

Deny, Deny Until They Die: Vietnam Veterans Affected by Agent Orange. The US Government's Response

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So, the U.S. government has finally decided to help some 2,000 Air Force personnel exposed to Agent Orange residue left over in airplanes used during the Vietnam War. They are now eligible for disability, medical and survivor benefits.

"Opening up eligibility for this deserving group of Air Force veterans and reservists is the right thing to do," Veterans Affairs Secretary Bob McDonald announced.

Really? Then why didn't the VA take this step long ago? These new recipients flew in Fairchild C-123 aircraft from 1969 to 1986. That's between 46 and 29 years ago!

And if it's the "right thing to do" for those folks then what about the countless other Vietnam era military personnel whose cries for help have been ignored even though they suffer from some or many of the 14 diseases needed to claim Agent Orange benefits?

The longstanding rule says if a veteran had boots on-the-ground in Vietnam they are automatically accepted for special benefits. All others making Agent Orange disability claims have to prove they handled the toxic chemical or worked near it.

Over the decades I have spoken to dozens of vets who suffer from an "approved" disease. Among them: Hodgkin's, Parkinson's, prostate or respiratory cancers, soft tissue sarcoma, diabetes mellitus (Type 2), chronic B-cell leukemia, ischemic heart disease and debilitating chloracne. Many fear they have passed their ill health on to their children and grandchildren.

These veterans are ignored, according to the few lawyers willing to challenge the VA on their behalf, because the Defense Department claims they can find no records proving they were in proximity to Agent Orange. Records were poorly kept, lost and, in at least one case, destroyed by fire.

If ever there was a deserving group of citizens with a reason to sue for redress, this is it. But, oh yeah, the U.S. government is conveniently immune from lawsuits.

These men and women who loyally served their country are convinced that the government's strategy has been to "deny, deny, until they die," since Agent Orange benefits already account for one out of six disability checks issued by the VA.

Take the case of Air Force Master Sergeant LeRoy Foster who spent 10 years (from 1968 to 1978) assigned to the 43rd Supply Squadron at Anderson Air Force Base in Guam. His duties

included spraying herbicides around the base to get rid of weeds. In sworn testimony to the U.S. Congress, and in several affidavits to the VA, Foster swore that Agent Orange — which contains deadly TCDD dioxin — was among the defoliants he regularly loaded into his 750-gallon, trailer-mounted sprayer and dispersed base-wide. Other military personnel on Guam at the time — such as Sgt. Ralph Stanton — confirm the account and reported they were “routinely soaked” by Foster’s spray.

They gave me personal photographs from their days at Anderson AFB showing stacks of chemical barrels they swore carried the telltale Agent Orange markings. Other photos showed G.I.’s cooking on barbecue grills fashioned out of the empty drums.

A U.S. government analysis of the island’s soil confirmed the presence of Agent Orange toxins. Guam currently has an extraordinarily high cancer rate. Yet, to this day the DOD maintains it has no records proving the military ever transported Agent Orange to that strategically important Vietnam-era island.

The Pentagon also denies Agent Orange was ever present on Okinawa, another location U.S. vets maintain was an AO hot spot where they first began to experience major health issues.

Checking in this week with Foster and Stanton I discovered both men were still alive but deathly ill. Foster is battling devastating rectal cancer.

“I am down to 150 (pounds) now,” Foster wrote. “The weight is falling off of me. I believe there is no reversing it.”

Stanton wrote of his health, “It’s kind of like a juggling act because of the number of things wrong with me.”

Hundreds of Guam- and Okinawa-based veterans have filed VA claims citing exposure to Agent Orange as the cause of their health problems, but the vast majority were rejected. And none of the 200,000 so-called “Blue Water” vets who say they were exposed to Agent Orange while serving aboard deep-water naval vessels stationed off Vietnam’s coast has been awarded special benefits.

Who can’t be happy for the 2,000 Air Force vets who were recently added to the Agent Orange rolls? But excuse me if I don’t applaud the VA’s massively delinquent action.

Our government did a terrible thing when it continued to spray millions of gallons of deadly Agent Orange long after it was clear it caused devastating health problems. But what’s worse is its obstinate refusal over the years to take full responsibility for all sick and dying veterans.

Deny, deny until they die. Shameful.

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