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Agent Orange on Okinawa: Buried Evidence?□□沖縄のオレンジ剤―証拠埋却□• Japanese translation is available

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A former US soldier has identified a busy neighborhood in the Okinawa town of Chatan as the burial site of dozens of barrels of the toxic defoliant Agent Orange. The alleged burial took place in 1969 when the area was part of the US military's Hamby Air Field. Since its return to civilian use in 1981, it has been redeveloped into a sightseeing district with restaurants, hotels, apartment blocks and a popular beach.



The US veteran identifies the location of the buried barrels of Agent Orange.

Recently there have been several other claims concerning the burial of Agent Orange within US military bases on Okinawa – including on MCAS Futenma, Kadena Air Base and Camp Schwab.[1] To date the Japanese and US governments have refused to conduct environmental inspections within these installations. But this is the first time an alleged burial site has been identified on civilian land - paving the way for independent dioxin tests to be conducted.

According to the veteran, in 1969, an American transport ship[2] carrying military supplies from Okinawa to South Vietnam became stuck on a reef near Naha.

> "[The army] brought in men from all over the island to Naha Port. We spent two or three days offloading the boat on the rocks. There were a lot of broken containers full of drums of Agent Orange. The 55-gallon barrels had orange stripes around them. Some of them were split open and we all got poured on."

After he had helped remove the damaged barrels, the veteran claims that he then witnessed the Army bury them in a large pit. "They dug a long trench. It must have been over 150 foot long. They had pairs of cranes and they lifted up the containers. Then they shook out all of the barrels into the trench. After that, they covered them over with earth."[3]

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The area identified by the former US soldier is now a mixed residential/business neighborhood in Chatan Town, Okinawa.

The veteran explained that such disposal of damaged or unwanted supplies was commonplace by the military on Okinawa. “The Army was just doing what it always did,” alleges the veteran. “They buried those barrels because it cost less than shipping them all back to the States. It was cheaper that way.”

According to other veterans testifying on the presence of military defoliants on Okinawa, Naha Port was one of the island’s main storage areas for Agent Orange before it was shipped to Southeast Asia. One former service member, for example, states “The entire Vietnam War flowed through the Naha Naval Port. Ammunition, rifles, machine guns, Claymore’s, C-rations, body bags, coffins and Agent Orange. I remember those barrels with big orange stripes going around them as clear as yesterday.”

When the former soldier first spoke out about the Chatan burial in August 2011, his account was widely reported in the media and caused alarm among local residents.[4] However at the time, he was unable to accurately identify the exact location of the trench on current maps due to the changes that had occurred to the landscape over the past 42 years.

Now with the help of a 1970 map of Hamby Air Field supplied by a concerned Okinawa resident at a November 4th press conference on Agent Orange, the veteran has pinpointed where the barrels are believed to be buried.

"As soon as I saw the long pier on that map, I knew exactly where they buried the Agent Orange. I used to go fishing from the pier all the time. Seeing it made it simple for me to find the site. There is no doubt in my mind," said the veteran.



Hamby Air Field at the time the barrels were allegedly buried (Photo courtesy of Robert Avery & Kinue Oshiro-Avery, RAFilms Okinawa, and Donn Cuson, Veteran Kadena Air Base)

The revelation will increase pressure on Tokyo and Washington to conduct a full investigation into the usage of these defoliants on Okinawa. The Mayor of Chatan already asked for reassurances on the burial of defoliants in his

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town when he met Saito Tsuyoshi, the deputy Chief Cabinet Secretary, on October 22.[5] On October 28, Okinawa Gov. Nakaima Hirokazu requested that US Ambassador John V. Roos help him to investigate allegations over these poisonous chemicals.[6]

Meanwhile, the Pentagon still refuses to admit that Agent Orange was ever present on Okinawa - and apparently underestimates the anger which its denials are causing. In October, for example, Deputy Director of Public Affairs at United States Forces Japan, Major Neal Fisher, wrote that he was "a little surprised to see" the media was still pursuing the issue. He then went on to offer the formulaic denial that the "Department of Defense has searched and found no record of Herbicide Orange being sent to Okinawa, or that the aircraft or ships transporting Herbicide Orange to South Vietnam stopped at Okinawa on their way."

The veteran, who alleges the defoliants were buried in Chatan, believes that the US government's continued denials are endangering the health of Okinawan citizens.

> "Agent Orange has wrecked my body and I worry about residents living in the area (of the burial). They have to move away. They'd better get their babies checked out, too. Those chemicals must be poisoning the land where they live. It needs to be tested."

A Chatan official who spoke on condition of anonymity said it is too early to decide whether dioxin tests are needed. But he made it clear where responsibility for such tests lie.

"If tests are to be conducted, it is the Japanese government's duty to do so. When it comes to military-related contamination, it must be the national government that does any tests and cleanups," the official said.

Until now, Tokyo has refused to cooperate with dioxin tests on US installations that allegedly stored defoliants on Okinawa. On November 24, the Foreign Ministry's Okinawa branch rejected demands from members of the Nago Municipal Assembly for such tests at Camp Schwab - the US Marine Corps facility at Henoko slated as the site for a relocated Futenma Air Station.[7]

When pushed to explain its reasons for refusal, Deputy Director Iyori Makoto stated that the Pentagon had found US veterans' testimonies of seeing Agent Orange usage on the base implausible. Two of the doubts cited by Iyori were the fact that Agent Orange barrels were always stored separately from other chemicals and they were marked with signs labeling them as defoliants.

Dr Wayne Dwernychuk, a dioxin expert who spent 15 years researching the impact of Agent Orange in Vietnam, dismisses Iyori's statement as "ludicrous".

"I don't know how the official can say this. If space was limited, of course Agent Orange was stored next to other chemicals. As for the claims that all barrels were marked, some of them had only very minimal markings," Dwernychuk said.

Equally critical of Iyori's statement was Paul Sutton, who served as Chairperson of the Vietnam Veterans of America Agent Orange/Dioxin Committee from 2001 to 2004. "Generally, herbicides were stored separately. But when space was an issue, it was stored with other, non-herbicide material. There was evidence of this on Guam and in a number of places in Vietnam."[8]

The third reason given by Iyori for finding the 20+ veterans' accounts implausible was that none of them was actually in charge of issuing orders to use Agent Orange. Joe Sipala, the Air Force veteran leading the campaign calling on the Pentagon to come clean about its usage of

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Agent Orange on Okinawa, reacted angrily to Iyori's statement.

> "What 'Orders' is the Japan government referring to? We were never given written orders when we were told to spray those chemicals around our bases. It's like saying we had to have written orders to eat, shower and sleep. Commanders were allowed to use those herbicides at their own discretion."

These latest allegations of the burial of Agent Orange on Okinawa are not the first time that Washington has been suspected of disposing toxic chemicals in the Chatan area. In 2002, 215 barrels of an unidentified substance were unearthed on formerly US-owned land approximately 750 meters from where the former soldier is now alleging Agent Orange was buried.[9]



In 2002, over 200 barrels of unidentified US military waste were discovered in Chatan near the alleged Agent Orange burial site.

According to Masami Kawamura, director of the nongovernmental Citizens' Network for Biological Diversity in Okinawa, the handling of that investigation was slipshod.

> "Okinawa Prefecture conducted tests on only one of the barrels. Then they incinerated them all — along with 500 tons of contaminated soil — at an industrial waste processing facility. They didn't even test them for dioxins beforehand."

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With these latest allegations, Kawamura worries that the 215 barrels might also have contained defoliants. Furthermore, she is concerned about the authorities' unwillingness to investigate the issue.

> "We had an official meeting with MOFA (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) Naha office and Okinawa Prefectural government. MOFA does not seem to want to address this issue. We think Okinawa prefecture should take action. They are responsible for the wellbeing of the people of Okinawa and they can do so since the alleged burial location is outside US military bases. But they remain reluctant."[10]

"They stated that they cannot conduct tests or surveys without credible evidence because they do not want to cause Okinawan people fear or anxiety."[11]

In mid-December, the NGO plans to submit a petition for independent dioxin tests to the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly.

According to Dwernychuk, these environmental tests are the only surefire way to put public fears to rest. "If Agent Orange was in the barrels that were buried there over 40 years ago, I am 100 percent confident that soil in the immediate area remains contaminated with dioxin," he said.

Dwernychuk stresses the need for qualified-experts to conduct the tests for dioxin - but he also says that the actual method of acquiring the soil sample need not be so sophisticated. "Simply use a backhoe and dig down to the depth of the barrels and take samples. This would be more disruptive to the actual profiles in the soil, but could provide a clear "yes" or "no" answer regarding contamination."

While Dwernychuk believes that the buried defoliants pose a minimal risk to current residents' health, he added, "My only caveat is that if there are water wells in the area that are fed by aquifers in close proximity to the burial site, leaching of Agent Orange or dioxin may have occurred."

Until now, the former soldier at the center of these allegations has been unwilling to go public with his identity. However, he promises that will soon change.

> "I've scheduled a meeting with my congressman to explain what I saw happen in Hamby. The US government has been lying for too long. It's time to get some truth for the veterans and the people of Okinawa."

This is an expanded version of an article which first appeared in The Japan Times, November 30, 2011.[12]

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.

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Notes

[1] For an account of these burials, see: Jon Mitchell, "Military defoliants on Okinawa: Agent Orange", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, September 12, 2011.

[2] John Olin, a Florida-based researcher, believes that the ship was the USNS LST-600 which ran aground on Kanno Se Reef near Naha in January, 1969. At the moment, attempts are underway to secure official documents under the Freedom of Information Act about the LST-600 and other vessels involved in the salvage operation.

[3] For a full account of the burial see this link.

[4] The story made the front pages of both the Ryukyu Shimpo - and the Okinawa Times.

[5] The meeting was reported by the Ryukyu Shimpo here.

[6] The Okinawa Times reported the meeting here.

[7] An account of the meeting is available in Japanese here.

[8] In the same way as Okinawa, Guam was an important US military staging post for the war in Vietnam and many former service members claim they came into contact with Agent Orange on the island. Since 2005, the VA has awarded compensation to seven veterans for defoliant exposure that occurred on Guam, but in spite of these payouts, the Pentagon still refuses to acknowledge that the chemicals were present on the island. For more information, visit Ralph Stanton's comprehensive website about Agent Orange on Guam here.

[9] For an account of the unearthing of these barrels, see for example this link.

[10] A news report on Citizens' Network for Biological Diversity in Okinawa's request for an investigation into defoliant usage on the island can be viewed here.

[11] Adding to residents' worries that the authorities are reluctant to investigate the burial of toxic chemicals in the thriving business district was the experience of documentary filmmaker, Robert Avery.

"Following the Press Conference of November 4th, I was approached by three men from the Okinawa Self Defense Ministry. They wanted to know how I was so sure about the location of Hamby Air Field. I responded that I was in the Army, and was at Hamby many times, shot 8mm film of the field and knew it fairly well. They asked how I could be sure as the area had changed so much. I said that a map from 1971 which is included on our DVD clearly shows the area, as framed on the South and North by water inlets that still exist today, with Araha Beach to the West and Highway 58 to the East."

"I felt their questions were an interrogation rather than information seeking. They were curt in their approach and their demeanor was to the point. I gave them a copy of the DVD on the issue of Agent Orange on Okinawa. I did not feel they were interested in finding Hamby

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for ethical reasons but for an unknown agenda. I base this on my career as a policeman."

Information about Avery's documentary, Agent Orange on Okinawa, is available here.

[12] The original article can be read here.

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