

THE PERIMETER Guard

VVA Chapter 17
**Perimeter
Guard**

2010

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Anyone Train at Fort Gordon.....?

Agent Orange is well known for turning jungles from green to brown and making a generation of our soldiers sick. But not only were they using it over there, they were testing it here.



AUGUSTA—It's come to symbolize everything that went wrong in Vietnam. Agent Orange is well known for turning jungles from green to brown. And for making a generation of our soldiers sick. But here's something you might not know about Agent Orange. Not only were they using it over there, they were testing it here.

The United States had a problem in Vietnam. Soldiers were fighting an enemy they couldn't see. An enemy taking cover in the dark jungles there. The solution was a toxic chemical so strong it could turn jungle into a wasteland.

Patrick Burke is an Army veteran. He was there.

"We walked through areas throughout Vietnam that were completely destroyed, burnt," "They sprayed the area and we were looking for the enemy."

Starting in early 1962, the U.S. sprayed 20 million gallons of the herbicide over millions of acres. Army veteran Lou Krieger saw it too.

"It's barren, it's just nothing there. It just kills everything that's there. It's total kill," Krieger said.

Krieger and Burke saw it for themselves. Now their mission is to spread the word about dioxin, one of the most dangerous chemicals there is. It's the stuff in Agent Orange.

"Agent Orange is a tactical herbicide," Krieger said. "it's not your Round Up, it's not commercial. It's so far above that. It's so powerful."

But Krieger isn't just talking about Vietnam. He's also talking about Augusta. I sat down with Krieger to look at a map of Fort Gordon.

"So aside from testing Agent Orange in this area, soldiers were actually swimming here for recreation?" I asked.

"Yeah, soldiers from the special forces, they would often train—they talk about going through water sheds down here, like going through the rice paddies with full packs on. Training like that," Krieger explained.

While the military was burning the jungles of Vietnam with dioxin, they were testing the toxic chemicals here in the United States. Here, at Fort Gordon. It was the summer of 1967. Krieger would spend a few months training here before heading overseas.

"Why do you think they were testing Agent Orange here?" I asked.

"The climate, the topography fairly represented what we had over in Vietnam," Krieger said.

The Department of Defense calls Agent Orange and similar chemicals "tactical herbicides". News 12 found paperwork proving they were tested here. In Alvin L. Young, Ph.D.'s 2006 report "The History of the US Department of Defense Programs for the Testing, Evaluation, and Storage of Tactical Herbicides", Fort Gordon is listed under "Site 21", along with two other locations.

The report states tactical herbicides were sprayed on duplicate 3 acre plots, 200 by 600 feet, using a helicopter rigged with two 40 gallon tanks. The document shows they sprayed about 475 gallons of herbicides Blue, Orange and White. A toxic rainbow, marked by a color-coded band around the middle of the drums.

"Personally, I wouldn't want to go anywhere back in there," Krieger said. "I rode back there in my truck, and that's the last I'll ever go back there."

It all took place in a remote part of the sprawling Army post, near a place known then as Camp Crockett. Long forgotten Quonset Huts are all gone now. Cement slabs are all that's left. A pine forest has grown up around it.

"The reforestation program, it says here, was instituted in 1970, so they tried to close that up real quick," Krieger said.

Krieger took lots of pictures when he went back in October. He wanted to see it again for himself.

"There was a couple of people fishing. I wouldn't eat any fish out of there," he said.

So why Fort Gordon? We may have more in common with Southeast Asia than you think.

Young's report states, "the Georgia site was

described as a warm temperate, humid, moderate rainfall climate with deep, well-drained sands in rolling topography. The vegetation type was an oak hickory-pine forest." And veterans who were at Fort Gordon in 1967 say there was even a Vietnamese Village there too.

If the documents aren't proof enough, meet James Cripps.

"Personally speaking, I sprayed a herbicide that I believe to be Agent Orange," Cripps told News 12.

Cripps was a game warden. He says he remembers spraying Agent Orange around some of the lakes at Fort Gordon.

"Along the sides of the roads, along the trails the fishermen used, to the restrooms, picnic areas," Cripps recalled.

Cripps lives in Tennessee now. He also lives with the health effects of his exposure.

"It's the deadliest poison known to man," he said.

Cripps' medical history made history. He's the first person to prove to the government that he was exposed to Agent Orange not in Vietnam, but in America. In Augusta.

"I won the first ever Agent Orange claim in the continental United States," he said.

That brings us back to Lou Krieger. He doesn't believe he was exposed to Agent Orange here. But he wants to make sure you hear the story...and he wants something else too.

"I'd like to get an apology," he said. "I'd like the truth to come out. We deal with it every day, I mean I've got a VA file that's probably a foot thick."

That's Krieger's mission now: to spread the word about Agent Orange and to make sure veterans get the coverage they need.

As for Fort Gordon, News 12 requested documents related to Agent Orange testing here through the Freedom of Information Act. They sent us the map showing where the chemical was tested. They confirm they tested Agent Orange and Blue here in July 1967. And they conclude there are no known problems associated with it.

In the Summer of '67, Fort Gordon was a very different place. Lou Krieger should know. He was training here before shipping out to Vietnam. Lou remembers a place they called Camp Crockett. It was in an isolated spot off Gibson Road near

Leitner Pond, far removed from the center of the sprawling Army post.

"Camp Crockett was used for the training of pre-airborne school and also pre-special forces. Some of the guys in Crockett were there over three months," Krieger told News 12.

Soldiers who trained here also talk of a village set up to look like one you might see in Vietnam.

We're sitting at a table, covered with documents from the 1960's. Krieger has a map in front of him.

"Right about here was the actual Vietnam village, where they put you through the training, going through the village and clearing it out," Krieger said.

And that's not the only thing the Georgia Army post once had in common with Southeast Asia. While they sprayed Agent Orange over the jungles of Vietnam, they tested it here. News 12 obtained a map prepared by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It's based on aerial pictures taken in 1967 and shows the rectangular areas where Agent Orange and other "tactical herbicides" were sprayed. There are 23 sites.

When you look at the same area today, 43 years later, you can clearly see what appears to be a massive dead zone right next to it. The area is called Training Area 47. It's at the southernmost part of Fort Gordon and only about six miles away from towns that include Wrens, Harlem and Dearing. News 12 has documents showing this spraying was done by air.

James Cripps also sprayed Fort Gordon, but he did his spraying on the ground.

"I believe the herbicide I sprayed was indeed Agent Orange," Cripps told News 12. "At the time I thought I was six or seven thousand miles away from Agent Orange."

The Tennessee veteran was a game warden at Fort Gordon who actually did the spraying around some of the lakes there.

"I remember the lakes by name. And the best I remember is I'm thinking either 13 or 14 (years old)," he said.

Dr. Nanci McPhail has seen more than her share of veterans exposed to Agent Orange. She used to see two or three cases a week at the Augusta VA. Now it's as many as 25 a week.

"We don't want those unanswered questions lingering out there if we can help it," Dr. McPhail

said.

"As far as you can tell, does Agent Orange continue to affect a victim years and years after exposure?" I asked.

"Absolutely," Dr. McPhail responded. "Research teams have gone to Vietnam in the last ten years, and they've found hot spots of dioxin in the soil, which makes you think it's in the food sources grown on that soil. So yes, it does have lingering effects."

In a room surrounded with documents, where history and mystery collide, I talked to Lou Krieger about Fort Gordon.

"You're saying only one thing remains, and that's the poison?" I asked.

"Yeah, it doesn't go away," Krieger said. "It's still hot over in Vietnam."

All of this has serious implications for Congress. Just this month, the VA began offering benefits for up to 200,000 Vietnam veterans who may now qualify for Agent Orange health care. But what about the ones who might have been exposed to dioxin here?

Senator Lindsey Graham admits there's much we don't know.

"We don't know the scope of its use," he said. "So here we are, 30 or 40 years after its use, and still finding evidence that Agent Orange was used in places we never understood before."

Sen. Graham is on the Committee for Veterans Affairs.

"I am astonished that it was being treated at Fort Gordon and we're just now knowing," he said.

Graham wants to find out more about what went on at Fort Gordon in the summer of 1967. About where it was sprayed. About who might have been exposed.

"The final chapter hasn't been written," Sen. Graham admitted. "So we need to reopen the book on Agent Orange."

Meanwhile, veterans like Lou Krieger and Patrick Burke, who was exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam, know the clock is ticking.

"What got you started in all this research?" I asked the men.

"Well," Krieger paused. "It's a thing called death."

"I'm 66 years old," Burke said. "What's going to happen when I reach 67—if I make it to 67?"

In the very back of a Veteran's Magazine, in a section simply called TAPS, they list the names of the dead and their ages.

"61, 57, 59," Krieger read them aloud. "This one died of Agent Orange diabetes. We're dying at over 300 a day right now."

There is some promising news to report on all of this. In addition to reopening the books on Agent Orange exposure, Sen. Graham is working to set up a walking tour of Fort Gordon to find out more about a story that was nearly forgotten. About a part of Augusta, Georgia with a very strong connection to a sad chapter in American history.

One final note about the veterans we interviewed in this News 12 Special Assignment. Two of them have been diagnosed with medical conditions related to Agent Orange exposure. Patrick Burke is still trying to prove his claim. Those conditions can include a severe skin reaction known as chloracne, diabetes, various cancers, and heart problems.

You won't find Camp Crockett on any modern maps. And even if you knew where to look, you won't find it at Fort Gordon either.

The soldiers who once trained here and the Quonset Huts are all gone. All that's left are the concrete slabs.

We obtained a map through the Freedom Of Information Act. It shows where the government tested agents blue, orange and white in Augusta from January of 1967 through December 1969.

We found documents outlining how they used a helicopter to spray the chemicals on 98 acres in the southern tip of the sprawling Army post between Highway 221 on the west and the artillery range to the east.

Krieger worries about the soldiers who trained at Camp Crockett.

"Well, there are a lot of veterans out there, unfortunately, that have been exposed to dioxin unknowingly," he said.

And he showed us a picture. He says these soldiers are bathing in a stream near Camp Crockett in July of 1968.

This is right down from Leitner Lake which is well within a 6 to 8 square mile area where there could have been mist drifts from the dioxins and the herbicides.

But it wasn't just Augusta where they did the

testing.

News 12 found documents outlining all of the other places across the nation where The Department of Defense tested these so-called "tactical herbicides" from Florida to Canada and California to New York.

But Augusta stands out from all of the others because of one man — and what he did here.

His name is James Cripps.

Cripps is the first person to prove that he was exposed to Agent Orange — not in Vietnam, but in the continental U.S.

"At the time, I thought I was 6 or 7,000 miles away from Agent Orange," Cripps said.

Cripps was a game warden who did some spraying himself.

"Along the sides of the roads, along the trails the fishermen used, to the restrooms, picnic areas."

When we found him last year in Tennessee, he could still remember the lakes by name.

"... Little Bear, Big Bear, Little Smoak, Big Smoak, Leitner, Clay Pit ..." he said.

There's no paper trail from what Cripps did.

The Army will only admit to spraying in the test area. The same map shows where they took soil samples in 1994. The dots mark the spots.

They say the area today is clean.

"Fort Gordon says the area has been tested and it's safe. Are you comfortable with that?" asked News 12's Richard Rogers.

"No, I'm not comfortable with the soil samples at all. Number one, you have to take into consideration that right here on this map is an approximate area where they tested," Krieger said.

Dr. Martha Terris is chief of Urology at GHSU and the VA. She's seen case after case of cancer in veterans exposed to Agent Orange.

"And more and more veterans are coming to me saying, 'I never was in Vietnam, but I was asked to spray this stuff ... I don't know what it was- it worries me now that I've come up with this cancer.'"

Dr. Terris says dioxin gets in your body and stays there, changing your DNA.

"That can result in different cancers, different types of disease processes that can occur 20, 30, 40 years later," she said.

Birth defects are also a concern.

"With male veterans exposed to Agent Orange,

the predominant birth defect that's seen is spina bifida ... or defects of the spinal canal in their children," Terris said.

Cripps proved his case and has nothing to lose.

"It's the deadliest poison known to man," he said.

Meanwhile, Krieger continues his own mission to spread the word about Agent Orange to shine a spotlight on a remote of Fort Gordon that's been long forgotten and to speak up for veterans too afraid to speak for themselves.

"The stories I get from the veterans, I wish more of them would talk — but the unfortunate thing is they're afraid that if they talk they're going to lose their benefits or if they apply for benefits they're not going to get their benefits because of the way the V.A. works," he said.

And that's one of the reasons this story is such a difficult one to tell. The soldiers who trained here back then don't want to put their claim in jeopardy.

We asked Fort Gordon to let us see the testing area for ourselves and so far they have declined.

We also asked Fort Gordon to let us speak with their environmental experts about those soil tests back in 1994. Again, they've declined.

Officials at Fort Gordon did release a statement after our initial investigation a year ago.

Are You Prepared?

Nobody wants to think about bad things happening, but bad things do happen. Not all bad things are classified as a disaster but often they are just that to us personally. For now, let us focus on the things that are classified as true disasters such as hurricanes, floods, tornadoes etc.

The first question is are you prepared? Prepared is a loose term generalized to fit generic needs. Prepared can mean far more in terms of what each person or family may need or want to have available to them. I look at preparedness as a business plan of sorts. First you need to develop a plan, make a list, get the goods and organize everything.

