



# The Asia-Pacific Journal: Japan Focus

in-depth critical analysis of the forces shaping the Asia-Pacific...and the world.

## US Military Defoliants on Okinawa: Agent Orange Japanese translation is [available](#)

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### Introduction

On August 19<sup>th</sup>, 2011, Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs released a statement in response to recent media coverage about the US military's use and storage of defoliants (including Agent Orange) on Okinawa during the Vietnam War. MOFA announced that, although it had requested the US Department of Defense to investigate these allegations, Washington had replied that it was unable to find any evidence from the period in question. As a result, Tokyo asked the US government to re-check its records in more detail.<sup>1</sup> This was the first time that the Japanese government had asked the US about military defoliants since 2007 - and its refusal to accept the Pentagon's stock denial was rare. The current announcement arose after two weeks of unprecedented press reports which alleged that these chemicals had been widely used on Okinawa during the 1960s and '70s.

With fresh revelations coming to light on a regular basis, this is still a rapidly developing issue. However in this paper, I will attempt to unravel the situation as it currently stands. Starting with a brief overview of the role of Okinawa during the Vietnam War and the military's use of defoliants during the conflict, I will then explore the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) rulings of 1998 and 2009 that appeared to offer official recognition of the presence of these defoliants on the island. Following this, I will summarize US veterans' accounts of their experiences handling these defoliants on Okinawa - including their transportation, storage, spraying and burial. In conclusion, I will assess the obstacles that these veterans and Okinawan residents face in winning an admission from the Pentagon - plus possible signs of hope that, while difficult, such an acknowledgement *is* achievable.

### Okinawa and the Vietnam war

After its capture by the US military in June 1945, Okinawa was quickly transformed into a forward base for Operation Olympic, the anticipated Allied invasion of the Japanese mainland. The atomic bombings and Soviet declaration of war on Japan rendered that assault redundant - and as the victors focused their attention on the Tokyo-centered occupation, Okinawa's significance plummeted. By November 1949, Time Magazine had dubbed it a "forgotten island", claiming that, "For the past four years, poor, typhoon-swept Okinawa has dangled at what bitter Army men call 'the logistical end of the line.'"<sup>2</sup>

This attitude of neglect was reversed by Mao Zedong's consolidation of Communist rule in China and the outbreak of war on the Korean peninsula in June 1950. The US government - with the encouragement of Emperor Hirohito - now perceived Okinawa's importance as a strategic buffer against communism in the region. In 1952, the Treaty of San Francisco effectively ended the Allied occupation of mainland Japan, but its Article 3 spelled out the future of Okinawa:

"The United States will have the right to exercise all and any powers of administration, legislation and jurisdiction over the territory and inhabitants of these islands, including their territorial waters."<sup>3</sup>

Soon after the treaty was signed, the US military - under the auspices of Ordinance 109 - embarked upon an aggressive campaign of base building across the island, extending earlier base construction. Lending Okinawa the nickname, "The Keystone of the Pacific", these installations were used throughout the Korean War, but it was during the conflict in Vietnam that they truly came into their own.

In the 1960s, Okinawa became the hub of the entire war in South East Asia. American ships offloaded their cargoes at Okinawa's ports where, nearby, bases stockpiled materiel - everything from beer and toilet paper to more hazardous items such as mustard and nerve gas (discussed below in Operation Red Hat - the 2009 Fort Harrison VA ruling). From Kadena Air Base, B-52s departed on daily bombing runs to Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia - while in Okinawa's northern Yambaru jungles, mock-Viet Cong villages were constructed and peopled with daily-hired locals for that added dose of reality in war games.

In the span of a little over 15 years, Okinawa had gone from being the "logistical end of the line", to the linchpin of US strategy in the region - leading Admiral U.S. Grant Sharp, Commander of U.S. Pacific forces, to state in 1965, "Without Okinawa we cannot carry on the Vietnam war."<sup>4</sup> Despite this, however, there was one essential component of its war machine that the Pentagon still denies ever passed through Okinawa: military defoliants.

### Military defoliants - a brief overview

During the 1930s and '40s, the US military pumped millions of dollars into researching a range of defoliants to deprive enemy soldiers and civilians of jungle cover and crops. The findings proved too late to use in World War Two, but from the late 1940s and throughout the 1950s, the Department of Defense continued wide-scale tests of these chemicals in forests and farms across the continental United States and Puerto Rico.<sup>5</sup>

Depending on the balance of chemicals, the military labeled the barrels containing these defoliants with a different colored stripe - giving rise to the names by which they were commonly known - Agents Pink, Green, Purple, White, Blue and Orange. In 1962, the Pentagon officially initiated Operation Ranch Hand - the decade-long spraying of South Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. Between 1962 and 1971, approximately 76 million liters of defoliants were used - of which, roughly 4 million liters were spread by "hand sprayers, spray trucks (Buffalo turbines), helicopters and boats."<sup>6</sup> To those of us whose main image of Agent Orange has been shaped by iconic TV footage of C-123 airplanes trailing clouds of mist, this smaller-scale spraying may come as a surprise.

But as Vietnam War journalist, Philip Jones Griffiths, describes, "the use of herbicides was not confined to the jungles. It was widely used to suppress vegetation around the perimeters of military bases and, in many instances, the interiors of those bases."<sup>7</sup> Fred A. Wilcox makes a similar point when he writes, "base perimeters were routinely sprayed."<sup>8</sup>

This localized spraying was conducted by GIs without the protection of even basic safety equipment since it was not until the late 1970s that the general public became aware of the toxicity of the dioxin contained in these defoliants. Throughout the 1960s, the manufacturers, Dow and Monsanto, repeatedly suppressed memos related to the dangers of their products.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore in 1969, the US military, despite suspecting the risks as early as 1967, continued to assure its personnel that "(Agent) ORANGE is relatively nontoxic to man or animals. No injuries have been reported to personnel exposed to aircraft spray."<sup>10</sup>

By 1971, the barrage of scientific evidence and press reports on the health dangers of these defoliants finally forced the Pentagon to call an end to Operation Ranch Hand. But the remaining defoliant stocks continued to be used to suppress vegetation for many more years. Scientists estimate the total volume of dioxin contained in the defoliants manufactured between 1961 and 1971 to be over 360 kilograms<sup>11</sup> - an apocalyptic amount given the fact that its lethal dose is measured in parts per trillion. In Vietnam alone, the Red Cross estimates that "3 million Vietnamese have been affected by Agent Orange, including 150,000



**Spraying Agent Orange in Vietnam**

children born with birth defects."<sup>12</sup>

Although, the manufacturers of these defoliants have never paid any compensation to the people of Vietnam, in 1984, they settled out of court with exposed US veterans for \$180 million.<sup>13</sup> The US government currently assumes that any American service member who was stationed in Vietnam between 1962 and 1975 was exposed to military defoliants and is eligible for assistance with dioxin-related diseases - including prostate cancer, Hodgkin's disease and multiple myeloma. The Veterans Affairs Department (VA) maintains an official list of areas where the Pentagon acknowledges its defoliants were used - including Canada, Thailand, the Korean DMZ, Laos, Puerto Rico and over a dozen US states.<sup>14</sup>

#### **Military Defoliants on Okinawa - the 1998 San Diego VA Ruling**

For a fleeting moment in July 2007, it seemed that the Department of Defense was on the verge of adding Okinawa to this list of locations after the Kyodo news agency ran an article titled: "Agent Orange was likely used in Okinawa: U.S. vet board".<sup>15</sup> Journalists had uncovered a 1998 VA ruling from the San Diego Regional Office that awarded compensation to a US veteran who claimed that his prostate cancer was the result of his service on Okinawa from 1961 to 1962.<sup>16</sup>

The former service member, a driver for the US Marine Corps, "reported that he had been exposed to Agent Orange while in the process of transport, as well as when it was used in Northern Okinawa for War Games training." The veteran stated that military defoliants were used "particularly near base camp perimeters. Spraying from both truck and back pack were utilized along roadways too."

In its ruling on the case, the VA stated that: "the veteran was indeed where he said he was, at a time when military build-up from a support standpoint was considerable, doing a job which was entirely consistent with the mixing and other transport of herbicides, and at a time when these were both used and warnings not necessarily given." It concluded, "Service connection for prostate cancer due to Agent Orange exposure is granted."

The 1998 ruling broke new ground in three significant ways. For the first time a US government department had awarded compensation to a veteran solely attributable to exposure to defoliants on Okinawa. Due to Okinawa's role as a hub for GIs transiting to and from Vietnam, the majority of veterans served in both locations - thus muddying the issue of where their exposure had occurred. But in the 1998 ruling, the veteran had never been to Vietnam - thus his dioxin-connected illness could be pinned to Okinawa.

The second significant point is that the ruling appeared to contradict the Pentagon's official line on the subject. In 2004, General Richard Myers, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, had issued this response to an enquiry from the House of Representatives Committee on Veterans' Affairs: "records contain no information linking use or storage of Agent Orange or other herbicides in Okinawa." He further stated, there was "no record of any spills, accidental or otherwise, of Agent Orange. Therefore, there are no recorded occupational exposures of service members in Okinawa to Agent Orange or similar herbicides."<sup>17</sup> After the Kyodo article was published, the Department of Defense reiterated this stance.

Thirdly, the 1998 award opened the floodgates for hundreds of other veterans who long suspected that they, too, had been exposed to these defoliants on Okinawa. Had this ruling been made in a civil courtroom, then it might have set a legal precedent upon which others could have based their own claims. However, the VA does not work that way - a point well illustrated by this 2010 denial of a veteran attempting to support his own application with the 1998 ruling:

"Board decisions are not precedential. 38 C.F.R. § 20.1303. Thus, any reasoning, conclusions, or other findings made in any other Board decision, ... has absolutely no relevance to this adjudication and the Veteran's claim will be decided on the basis of the individual facts of the case."<sup>18</sup>

Due to this protocol, in the thirteen years since the 1998 award was made, no other veterans have been awarded compensation for their exposure to military defoliants on Okinawa.

#### **Operation Red Hat - the 2009 Fort Harrison VA ruling**

Exacerbating the frustrations of many former service members was a further comment made by the VA Regional Office in Fort Harrison, Montana. In November 2009, it ruled on the claim of a supply clerk who alleged he had been exposed to defoliants while stationed on Okinawa between 1962 and 1964. Although the VA rejected the veteran's claim, it unwittingly appeared to offer up evidence that directly contradicted the Pentagon's stance on the issue.

"The records pertaining to Operation Red Hat show *herbicide agents were stored and then later disposed in Okinawa from August 1969 to March 1972.*"<sup>19</sup> (my italics)

This assertion is entirely consistent with public records regarding the 1971 Operation Red Hat. During the two-phase project, the Army removed its stockpiles of over 12,000 tons of bio-chemical weapons (including nerve and mustard gas) from Okinawa to Johnston Island in the south Pacific.<sup>20</sup> It has long been suspected that some military defoliants were included among these shipments - especially since in the same year, the US moved over three-and-a-half million liters of military defoliants from *South Vietnam* to Johnston.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, the statement that herbicides were "disposed in Okinawa" is supported by a veteran's account regarding the burial of defoliants at three locations on the island during this period (see below: Disposal of defoliants at Camp Hamby, MCAS Futenma and Kadena Air Base).

Coming so soon after the 2007 Kyodo report, this latest disclosure raised the hopes of many veterans sick from dioxin exposure on Okinawa. Yet the VA - without exception - continued to deny all claims. Previously, many of these former service members had been fearful that going public with their experiences would harm both their reputations and their chances of receiving compensation - but now many realized that they had very little to lose.

#### **Veterans speak out**

On April 12th, 2011, The Japan Times published my article, based upon the testimonies of three US veterans, titled "Evidence for Agent Orange on Okinawa."<sup>22</sup> James Spencer, a longshoreman, described the unloading of hundreds of barrels of Agent Orange at Naha Port and White Beach. Joe Sipala, an

Air Force sergeant stationed at Awase Transmitter Site, explained how he regularly sprayed the defoliant around the base in order to kill weeds. Lamar Threet, a medic on Camp Kue, explained how Agent Orange was used on the installation - including an incident where a service member was drenched in defoliants when a barrel tipped over. Accompanying the article was, for the first time, a photograph of a drum of Agent Orange on Okinawa.

All three men stated that they were suffering from illnesses that the VA recognizes as being symptomatic with exposure to Agent Orange and, had they been stationed in Vietnam, they would be eligible for health care support. However their claims were denied due primarily to the fact that the Department of Defense still insists that it has no records of military defoliants on Okinawa.

The publication of the April 2011 article encouraged more veterans to come forward with their experiences.<sup>23</sup> Taken together, these accounts detail a comprehensive picture of how military defoliants were transported, stored, sprayed and buried on over a dozen Okinawan installations from Naha Port in the south to the Jungle Warfare Training Center in the north. They suggest the presence of thousands of barrels of Agent Orange, Yellow, Pink, Purple and Blue on the island for a 14-year period between 1961 and 1975, spanning both the pre- and post-reversion era.



Marine Scott Parton on Okinawa 1971

### 1. Transportation

*"The entire Vietnam War - including Agent Orange - flowed through the Naha Naval Port."*

According to veterans' accounts, the vast majority of military defoliants arrived in Okinawa at Naha Port - and to a lesser extent White Beach and Tengan Pier. Sometimes, the barrels had been damaged during the voyage from the United States - and dock workers were exposed to the leaking chemicals. After arriving at these ports, the barrels were temporarily stored before being transferred to smaller vessels which carried them to Vietnam. Alternatively, the defoliants were taken by truck to Kadena Air Base or Futenma Air Station - from where they were flown to the war zone.

Companies mentioned by veterans as involved in this transportation of defoliants to and from Okinawa are the Bear and the States Line merchant marine ships; individual vessels include SS *Sea-Lift*, SS *Transglobe*, and SS *Schuyler Otis Bland*.

The use of civilian ships to carry military supplies is well documented in histories of the Vietnam War - and it suggests that the Pentagon's claim that Department of Defense (i.e. *military*) records contain no information about the transportation of Agent Orange may well be a lexical sleight of hand.

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### 2. Storage

*"The things I remember best in the supply yards are the piles of aluminum coffins and the 55-gallon barrels with orange stripes around their middle."*

After the defoliants had been unloaded from the docks mentioned above, veterans state that they were then stored at three main locations - Machinato Supply Depot, Naha Port and Kadena Air Base - until orders were received to send the chemicals to South Vietnam.

**Machinato Supply Depot** is the area most frequently mentioned in interviews with veterans. "There were hundreds of orange-striped 55-gallon barrels," recalls one former forklift driver. "At Machinato, we regularly loaded them onto pallets to fill RBX orders (Red Ball Express = a World War Two phrase borrowed by Vietnam War service members to refer to the convoy system supplying the front lines)." According to their testimonies, in addition to Agent Orange, there were also barrels of Agent Yellow and Agent Blue at Machinato. One former truck driver was able to give the precise location of Machinato's defoliant storage area, "The drums were kept close to the sea in an open yard between Second Logistical Command's temporary housing and the lumber yard."

**Naha Port** is the second storage area frequently cited. Veterans claim that thousands of barrels of defoliants were unloaded and stored in wharfside warehouses. Testimonies ranging from 1961 to 1970 reveal that Naha Port was used to stockpile the military's full spectrum of defoliants including Agents Pink, Purple and Orange. "At the time, we handled everything in the same way," says one veteran stationed there in the late 1960s. "I didn't even know what those orange-striped barrels were until I saw some in a TV documentary 20 years later."

**Kadena Air Base** is the third large-scale storage area mentioned by veterans who claim that - by the late 1960s - "the existence of vast numbers of barrels of Agent Orange on Kadena was common knowledge." Former service members allege that these defoliants were stored there before being loaded onto flights bound for South Vietnam. Another veteran recalls seeing barrels of the defoliant at Kadena's Chibana Depot - the scene of the 1969 nerve gas leak that prompted the Army to launch Operation Red Hat.

In addition to these three main storage areas, it seems evident that many other US bases maintained smaller stocks of defoliants in order to keep their grounds clear of vegetation. The size of these stockpiles ranged from "about 50 barrels or maybe more" on Camp Schwab to a single barrel on Awase Transmitter Site that was refilled as necessary by a visiting supply truck.

### 3. Spraying<sup>24</sup>

*"It was easy, effective - and most importantly it kept the habu snakes at bay."*

While the veterans explain that the vast majority of military defoliants were transported to Vietnam, they also claim that the chemicals were employed as localized herbicides - in a similar way to that described by Griffiths and Wilcox in South Vietnam. "Since no records were required to be kept," stated one veteran, "many commanders 'acquired' Agent Orange as a cheap way to hold back vegetation."

Former service members described how the defoliants were loaded into backpack sprayers before being used around perimeter fences (on Camp Foster, Awase Transmitter Station, Camp Schwab, Camp Kue, Machinato Supply Depot and Yomitan Dog School<sup>25</sup>) and airbase runways (Kadena AB and MCAS Futenma). Also, there are reports of spraying around the housing areas of Machinato and Camp Zukeran - as well as officers clubs and the grounds of Camp Foster's Kubasaki High School (see below).

After the barrels of defoliants had been depleted, there are accounts of the drums being re-used to burn garbage. Such a practice was particularly hazardous since, according to Stelman *et al.*, "Approximately two liters of herbicide residue remains in the 208-liter barrel after it has been 'emptied'"<sup>26</sup> - moreover, the process of combustion is believed to elevate the toxicity of dioxins.<sup>27</sup>

### 4. Civilian exposure

## U.S. Military Bases in Okinawa



"We served our country and now we suffer. What about my children and Okinawan children? Do they suffer too?"

For the most part, the veterans' accounts attest to the transport, storage and use of these defoliant *within* US bases, suggesting that primarily US service members were put at risk of dioxin exposure. However, there is evidence that civilians - both Okinawan and American - may also have come into contact with these chemicals.

### i. Okinawan base workers

Whereas veterans' testimonies from the mid-1960s state that it was usually American personnel who sprayed defoliants on base, towards the end of the decade, it appears the task had been delegated to local nationals. On Camp Kue, for example, one former service member recalls that, "Okinawans sprayed defoliants under the guidance of American supervisors." On Camp Foster, another veteran says he witnessed "on many occasions the Okinawan grounds keepers spraying defoliant around the buildings and refrigeration units." On Machinato Supply Depot, too, there are reports of Okinawan workers involved in both the loading and spraying of Agent Orange.

As well as Okinawans involved in spray teams, other veterans expressed concern that the locally-hired stevedores who helped to unload the drums on the docks may - like their American counterparts - have been exposed to the chemicals which leaked from damaged barrels.

### ii) Okinawan farmers

Veterans claim that the Okinawan people who observed the effects of the defoliants were impressed with their power to kill vegetation. These former service members state that, in the same way American goods were unofficially bartered for Okinawan produce, small volumes of military defoliants were exchanged with local residents. Although veterans believed that these Okinawans were farmers, they did not see how the chemicals were used once handed over.

### iii) Department of Defense Dependant schools

Among the veterans' accounts, there are multiple references to the spraying of defoliants around DoDD schools during the late 1960s - with Camp Foster's Kubasaki High School specifically mentioned by two service members. They claim that Army and Okinawan groundskeepers regularly used Agent Orange to kill weeds close to classrooms, playgrounds and playing fields. One veteran stated that it was common knowledge that the defoliants came from the same supply yards as the ones that sent the barrels to Vietnam. Other veterans claim that this pattern of usage was consistent with how these herbicides were sprayed elsewhere on Camp Foster.

## 5. Disposal of defoliants at Camp Hamby, MCAS Futenma and Kadena Air Base.

"The Army did what it always does. It buried them."

The 2009 comment from the Fort Harrison VA concerning the disposal of herbicide agents on Okinawa between 1969 and 1972 seems to be corroborated by a former forklift driver who was assigned to Machinato Supply Depot. According to the veteran, in 1969 he witnessed the burial of dozens of barrels of Agent Orange after they had been damaged during transportation at sea.<sup>28</sup>

"I watched them dig a long trench. 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. Where was this? Go through the main gate of Hamby Yard (current day Chatan). Go a quarter mile and those were our Connex (container) yards. The trench was about a half mile from the ocean - close to the rocks."

Hamby Yard, according to this veteran, was not the only place where Agent Orange was buried. Towards the end of 1970 - with the US military under increasing pressure to scale back its use of the defoliants<sup>29</sup> - two other stockpiles were buried on MCAS Futenma and Kadena AB. "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."

## The repercussions of the 8.8 talk at Okinawa Christian University

In August 2011, I presented my research on military defoliants at Okinawa Christian University, Nishihara.

**Part 1**

## Part 2

In the week leading up to the talk, the Okinawan dailies ran extensive stories about military defoliants on the island. On August 6<sup>th</sup>, the Okinawa Times led with "Defoliants used on nine (U.S.) installations."<sup>30</sup> The following day, the Ryukyu Shimpo ran three articles titled "Defoliants used on eight installations,"<sup>31</sup> "Investigations needed within bases"<sup>32</sup>, and "Two generations struggle with diseases"<sup>33</sup> - based upon an interview with former Air Force Sergeant, Joe Sipala. On August 9<sup>th</sup>, the mainland Asahi Shimbun picked up the issue and ran the story "US military stored defoliants on Okinawa during Vietnam War, it is claimed."<sup>34</sup> This was followed in the evening by a primetime news report, "The Okinawa-Defoliant connection."<sup>35</sup>



**Joe Sipala in a 1970 photo**

Such widespread media coverage seemed to take the Japanese government by surprise and it spurred the first official reaction on August 9<sup>th</sup>. At a meeting of the Upper House Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, the Japanese Foreign Minister Matsumoto Takeaki stated that he had, using diplomatic channels, enquired with the United States about the issue. LDP member Shimajiri Aiko requested a Japan-U.S. Joint investigation - to which Matsumoto demurred that he would like first to hear the response from Washington.<sup>36</sup>

Five days later, on August 14<sup>th</sup>, The Japan Times published the forklift truck driver's account of the burial of Agent Orange on Camp Hamby.<sup>37</sup> Once again, the Okinawan media was quick to cover the story<sup>38</sup> - and on 19<sup>th</sup> August, Stars and Stripes, the US military's daily newspaper, ran an article titled "Okinawan mayor urges probe into Agent Orange allegations."<sup>39</sup>

The Japanese-language Tokyo-based press chose not to report the issue. However, the Japanese and US governments appeared to grasp more fully its potential ramifications. On the evening of August 19<sup>th</sup>, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs announced that the Pentagon

claimed to be unable to find any evidence of military defoliants on Okinawa - but the Japanese government was pressing for a further investigation.

## Conclusion

In 1989, Fred A. Wilcox chronicled the struggles that US veterans faced in receiving recognition for their exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War in the book *Waiting For An Army to Die*. Twenty-two years later, the title still encapsulates the attitude adopted by the Pentagon and the VA towards former service members citing exposure to dioxins on Okinawa. The veterans interviewed for this article recite an endless cycle of tactics that the authorities employ to stall their claims - lost deployment orders, missing medical records and requests for the veteran to seek out 40-year old documents that the VA knows never existed. Instead of "Putting Veterans First", many former service members contend that the VA's slogan should be changed to "Delay, deny until we all die." When asked if he thought the Department of Defense would ever admit to the presence of Agent Orange on Okinawa, one retired Army member replied,

"Imagine how much they'd have to pay out. That's how they work. They don't care about the veterans. It's all about the money."

His answer echoed the thoughts of almost all the veterans I interviewed. If the 1998 VA ruling had actually been made public at that time - when the US economy was stronger and the mood of the nation more favorable to veterans - then perhaps the Pentagon might have come clean on the issue. However, the world has changed significantly over the past 13 years and, with the US economy in deep recession, veterans exposed to toxic chemicals on this small outpost of the American Empire face an uphill struggle.

The US military on Okinawa already has a dubious environmental track record - including rendering Torishima Island a no-go zone through its use of depleted uranium ordnance in the 1990s and dangerous levels of arsenic and asbestos left on land formerly home to Camp Lester. In this atmosphere, the Pentagon is only too aware that any admission of the presence of military defoliants on Okinawa may make it liable for environmental evaluations and clean-up costs stretching into the tens of millions of dollars.

Regardless of these undeniable hurdles, there are positive signs that the US government will soon be compelled to end its silence. According to Jeff Davis, Senior Legislative Advocate of the Veterans Association for Sailors of the Vietnam War, "The Department of Defense is decidedly unhelpful, but you can beat the Department of Veterans Affairs by overwhelming it with testimony, statistics, science and documentation."

In the past, one of the main obstacles to veterans forming a united front on this issue was the bureaucratic and geographical difficulties of tracking down those with corroborating experiences. Joe Sipala has been at the forefront of breaking down this barrier with the creation of "Agent Orange Okinawa," a focus group on [Facebook](#).

Sipala uses the site to share media reports, create a sense of solidarity among veterans exposed to agent orange and guide them through the hoops and barrels of the VA claims procedures. Since April 2011, the site has received over 35,000 views and brought into the open the testimonies of a dozen more veterans exposed to dioxins on Okinawa.<sup>40</sup>

Similarly, social media has engendered cooperation between veterans fighting for recognition in other regions where the Pentagon, despite overwhelming evidence of the presence of these defoliants, denies they were ever used - most notably in Guam and South Korea. This global approach allows former service members to better comprehend how and where these chemicals were deployed - as well as share techniques on accessing restricted information and pushing the issue into the public eye.

Meanwhile, the August 8<sup>th</sup> presentation helped to facilitate collaboration between Okinawan environmental groups and US veterans who were exposed on the island. Members from both sides have entered into correspondence and there are tentative plans to invite US veterans to Okinawa to identify former storage areas and give talks to community leaders concerned about the health risks. Okinawan groups are also in the process of gathering testimonies from former base workers who might have handled these defoliants - with the long-term goal of producing an epidemiological study.



**55-gallon drums of Agent Orange.** Photo from Stars and Stripes story of Aug 19, 2011, "Okinawan mayor urges probe into agent orange allegations"

In addition, plans are underway to test soil and water from the areas where military defoliants were stored. If comparisons with similar storage sites in South Vietnam are accurate, there is the very real danger that these areas continue to be highly-contaminated today.<sup>41</sup> Without a doubt, these investigations—and, if the charges are confirmed, the subsequent cleanup—will be expensive. But with the potential health risks so serious, any delay on the side of the Japanese or American governments suggests not merely negligence but a cover-up. The harm may extend beyond the veterans interviewed in this article to US service members currently stationed on the island and Okinawans living, working and farming on areas formerly used to store these lethal chemicals.

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See also Ikhwan Kim, [Confronting Agent Orange in South Korea](#)

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> The full Japanese text of the announcement is available [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> "OKINAWA: Forgotten Island," *Time*, November 28, 1949.

<sup>3</sup> Available, for example, [here](#).

<sup>4</sup> Steve Rabson, "'Secret' 1965 Memo Reveals Plans to Keep U.S. bases and Nuclear Weapons Options in Okinawa After Reversion," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, February 1, 2010.

<sup>5</sup> William A. Buckingham, "Operation Ranch Hand - The air force and herbicides in Southeast Asia, 1961-1971", Office of Air Force History, Washington D.C., 1982.

<sup>6</sup> Jeanne Stellman *et al.* "[The extent and patterns of usage of Agent Orange and other herbicides in Vietnam.](#)" *Nature*. Vol 422, 681.

<sup>7</sup> Philip Jones Griffiths, "Agent Orange - 'Collateral Damage in Viet Nam'", Trolley Ltd., London, 2003, 169.

<sup>8</sup> Fred A. Wilcox, "Waiting For An Army To Die," Seven Locks Press, Santa Ana, 1989, 26.

<sup>9</sup> For a concise summary of these cover-ups, see Griffiths pp. 164 ~ 169.

<sup>10</sup> "Employment of Riot Control Agents, Flame, Smoke, Antiplant Agents, and Personnel Detectors in Counterguerilla Operations," Department of the Army Training Circular, April 1969.

<sup>11</sup> Stelman *et al.*, 684.

<sup>12</sup> For this - and further information on the impact on the health of people in Vietnam, see [this link](#).

<sup>13</sup> The primary manufacturers of these defoliants are still keen to emphasize that the 1984 settlement was not an admission of fault. Dow Chemical Company maintains that "Today, the scientific consensus is that when the collective human evidence is reviewed, it doesn't show that Agent Orange caused veteran's illnesses." [Link](#).

In 2004, Corpwatch quoted a spokesperson for Monsanto: "reliable scientific evidence indicates that Agent Orange is not the cause of serious long-term health effects." [Link](#).

In 2005, Griffiths dismissed these scientists as "the whores of the chemical companies - and of Washington - who will write stuff saying that Agent Orange is perfectly harmless." (from "Conversations with Harold Hudson Channer," Manhattan Neighborhood Network, aired 5<sup>th</sup> September, 2005)

<sup>14</sup> The list of locations is available [here](#).

<sup>15</sup> "Agent Orange was likely used in Okinawa: U.S. vet board", Kyodo News Service, July 8, 2007.

<sup>16</sup> The complete text of ruling #9800877 is available [here](#).

<sup>17</sup> Quoted in the Kyodo article of July 8, 2007.

<sup>18</sup> VA ruling #1030176 can be accessed [here](#).

<sup>19</sup> The ruling - #0941781 - can be read [here](#).

<sup>20</sup> Operation Red Hat was spurred by a leak of nerve gas that hospitalized over 20 GI's in 1969. "Operation Red Hat: Men and a Mission" - a cheerily patriotic 1971 Department of Defense documentary detailing the removal of these munitions - can be watched [here](#).

<sup>21</sup> Buckingham, 188.

<sup>22</sup> "Evidence for Agent Orange on Okinawa", The Japan Times, April 12, 2011 (available [here](#)).

<sup>23</sup> At the time of writing, over 20 veterans with firsthand experiences of spraying, storing or shipping military defoliants have come forward - with many more claiming to have seen these chemicals on the island. Of these former service members, approximately 75% have asked that their accounts remain anonymous while the VA processes their claims for compensation. All described the government department as "vindictive" and "spiteful" - with one veteran alleging that he was told if he went public with his experiences, the impact on benefits he was already receiving for injuries unrelated to dioxin-exposure would be "catastrophic."

<sup>24</sup> In their denials of veterans' claims, the VA sometimes tries to suggest that the defoliants sprayed by US service members on Okinawa were "commercially-available herbicides." This appears to be a deliberate attempt to obscure the truth. Veterans state that spray-tanks were filled directly from the same orange-striped barrels that were sent to Vietnam. The VA suggested to one veteran that the herbicides she inhaled in 1975 was Monsanto's Roundup - a product that was not on the market until one year later. Moreover, the use of military defoliants in precisely the same manner Okinawa's veterans describe is well-documented throughout Vietnam at this time - posing the question, why would the infamously parsimonious military pay extra for herbicides if they had thousands of gallons of powerful (and supposedly non-toxic) defoliants already at hand?

<sup>25</sup> The allegation that military defoliants were sprayed around Yomitan Dog School is noteworthy due to a 1990 report regarding US military working dogs. The study compared the rates of testicular cancer in dogs that had died in the United States, Vietnam and Okinawa. The report found that dogs that died in Vietnam were 1.8 times more likely to develop testicular cancer than those in the U.S. - whereas the rate in Okinawa was even higher at 2.2 times the American control group. Howard M. Hayes *et al.*, "Excess of Seminomas Observed in Vietnam Service U.S. Military Working Dogs", Journal of the National Cancer Institute, Vol 82, Issue 12.

<sup>26</sup> Stelman *et al.*, 685.

<sup>27</sup> Griffiths, 166.

<sup>28</sup> "Agent Orange Buried on Okinawa, Vet Says", The Japan Times, August 13, 2011 (available [here](#)).

<sup>29</sup> Buckingham, 169.

<sup>30</sup> Japanese text available [here](#).

<sup>31</sup> The difference in the number of installations cited is due to the Ryukyu Shimpo article basing its calculations on VA denial records whereas the previous day's Okinawa Times piece was based upon my own research. The Shimpo article is [here](#).

<sup>32</sup> 基地内の調査必要, Ryukyu Shimpo, August 7, 2011.

<sup>33</sup> 親子2代疾患に悩む, Ryukyu Shimpo, August 7, 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Available [here](#).



<sup>35</sup> The TV report is accessible [here](#).

<sup>36</sup> The exchange was reported by the [Okinawa Times](#) on August 10<sup>th</sup>.

<sup>37</sup> "Agent Orange Buried on Okinawa, Vet Says", The Japan Times, August 13, 2011.

<sup>38</sup> See, for example, this [TV report](#).

<sup>39</sup> "Okinawan mayor urges probe into Agent Orange allegations", Stars and Stripes, August 19, 2011 (available online [here](#))

<sup>40</sup> "Agent Orange on Okinawa" - [link](#).

<sup>41</sup> For an overview of the identification and clean-up of potential dioxin hotspots in South Vietnam, see [this link](#).