

Wider Exposure of U.S. Troops to Agent Orange Told

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WASHINGTON—Richard S. Schweiker, secretary of health and human services, announced Wednesday that a search of Vietnam War records has revealed 41 previously unknown cases of dumping the toxic defoliant Agent Orange from airplanes in Vietnam—sometimes directly over or near U.S. military installations and their residential areas.

"The number of people exposed to Agent Orange was substantially larger than originally thought," Schweiker told a news conference. "I don't think anybody quite foresaw we would be dumping chemicals on our own people—but apparently we were. The veterans have been saying that for quite some time."

For years, many Vietnam veterans have blamed exposure to Agent Orange for a variety of medical problems, including cancer, skin diseases, impotence, liver abnormalities and birth defects in their children.

An estimated 10.6 million gallons of Agent Orange was used for six years during the Vietnam War in an effort to defoliate jungle sanctuaries used by enemy troops.

Critics of the Agent Orange program have charged that dioxin, a byproduct present in 2,4,5-T, one of the components of Agent Orange, is dangerous and carcinogenic and responsible for many of the health problems claimed by Vietnam veterans. Defenders of the program have said that no hard scientific evidence for these charges exists and that Agent Orange is not a health hazard if handled properly.

Schweiker said a government-wide panel called the Agency Orange Working Group, which President Reagan elevated to Cabinet council level in July, had discovered that about 90 chemical spraying missions in Vietnam had been aborted because of enemy fire or engine failure, 41 of them involving Agent Orange. When the missions were aborted, the chemicals were dumped by the aircraft before they landed, he said.

Schweiker added that the group was also investigating additional reports that the herbicide was used for "bank-spraying" and "base-clearing" around U.S. military facilities.

Until now, he said, about 1,200 pilots and support personnel who flew spraying missions—personnel known as "ranch hands"—were the only servicemen known to have been heavily exposed to the defoliant.

"We are saying today for the first time that a much larger population (of those exposed) exists—unfortunately—than was known before, but we still don't have any concrete figures," Schweiker said.

Schweiker said the Cabinet group, which is under his jurisdiction, will work with the Defense Department to try to determine exact locations, times, weather conditions and personnel present during the aborted missions, as well as the extent of their possible exposure. "We have to go back and look at the missions," he said.

Veterans Groups Elated

Representatives of Vietnam veterans' groups welcomed the new information.

"We're very happy that the new material has been made available," said Greg Kane, director of operations and Agent Orange coordinator for the Vietnam Veterans of America. "We hope this means that veterans who have been experiencing the same disabilities as veterans who were proved to be exposed to Agent Orange will now be able to make the connection" between their problems and the chemical, he said.

Victor Yannacone, the lead counsel for Vietnam veterans in a class-action suit against the five major chemical companies that manufactured Agent Orange, said the new information "improves the position of the veterans and begins to forge an alliance between the veterans and their government."

The chemical companies have defended the safety of their product and maintain they are not liable because they manufactured the herbicide for the government.

Thus far, the Veterans Administration has refused to provide free medical care to Vietnam veterans who have attributed their health problems to Agent Orange, contending that there is no documented evidence that exposure to the defoliant has resulted in long-term health defects. A bill approved in June by both houses of Congress, however, would provide federally financed medical treatment under certain circumstances to veterans exposed to Agent Orange. The bill is now in a House-Senate conference committee.