

Study finds high pollution levels at most U.S. bases in S. Korea  
By Franklin Fisher, Stars and Stripes  
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PYEONGTAEK, South Korea — Most U.S. military installations in South Korea have high levels of polluted soil, in some cases up to 100 times higher than the country's environmental standard, according to a government study a newspaper made public this week.

The Ministry of Environment report — which the South Korean government has yet to release officially — was dated Oct. 4, 2005, according to Wednesday's edition of the South Korean newspaper Hankyoreh, which said it obtained a copy of the report.

The ministry on Thursday declined to release the report or publicly discuss it without the agreement of U.S. Forces Korea, the top U.S. military command in Seoul.  
USFK officials also declined to discuss the report.

"Return of U.S. bases is the subject of negotiations between [South Korea] and U.S. officials," said David Oten, a USFK spokesman in Seoul. "It would be inappropriate for us to comment on the specific issues being discussed while these negotiations are ongoing."

The ministry's report, according to Hankyoreh, said most of the U.S. installations are seriously contaminated by leakage of oil and heavy metals. It said levels of oil and lead were four times those permitted by South Korean environmental standards, the newspaper reported. When South Korean environmental officials did soil tests, 14 of 15 U.S. installations showed levels of metal pollutants that were an average of four times the permissible level.

The officials were part of a South Korean-U.S. environmental survey team, USFK said.

Among installations tested were camps Page, Garry Owen, Stanton, Grieves, Howze, Giant, Edwards, and three ranges, Texas, Oklahoma, and North Carolina, the report said. The Army since has vacated the camps for eventual return to South Korea. The three ranges continue operating, a 2nd Infantry Division spokesman said.

According to the newspaper, the survey showed that soil contamination levels at Camp Page in Chuncheon stood at more than 100 times above the permissible level. Samples from all eight installations tested for ground water pollution revealed toxins that exceeded permissible levels, the newspaper reported.

In 2005, ministry officials told the National Assembly's Environment and Labor committee that 14 of 15 U.S. installations tested for soil or water pollution needed some measure of environmental clean-up. "Camp Page in the city of Chuncheon tops the list for oil leakage pollution among those bases," Kang Sung-min, chief aide to Korean National Assemblyman Kim Hyung-ju, told Stars and Stripes on Thursday. The ministry's soil tests were made in connection with the eventual hand-over of many U.S. military installations to the South Korean government.

Under an agreement, the U.S. military is in the process of closing many installations, which are to be returned to the South Korean government by 2011. It plans to shift the bulk of its forces to several remaining installations in two regional hubs, one in Pyeongtaek, the other in the Daegu-Busan area. Hwang Hae-rym contributed to this report.

#### AGENT ORANGE UNITS SPRAYED OUTSIDE OF VIETNAM (KOREA)

In 1968-69, during the "Second Korean War," 59,000 gallons of three toxic chemicals defoliated nearly 21,000 acres of the DMZ. For vets of the U.S. 2nd and 7th Infantry divisions, the recent U.S. government acknowledgment is a major breakthrough. It is said you can no more win a war than you can win an earthquake. Events transpiring on the Korean Peninsula some 30 years ago add credence to that old adage. An investigation by the South Korean government into reports U.S. troops sprayed Agent Orange along the Korean demilitarized zone (DMZ) three decades ago has raised questions about possible contamination of American servicemen who also served on that hostile border. Citing declassified U.S. Department of Defense documents, Korean officials fear thousands of its soldiers may have come into contact with the deadly defoliant in the late 1960s and early 1970s. According to one top government official, as many as "30,000 Korean veterans are suffering from illness related to their exposure."

The exact number of GIs who may have been exposed is unknown. But C. David Benbow, a North Carolina attorney who served as a sergeant with Co. C, 3rd Bn., 23rd Inf. Regt., 2nd Div., along the DMZ in 1968-69, estimates as many as "4,000 soldiers at any given time" could have been affected.

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'Widespread' Herbicide Use Previously, the U.S. government had said Agent Orange was used only in Vietnam. But a recent television report by the Seoul Broadcasting System quoted from the Defense Department documents:

"American troops stationed in South Korea spread more than 21,000 gallons of toxic defoliants along the border in 1968 and 1969." At a Pentagon briefing, Rear Adm. Craig Quigley said the U.S. military "researched the matter" as a result of the South Korean media reports. "[But] there is no evidence of an effort to cover up use of Agent Orange in Korea," Quigley stated. Its use was not classified but "just had fallen off people's scopes for a long period of time."

There was "widespread knowledge" of the use of herbicides in Korea at the time, Quigley added. "Along with involvement of the U.S. secretary of state and comparable South Korean officials." Regardless of the claims and counter-claims, evidence of existence of the previously classified documents has been around for more than a decade. Denver Combs, director of the Montgomery County Veterans Service Center in Kettering, Ohio, cited the documents in a Jan. 11, 1989, newspaper column.

"[Recently released documents] clearly substantiates that Agent Orange was also applied in Korea as early as 1968," Combs wrote. "[Agent Orange] was used primarily along the DMZ where over 12,000 of our men were assigned." According to Combs, the chemical was used "to keep the area on either side of the 18.5-mile barrier clear of vegetation."

The report first came to light through the persistence of Richard D. Morrow, a former 2nd Infantry Division soldier who also "walked the perimeter" during the early 1970s. Upon returning to the states, Morrow began to develop classic symptoms of Agent Orange exposure. "After [Morrow] fought to get the documents released," Benbow said, "he stayed with it until Congress passed the Agent Orange Act of 1991." Essentially, because of Morrow's efforts, Benbow added, "The legislation allows for service members stationed outside of Vietnam to apply for VA disability benefits."

According to the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), service members who served along the Korean DMZ during the late 1960s and early 1970s are covered under the 1991 Agent Orange Act. For veterans who served elsewhere on the peninsula, eligibility for benefits will be determined on a case-by-case basis. Special legislation would have to be enacted for "blanket coverage," VBA says.

#### SINCERE MOTIVATION

In the intervening years, Combs, Benbow, Morrow and others have worked to bring the story to the public's attention. Mostly, however, it remained a back-burner topic until the Korean media broke it last November. Benbow thinks it's about time. "An old Army buddy of mine, Jimmy Fleenor, often commented that he remembered being on patrol [along the DMZ] and walking through head-high vegetation dripping with defoliant and diesel fuel," Benbow said. "He told me how his clothes were soaked from the defoliant even though it hadn't rained for days."

It's stories like this that have kept me motivated to try to do the right thing."

Benbow, an "Admin. NCO," who also "walked patrol and served in the foxholes [along the DMZ]," remembers seeing Korean troops and service workers using "hand-applied sprayers" to clear away the thick foliage in the no-man's land separating North from South Korea.

"Every night of the 16 months I spent in Korea, GIs were sitting in foxholes along the barrier fence and the area was totally devoid of vegetation," Benbow said. "We also filled our canteens and water cans from a spring at the base of a defoliated guard post called 'Gladys.' Agent Orange had to have washed down the hill and into our water supply."

#### VA DECISION CRUCIAL

A March 12, 1999, ruling by VA's Board of Appeals served to bolster Benbow's claims. Citing the 1991 legislation, the Board awarded full VA benefits to a former "Camp Casey soldier" suffering from non-Hodgkin's lymphoma (a cancer widely associated with Agent Orange exposure).

Linkage of the disease with exposure to Agent Orange in Korea marked a major milestone for Benbow and his fellow veterans. "Taken [in context] with release of the documents, there is no doubt that our suspicions were right all along," Benbow said. "[We] are not doing this for anything other than fairness."

#### REF:

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NEW Information provided regarding the use of Agent Orange in Korea along the DMZ, including the units in the area during the period in which AO was sprayed. Department of Defense (DoD) has now provided a correction to two of the cited units. Previously reported as the 109th and 209th Infantry, those units were actually 1/9th and 2/9th Infantry. A corrected listing of units are as follows:

The four combat brigades of the 2nd Infantry Division:

1/38th Infantry, 2/38th Infantry, 1/23rd Infantry,  
2/23rd Infantry, 3/23rd Infantry, 3/32nd Infantry, 1/9th Infantry,  
1/72nd Armor, 2/72nd Armor,  
4th/7th Cavalry.

Also the 3rd Brigade of the 7th Infantry Division:

1/17th Infantry, 2/17th Infantry,  
1/73rd Armor,  
2/10th Cavalry.

DoD has stated that 21,000 gallons of AO were sprayed in Korea in 1968 and 1969 in an area from the Civilian Control Line to the Southern boundary of the DMZ. Only Republic of Korea troops were involved in the

actual spraying of the herbicide AO in Korea. However, it is plausible that U.S. service members in the area near spraying operations may have been exposed to AO during this period.

There were approximately 40,000 US service members deployed annually in Korea in 68-69, with nearly 100 percent turnover each year, i.e. as many as 80,000 service members over the two year period.

VA currently offers through its VA Medical Centers the Agent Orange Registry (AOR) examination to all United States veterans who served in Vietnam during the Vietnam War. Participating veterans are given baseline lab work-ups, with particular attention to those illnesses that VA presumptively links to AO exposure. The AOR has helped Vietnam War veterans by providing an entrance to VA healthcare, providing the opportunity for recording a comprehensive military history, and as a means of veterans outreach to share future developments and provide access to VA's Agent Orange Review newsletter.

VA will now provide a veteran who served in the Korean Conflict in 1968-69 with this same AOR examination, consultation and counseling, if the veteran requests participation in the AOR examination program. Accordingly, The benefits alluded to many likewise extend to these covered Korean veterans. In addition, VA's general outreach authority permits VA to notify veterans who served in Korea in 1968-1969 about the AOR program and to include them in the Departments AOR examination program updates and newsletters.

Veterans seeking the AOR examination are urged to contact the nearest VA Medical Center.

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Information contained herein is from the Florida Department of Veterans Affairs Regional Office in St. Petersburg, Florida and is considered reliable and accurate information.

• • VA Agent Orange Benefits site:  
<http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/benefits/herbicide/>  
• • VA's AO Claims info:  
<http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/benefits/herbicide/AOno3.htm>