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t Orange study offers good news

BEACH — "Vietnam was an
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study, which is being coordinated by the U.S. Air Force School of Aerospace Medicine at Brooks Air Force Base.

For every Ranch Hander who filled out a questionaire, the Air Force found five people who were not exposed to Agent Orange to compare his answers against.

For every Ranch Hander who underwent a 2½-day physical examination at Kelsey Seybold Clinic in Houston, Texas, two volunteers were found to take the examination for comparison.

"Each one of these Ranch Hands walking around here today has eight comparison individuals who are comparable in age, race and job," said Col. George D. Lathrop, one of the study's authors. "They are their clones, if you will.

"We did everything we could think of because someday, someone's going to go back and say, 'Why didn't you do that?'

"We drew up a scientific road map on how we wanted to do the study. And then we had it reviewed by the University of Texas School of Public Health, the Air Force's Scientific Advisory Board, the Air Force's Epidemiologic Board and by the National Academy of Science," Lathrop said.

The second part of the Air Force review, called the morbidity study, will try to determine if Ranch Handers contracted any diseases related to their exposure to Agent Orange.

The response of Ranch Handers was surprising, Chesney said. Ninety-seven percent of them filled out questionnaires. And 87 percent agreed to undergo physical examinations, which involved traveling to Texas.

The results were originally scheduled to be ready this month. But about 18 percent of those a computer picked for the comparison group turned out to be poor comparisons, Chesney said, and the results will not be available until February at the earliest.

"It's 40 million bits of information we're trying to put together in the computer . . . and we don't want to come back and have to redo part of it," he said.

The morbidity study is what everyone is waiting for, and neither Chesney nor Lathrop would comment on it.

"There's so much data, we really don't know what's going to come out, and if I did know, I couldn't tell you," Chesney said.

But the mortality study did point to some interesting, if inconclusive, bits of information.

"There are some patterns that bear watching," Lathrop said. "The officers are faring better than the enlisted folks, both among the Ranch Hands and the comparison groups [who weren't exposed to Agent Orange]."

There was also an increase in liver deaths among Ranch Handers, although the increase was statistically insignificant. And less Ranch Handers died of cancer than those in the comparison group. Until the study's second part is completed, doctors said, they won't know what to make of these results.

The study also indicated that Ranch Handers were dying at only 40 percent the rate at which non-veteran whites die. The doctors ascribe this to something called the healthy worker effect: "It's well known that the people who are active and working have a lower mortality rate than the public at large."

Chesney said he had 63 people working full time to complete the study: "I've told them no leave, no time off, maybe Christmas Day."

"Our bottom line is, we need to do a proper study because if there are attributable health defects, the Ranch Handers need to know," Lathrop said. "These people are among the bravest of the brave and deserve compensation. The flip side is, if there is nothing, they deserve the peace of mind that goes with that knowledge."