

Hynes/My Turn: Agent Orange's deadly legacy

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Vietnam veterans fought an uphill battle to win "presumed exposure" to Agent Orange and not until 1991 did they gain disability, medical and survivor benefits that the Veterans Administration had denied them for 20 years.

Recently, another set of veterans — the Air Force pilots and crew who flew Agent Orange-contaminated cargo planes on domestic missions after the war — have been systematically denied disability claims by the same agency.

Westover Air Reserve Base in Massachusetts is one of three bases where the C-123 planes were flown from 1972-1982. Prominent health scientists within government and universities support the plausibility of their claims; the Air Force does not, although it ultimately cordoned off and disposed of the planes as hazardous waste.

Agent Orange, an herbicide mixture contaminated with a potent dioxin compound, is arguably the most hazardous and long-lasting of weapons used in the Vietnam War. Its history is riddled with government deceit, a tale worth re-telling on behalf of the latest and yet-to-be-compensated victims of Agent Orange.

The U.S. government adamantly denied that it employed chemical or biological warfare in spraying Agent Orange and other herbicidal defoliants on Vietnamese forests, mangroves, food crops and populated villages. U.S. court rulings in class action suits brought separately by American and Vietnamese Agent Orange victims have upheld the government position. Yet, when the war began, the U.S. military's definition of biological warfare included crop destruction by chemical plant growth regulators (such as Agent Orange) for the purpose of killing or injuring humans, animals or plants.

Agent Orange was flown to U.S. Air Force bases in Vietnam in 55-gallon drums, where they were stored for filling aerial spray containers for C-123 cargo planes and helicopters and for backpack applicators used to kill vegetation on the base perimeters. The orange-banded drums carried no safety precautions. Nor were health advisories given to military personnel who handled Agent Orange, as was required by federal law. When the Army's environmental agency recommended that safety information be provided to GIs and Air Force pilots handling the herbicides — that is, what to do if they accidentally inhaled or swallowed it or spilled it on their skin — it was rejected by the military command.

Uninformed about hazards, GIs routinely cleaned empty drums by rinsing them and disposing the rinsate water, contaminated with Agent Orange residue, on base. GIs used empty barrels to store gasoline, for shower stalls and barbecues, and as cisterns for collecting water and food storage bins.

Two years after the Agent Orange program was launched in 1961, the National Cancer Institute (NCI) contracted with Bionetics Research Laboratories to screen 130 pesticides and industrial chemicals, among them the two herbicides combined in Agent Orange, 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T (D and T), for their potential to cause cancer, mutations and birth defects. By late 1966, Bionetics presented their preliminary findings to NCI, among them that T caused extreme rates of birth defects in lab animals, higher than any other compound tested. Their studies also showed that D, while less potent than T, caused birth defects. The government erected a firewall around these findings.

The finalized study was suppressed until 1969. Agent Orange manufacturers, most notably Dow Chemical, successfully pressured the Food and Drug Administration not to disclose the research results. In turn, the federal government successfully pressured Bionetics to withdraw a planned presentation on the study findings from a Society of Toxicology meeting in March 1969.

Dr. James R. Clary, a former senior scientist at the U.S. Air Force Chemical Weapons Branch who had designed the tanks for spraying Agent Orange in Vietnam, wrote in response to a 1988 congressional investigation into Agent Orange:

"When we initiated the herbicide program in the 1960s, we were aware of the potential for damage due to dioxin contamination in the herbicide. We were even aware that the military formulation had a higher dioxin concentration than the civilian version due to the lower cost and speed of manufacture. However, because the material was to be used on the enemy, none of us were overly concerned. We never considered a scenario in which our own personnel would become contaminated with the herbicide."

Clary's conscience-stricken admission was anomalous, given the selective amnesia among other government scientists who testified that they had no memory and no records of human toxicity from Agent Orange.

The American war in Vietnam, riddled with deceit, lives on in the bodies of Vietnam veterans and their children; in the estimated 3 million uncompensated Vietnamese poisoned by Agent Orange, including third generation victims; and in the veterans who flew aboard post-war contaminated C-123 planes without any forewarnings from the Air Force.

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