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Agent Orange Buried at Beach Strip? U.S. veteran fears toxin now beneath popular civilian area

By JON MITCHELL – 30 November 2011 - Special to The Japan Times

Dozens of barrels of the toxic defoliant Agent Orange were buried in the late 1960s beneath what is now a busy neighborhood in the central Okinawa Island town of Chatan, near Araha Beach, according to a former U.S. soldier who has recently pinpointed the location thanks to a 1970 map of a U.S. base obtained by The Japan Times.

The alleged burial took place in 1969 when the area was part of the U.S. Hamby Air Field, but since its return to civilian use in 1981 the area has been redeveloped into a sightseeing area. Nearby today are restaurants, hotels and apartment buildings on a street running parallel to popular Araha Beach.

Recently there have been several other claims

concerning the burial of Agent Orange within U.S. military installations in Okinawa, but

this is the first time a site has been identified on civilian land, which may pave the way for independent environmental tests to be conducted.



Black mark: A U.S. military veteran who claims to have witnessed the burial of dozens of drums of Agent Orange in 1969 points to the site on a map. Today the area is a busy shopping district in the heart of touristy Chatan, Okinawa Prefecture. JOE SIPALA

In August, the veteran claimed he had helped offload dozens of barrels of dioxin-laden Agent Orange from an American transport ship that struck a reef in 1969. He says he then witnessed the defoliants being buried in a 45-meter-long trench at Hamby Air Field.

He was unable to identify the exact location of the alleged burial on current maps due to the changes that had occurred to the landscape over the past 42 years.

But with the help of a 1970 map of Hamby Air Field recently handed over by a concerned Okinawan resident, the veteran has pinpointed where the barrels are believed to be buried.

"As soon as I saw the long pier on that map, I knew exactly where they buried the Agent Orange. I used to go fishing from the pier all the time. Seeing it made it simple for me to find the site. There is no doubt in my mind," the veteran who was stationed in Okinawa told The Japan Times.

He is one of more than 20 U.S. veterans who have recently alleged that they saw or sprayed Agent Orange in Okinawa during the 1960s and 1970s when the island was an American staging area for the war in Vietnam.

Last month, their testimony prompted the mayors of four municipalities — including Chatan — to urge an investigation into the claims by the central government.

On Oct. 28, Okinawa Gov. Hirokazu Nakaima met U.S. Ambassador John V. Roos and asked him to help allay residents' worries over these poisonous chemicals.

The Pentagon denies that Agent Orange was ever present on Okinawa Island.

The veteran, who is sick with dioxin-related illnesses he asserts were caused by his exposure to defoliants on Okinawa, said that the U.S. government's continued denials are endangering the health of Chatan citizens.

"Agent Orange has wrecked my body and I worry about residents living in the area (of the burial). They have to move away. They'd better get their babies checked out, too. Those chemicals must be poisoning the land where they live. It needs to be tested."

A Chatan official who spoke on condition of anonymity said it is too early to decide whether dioxin tests are needed. But he made it clear where responsibility for such tests lie.

"If tests are to be conducted, it is the Japanese government's duty to do so. When it comes to military-related contamination, it must be the national government that does any tests and cleanups," the official said.

Until now, Tokyo has refused to cooperate with dioxin tests on U.S. installations that allegedly stored defoliants in Okinawa. On Nov. 24, the Foreign Ministry's Okinawa branch rejected demands from members of the Nago Municipal Assembly for such tests at Camp Schwab, a U.S. Marine Corps facility.

This is not the first time Washington has faced allegations of disposing of toxic chemicals on military installations in the Chatan area. In 2002, 215 barrels of an unidentified chemical were unearthed on former U.S.-owned land approximately 750 meters from where the former soldier is now alleging Agent Orange was buried.

According to Masami Kawamura, director of the nongovernmental Citizens' Network for Biological Diversity in Okinawa, the handling of that investigation was slipshod.

"Okinawa Prefecture conducted tests on only one of the barrels. Then they incinerated them all — along with 500 tons of contaminated soil — at an industrial waste processing facility. They didn't even test them for dioxins beforehand."

With these latest allegations coming to light, Kawamura worries that the 215 barrels might also have contained defoliants. Next month, the NGO plans to submit a petition for independent dioxin tests to the Okinawa Prefectural Assembly.

Wayne Dwernychuk, a dioxin expert who researched the impact of Agent Orange in Vietnam for more than 15 years, said environmental tests are the only surefire way to put public fears to rest.

"If Agent Orange was in the barrels that were buried there over 40 years ago, I am 100 percent confident that soil in the immediate area remains contaminated with dioxin," Dwernychuk said.

While Dwernychuk believes that the buried defoliants pose a minimal risk to current residents' health, he added, "My only caveat is that if there are water wells in the area that are fed by aquifers in close proximity to the burial site, leaching of Agent Orange or dioxin may have occurred."

Until now, the former soldier at the center of these allegations has been unwilling to go public with his identity.

However, he promises that will soon change. "I've scheduled a meeting with my congressman to explain what I saw happen in Hamby. The U.S. government has been lying for too long. It's time to get some truth for the veterans and the people of Okinawa."

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