High dioxin levels found in few Vietnam veterans

CHICAGO (AP) — A new study of Vietnam veterans suggests that most escaped heavy exposure to the poison dioxin, even if they served as ground troops in areas extensively sprayed with the dioxin-laced herbicide Agent Orange.

The findings, based on a comparison of blood tests between 646 Vietnam veterans and 97 non-Vietnam veterans, confirm results of three previous studies on blood levels of dioxin in similar subjects, researchers said.

"Current (dioxin) levels were nearly identical in Vietnam and non-Vietnam veterans," researchers at the federal Centers for Disease Control reported in today's *Journal of the American Medical Association.*

Only two Vietnam veterans had "clearly elevated" blood dioxin levels, the researchers said, adding that both reported their health as "excellent."

However, 14 percent of the other Vietnam veterans in the study group attributed health problems to Agent Orange exposure.

Scientists are still debating the possible health effects of dioxin, which some Vietnam veterans contend include cancer, immune system problems and birth defects in their children.

Barry Kasinitz, a spokesman for the Vietnam Veterans of America, criticized the report as a twisted rehash of old data that jumps to conclusions and wrongly suggests smaller exposures to the defoliant probably were harmless.

The U.S. Supreme Court two months ago cleared the way for a multimillion-dollar settlement that could benefit up to 250,000 Vietnam veterans in a class-action lawsuit against the manufacturers of Agent Orange.