'Agent Orange' Tests Planned for Ex-Fliers

From Staff and Wire Reports

A group of Fort Walton Beach residents, former Air Force pilots and crewmen exposed to the Vietnam-era defoliant "Agent Orange," have volunteered to undergo medical testing to determine whether the controversial chemical damaged their health.

"I'm not here to spook you," project director Dr. George Lathorp told the volunteers. "But there's absolutely no doubt that this substance has caused damage to laboratory animals."

Lathorp, of the Brooks Aerospace School for Medicine in San Antonio, Texas, was in Fort Walton Beach Saturday to speak to the men of Operation Ranchhand Vietnam Association, a 130-member group that represents about 10 percent of the select pilots and crewmen who participated in Operation Ranchhand from 1961 to 1970.

The men sprayed more than 4.5 million acres of Vietnamese countryside with a defoliant called butyl esters of 2-4-5-trichlorophen oxyacetic acid. The defoliant was code-named "Agent Orange," and 60,000 tons of it was sprayed.

During Saturday's Ranchhand reunion, the group gave unanimous support for a medical study of its members.

"Our crews were regularly sprayed with the chemical when pressure hoses broke in the plane," recalled retired Air Force Maj. Jack Spey of 850 Tarpon Drive. "No one in our organization has ever gotten cancer."

According to Spey, 41, the chemical used in the war was "just a stronger concentrate of herbicides being used in the United States to clear forest land for cattle grazing in Kansas, Missouri and other states."

"Agent Orange" was withdrawn from use in Vietnam in 1970, under scientific and political pressure.

Spey said the testing will be done at the Brooks Aerospace School for Medicine.

"It will be an extremely thorough physical – much more comprehensive than a normal flight physical," Spey said. "It will be akin to an examination an astronaut goes through and, in some cases, more thorough."

Spey, a former pilot who said he was in contact with the chemical, said he may be among those tested.

He said he doesn't like the idea of going through what he termed an "exhaustive medical exam" because "I don't like doctor's offices and needles, but the outcome doesn't make me nervous."

Spey said his organization helped the Air Force locate some of the 1,200 men who were involved in Ranchhand. Air Force officials have been successful in contacting 1,050, Spey added.

"When this whole controversy started, our association made our mailing list available to the Air Force surgeon general's office," Spey said.

The Air Force will conduct mail and telephone interviews to determine who should participate in the study. Spey said the study will include only those who came in direct contact with the chemical.

Spey said he does not know how much the study will cost, but labeled it "very expensive." He said the Air Force will pay transportation costs to the test center for retired Air Force personnel.

According to Science magazine, a "worrisome number of stillbirths and defective fetuses were reported in provinces where the herbicide had been sprayed intensively."

However, Lathorp said there is "not a shred of concrete evidence saying that exposure is a medical problem."

A number of lawsuits have been filed against the government by Vietnam veterans claiming they were exposed to the dangerous chemical.

Lathorp and Maj. Phillip Brown, a bio-environmental engineer specializing in industrial hygiene training, will conduct the tests. Brown represents the U.S. Surgeon General's Office in Washington.

Spey said he expects the first tests will be conducted after the first of the year.

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