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Matthew Benns and Frank Walker | May 18, 2008

THE Australian Army tested chemical weapons on a town which now has deaths from cancer 10 times the state average.

Military scientists sprayed the toxic defoliant Agent Orange in the jungle that is part of the water catchment area for Innisfail in Queensland's far north at the start of the Vietnam War. The Sun-Herald last week found the site where military scientists tested Agent Orange in 1966. It is on a ridge little more 100 metres above the Johnstone River, which supplies the drinking water for Innisfail.

40 years later the site - which abuts farmer Alan Wakeham's land - is still bare, covered only in tough Guinea grass, but surrounded by thick jungle. "It's strange how the jungle comes right up to this site and then just stops. It won't grow any further," Mr Wakeham said.

Agent Orange was sprayed extensively in Vietnam to defoliate the jungle and remove cover for North Vietnamese troops. It contains chemicals including the dioxin TCDD, which causes forms of cancer, birth defects and other health problems.

Researcher Jean Williams found details of the secret Innisfail tests in the Australian War Memorial archives. "These tests carried out between 1964 and 1966 were the first tests of Agent Orange and they were carried out at Gregory Falls near Innisfail," said Ms Williams, who has been awarded the Order of Australia Medal for her work on the effects of chemicals on Vietnam veterans. "I was told there is a high rate of cancer there but no one can understand why. Perhaps now they will understand." Ms Williams unearthed 3 boxes of damning files.

One file showed the chemicals 2,4-D, Diquat, Tordon and dimethyl sulphoxide (DMSO) were sprayed on the rainforest in the Gregory Falls area in June 1966. The file carried the remarks: "Considered sensitive because report recommends use of 2,4-D with other agents in aerial spraying trials in Innisfail." Ms Williams said: "It was considered sensitive because they were mixing together all the bad chemicals, which just made them worse. They cause all the cancers."

Ms Williams claims a file which could indicate much wider testing in a project called Operation Desert had gone missing. The contents were marked "too disturbing to ever be released".

"Those chemicals stay in the soil for years and every time there is a storm they are stirred up and go into the water supply," Ms Williams said.

"The poor people of Innisfail have been kept in the dark about this. But these chemicals cause cancer and deformities that are passed on for generations. It is shocking. I am just an 83-year-old war-weary battler. I don't want any more medals, I just want justice for the people of Innisfail."

Queensland Health Department figures show Innisfail, which has a population of almost 12,000, had 76 people die from cancer in 2005. That is 4 times the national rate of death from cancer and 10 times the Queensland average.

Australian War Memorial director Steve Gower confirmed the file on Operation Desert could not be found.

Australia and Britain opened a joint tropical research unit at Innisfail in 1962. In 1969 the Liberal defence minister Allen Fairhall flatly denied chemical warfare experiments had been associated with the unit at Innisfail. But last week The Sun-Herald found the site and an old digger, a decorated veteran of three wars, who had worked on the experiment.

Innisfail local Ted Bosworth, 86, fought in the New Guinea campaign in World War II, copped a bullet in the lungs in the Korean War for which he was awarded the Military Medal and was in the Army Reserve during the Vietnam War. In 1966 he drove scientists to the site where the spraying occurred. "There was an English scientist and an Australian. I heard they both later died of cancer. "They sprayed by hand. The forest started dying within days. By 3 weeks all the foliage was gone. The scientists always denied it was Agent Orange. They were pretty cagey."

Mr Bosworth confirmed photos The Sun-Herald took were of the experiment site. "That is the area they sprayed. That is it. It was on top of the ridge next to grassland in the trees. It hasn't changed much in all these years."

Innisfail RSL president Reg Hamann suffers terrible effects from Agent Orange he was exposed to during the Vietnam War.

"A lot of my unit have died of cancer. I've got cancer of the oesophagus and stomach. I have to sleep on a special bed that raises me 17 degrees or everything in my stomach rises up. I've had a subdural haemorrhage, a heart attack and a quadruple bypass.

"It passes on to the next generation. My son was born with a deformed lung. My daughter has got the same skin problem I have from Agent Orange. Now my grandkids are going to get it." Mr Hamann is angry at the lies and deceit about the effects of Agent Orange on veterans and their families. Now he's discovered that while he was fighting in Vietnam the Australian government was experimenting with Agent Orange upriver from his home town.

"We were sprayed regularly by Agent Orange as they cleared the river banks. We had no idea how dangerous the stuff was. They'd fly over us and give us a squirt just for fun and wiggle their wings. We took it as a joke. But the stuff turned out to be a curse."

"I saw in Vietnam what Agent Orange did to an area and I am shocked to learn they used it here. It was kept secret. The army didn't tell anyone. It was just some of the old army guys and local farmers who knew they were experimenting up there. "I believe it must have something to do with the high cancer rates in Innisfail. The amount of young people in this area who die of leukaemia and similar cancers to what I got from Agent Orange is scary. The authorities are scared of digging into it as there would be lots of law suits. "The sad part is the number of kids who get cancer here. It's been that way at least since I came here in 1970. That means it can't be chemical spraying on the bananas as they only came here 15 years ago.

"They've always used Innisfail as guinea pigs. They did it in World War II and they did it during Vietnam. It's time to set it right."

Val Robertson, 74, said a high number of local people aged in their 40s were dying from cancer, about one a month for the last 12 months. "That's a lot for a small town like Innisfail. They would have been babies when they were spraying Agent Orange," she said.

Innisfail Mayor Bill Shannon said there was a high cancer rate in the area and there should be a full investigation. The Queensland Government and the Federal Government said they would look into the issue.

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