



Agent Orange Claims Worry US Soldiers, Past and Present

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WAEGWAN, South Korea (KPHO) -

The scene has played out at U.S. military bases across South Korea. Activists protesting, upset about possible contamination caused by the U.S. military's alleged burial of toxic defoliants in the 1970s.

The U.S. has had a presence on military bases in South Korea since the end of the Korean War in the 1950s.

And what was once viewed as a humanitarian effort is now being questioned. Three helipads currently sit on the site where a Phoenix area veteran claims he helped bury hundreds of barrels of Agent Orange. "There is some concern," says a soldier stationed at Camp Carroll near the village of Waegwan, who asked not to be identified. Even U.S. soldiers here don't know what to believe.

"We're keeping the newspaper articles just in case years down the road we have medical issues dealing with this situation," says the soldier. "And we're doing it just to cover ourselves, just in case the scientists and the technology they are using to determine if there is Agent Orange on the helipad is wrong."

But the issue extends beyond just one camp. "We sprayed Agent Orange there on both the North and South side of the river," says former Army engineer battalion Capt. Phil Steward. He says he ordered soldiers to spray 300 to 500 drums of Agent Orange and other chemicals back in 1968 and 1969.

He says the military told them back then that there was no danger. "It was totally safe," said Steward. "It won't hurt you. It's just to kill the weeds. You can take a bath in it. You can brush your teeth with it."

The U.S. military does admit bringing Agent Orange into Korea. "We do have very good records of Agent Orange entering Korea in 1968," says U.S. Army Col. Joseph Birchmeier. "Three hundred-eighty barrels and eventually being transferred over to the ROK 1st Army for use along the DMZ."

Birchmeier says the defoliant was needed to keep North Koreans from crossing to the South. "They used all the Agent Orange that was brought into Korea at that point," he says. "In fact, the reports indicate they didn't have enough Agent Orange to complete the mission they were assigned along the DMZ."

But Steward argues they also sprayed around Camp Ethan Allen and Camp Peterson, where he was stationed. "I can honestly say if I had known 42 years ago what that was going to do to me, to my men and the Korean people, I don't think I would have given that order," said Steward. "I would have defied that order to spray."

Steward says he was just following orders. But that doesn't change anything. "That doesn't change the fact that the government knew, the Department of Defense knew there were dangerous properties to those chemicals. They hid it. They lied about it. And they're still lying about it. And that's got to stop."

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