to these military defoliants. Increasingly, evidence has come to light suggesting that not only base employees, but also Okinawan farmers and families who consumed seafood near US installations may also have been contaminated by the dioxins within these chemicals. Given the US government and war contractors' criminal refusal to compensate the 3million+ people still suffering from Agent Orange poisoning in Vietnam, it seems unlikely that financial reparations will ever be extended to the Okinawan population.

Despite the long odds, there is a groundswell of support among Okinawa's politicians, public and media to uncover the extent to which

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Agent Orange was used there and the damage wrought- and recently, with national attention focused on the island leading up to May's 40th anniversary of reversion to Japanese control, even the normally Ryukyu-phobic Tokyo-based press has begun to report on this environmental and health tragedy unfurling 1500 kilometers to its south.

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The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has awarded two more former service members compensation for exposure to Agent Orange while serving on Okinawa during the 1960s and '70s. An army truck driver who came into contact with the dioxin-tainted defoliant as he unloaded barrels at Naha Port in 1966 is receiving benefits for lung cancer attributed to his exposure. The second veteran, a former marine stationed on the island in the early 1970s, developed Hodgkin's lymphoma and type 2 diabetes mellitus as a result of his work with contaminated military equipment shipped to Okinawa from the war in Vietnam, the VA ruled.



A sign welcomes visitors to Araha Beach - site of the alleged burial of hundreds of barrels of Agent Orange

Prior to the discovery of these two successful claims, it was widely believed that only one U.S. veteran had ever won compensation for exposure to Agent Orange on Okinawa. That 1998 VA ruling, in the case of a soldier poisoned by the defoliant in the island's northern jungles, caused consternation among former U.S. service members and Okinawa residents when it was reported in 2007. Despite Okinawa serving as a forward staging post for the Vietnam War, in which the U.S. utilized over 76 million liters of defoliants, the Pentagon has repeatedly denied that Agent Orange was ever transported via the island.

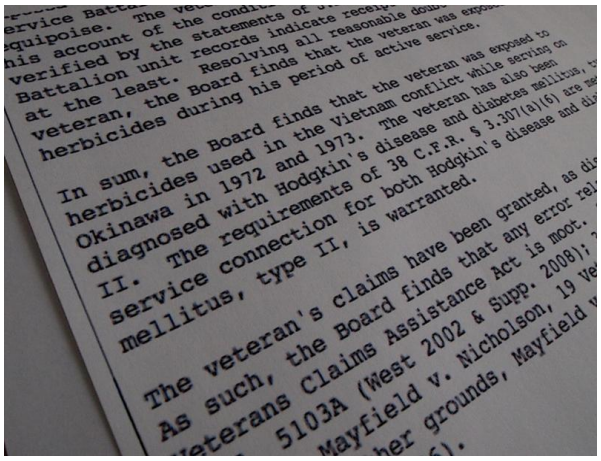
The recently revealed VA award regarding the army truck driver exposed at Naha Port was decided in July 2010. In his claim for compensation, the former soldier explained that he had served on the docks with the 44th Transportation Company between 1965 and 1966. According to his statement, "We provided logistical support for the Republic of Vietnam war effort. Our mission was to unload large transport ships. Such items as 55-gallon drums of herbicides, oils, solvents and other materials. We handled the drums with (sic) loading and unloading, and often these drums leaked which contaminated our hands and clothing."

The veteran's claim was supported by "buddy statements" from five fellow GIs corroborating his account of exposure to Agent Orange at Naha Port. In its judgment, the VA ruled that "Lung cancer associated with herbicide exposure was substantiated by the information and evidence in (the) VA's possession." It is not known whether the five veterans who supplied supporting statements are also receiving compensation for exposure to Agent Orange.

The case involving the former marine was decided by the VA in September 2008. According to its documents, the service member "worked in Okinawa, Japan on the Marine Corps base as a warehouseman in 1972 and 1973. He alleges that his unit, the 3rd Service Battalion of the 3rd Marine Division, received equipment from the combat arms battalions operating in Vietnam for repair and

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decontamination."



The 2008 ruling awarding compensation to a marine

The sick veteran's claim was supported by two other marines who stated that it was common practice in the final stages of the Vietnam War to ship goods contaminated with Agent Orange to Okinawa for cleaning. While the VA documents do not mention the specific installation where the exposure occurred, at the time the headquarters of the 3rd Marine Division was at Camp Courtney in Uruma City.

In its ruling, the VA deemed that "the veteran was exposed to herbicides used in the Vietnam conflict while serving on Okinawa in 1972 and 1973" and granted him benefits for Hodgkin's lymphoma and type 2 diabetes mellitus.

In addition to these two successful awards, VA records reveal that between 1996 and 2010 a further 132 veterans claimed that they had been exposed to Agent Orange while serving on Okinawa during the Vietnam War era. Their accounts suggest that the defoliant was widely stored and used on the island — one alleges that surplus defoliants were dumped on Camp Zukeran (currently Camp Foster) in 1962, while another claims that hundreds of barrels of Agent Orange were stored at Kadena Air Base in the early 1970s.

The 132 veterans are all suffering from one or more of the "presumptive conditions" the U.S. government recognizes as being related to Agent Orange exposure. All U.S. service members who set foot in Vietnam from 1962 to 1975 — as well as those who served along the Korean DMZ or in Thailand at certain times — are eligible for compensation for these 14 illnesses. But since the Pentagon insists it has no records pertaining to the presence of these defoliants on Okinawa, the vast majority of the 132 claims were rejected. In roughly 10 percent of the cases, however, the VA postponed its decision until it received further information from the Department of Defense or VA regional offices.

Michelle Gatz, a Minnesota-based Veterans' Service Officer and researcher on Agent Orange on Okinawa, worries that these 132 veterans may be just the tip of the iceberg. "Many other veterans are intimidated by the paperwork involved in filing a claim. Others may have died while waiting for their claims to be decided. The true number of veterans sick due to their exposure to Agent Orange on Okinawa is likely much higher than these 132."

Meanwhile, veterans hoping that the two successful cases will open the floodgates to extensive compensation for those sickened by dioxins on Okinawa are likely to be disappointed. According to VA policy, its rulings are non-precedential, meaning that claims are decided on their own merits and not determined by prior cases.

Joe Sipala, leader of the "Agent Orange Okinawa" grassroots campaign, believes that the current economic climate is also guiding the VA's decisions. "The U.S. is trillions of dollars in debt so there will never be full compensation like there is for Vietnam veterans. But, as with those who served along the Korean DMZ and Thailand, I hope the VA might start to compensate more Okinawa veterans who handled these defoliants on

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specific bases at certain times while serving on the island."

Public wants dioxin tests in "hotspots"

Last April, *The Japan Times* published three U.S. veterans' accounts of their exposure to Agent Orange on Okinawa. Since then, a further 30 former service members have spoken out about their experiences of transporting, storing, spraying and burying the defoliant at over a dozen bases on the island. These claims have alarmed residents of Okinawa, who are well aware of Agent Orange's toxic legacy in South Vietnam, where the Red Cross estimates approximately 3 million people have been sickened and highly poisonous dioxin hotspots remain on former U.S. military installations.

On Okinawa, concerns have focused on three locations: Higashi Village in the Yambaru jungle, Camp Schwab in Nago City and Chatan Town.

Higashi Village. According to a former U.S. military official interviewed by the Okinawa Times last year, defoliants were tested in the jungle near Higashi Village between 1960 and 1962. In 1963, the Pentagon apparently returned a patch of that land to civilian control, but even today it lies barren.



Defoliated area in Higashi Village Jon Mitchell

Local residents describe how saplings wither and die when their roots reach a depth of approximately 50 cm, suggesting that a substratum of the soil is heavily contaminated. Exacerbating their fears are the purported deaths from cancer of several civilians who used to be employed on the installation.

In a recent interview, Higashi Village resident Ashimine Gentatsu said, "I want the government to conduct tests in this area but I don't trust them to reveal the true results. So I'd like to see independent testing here."

Camp Schwab. Several U.S. veterans stationed on the base in the early 1970s have claimed that large quantities of Agent Orange were stored at Schwab and trucked to the northern jungles for war games training or sprayed within the base to kill weeds. Residents living near Camp Schwab at the time claim to have witnessed the effects of this defoliant usage — stocks of seaweed were wiped out and clams emitted a black, oily substance. Furthermore, they worry that a spate of deaths among local people who had consumed the shellfish was caused by dioxin poisoning.

On Nov. 24, Nago citizens' requests for dioxin tests to be conducted on Camp Schwab were rejected by the Okinawa Defense Bureau, which called the U.S. veterans' testimonies implausible. As a result, Nago City announced in December that it would conduct its own survey of local residents to learn more about defoliant usage in the area.

Chatan Town. In August, a former soldier's claim that he witnessed the burial in 1969 of dozens of barrels of Agent Orange on Hamby Airfield (current-day Chatan Town) created alarm in what is now a popular tourist area. His account was lent weight by the discovery of a large number of barrels near the alleged burial site in 2002. The barrels, leaking a tar-like

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substance and bearing American markings, were incinerated by the local government before they could be tested for dioxins.

Responding to public concern, Chatan Town council announced in December that it would allocate funds to conduct dioxin sampling in the area. The tests, the first to be approved by a municipal government, are scheduled for late February.

Jon Mitchell *is a Welsh-born writer based in Yokohama and represented by Curtis Brown Ltd., New York. He has written widely on Okinawan social issues for the Japanese and American press - a selection of which can be found here. He teaches at Tokyo Institute of Technology. He is an Asia-Pacific Journal associate.*

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