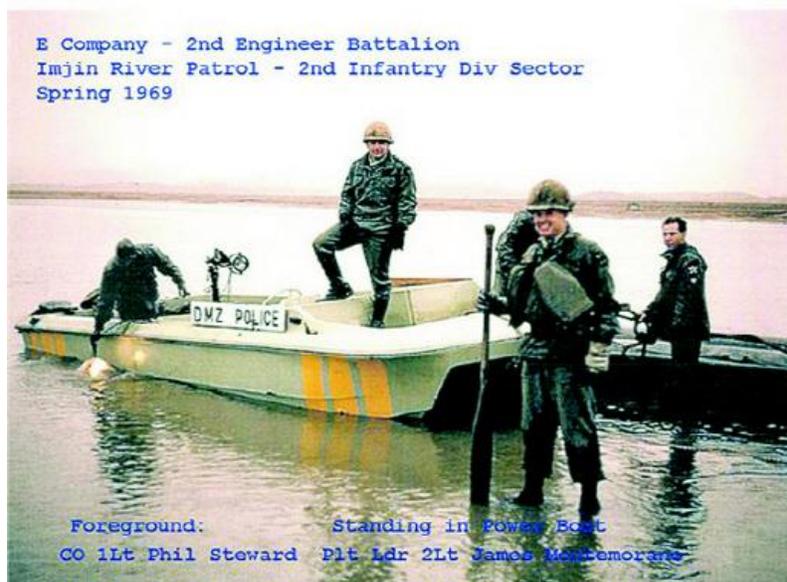


THE HANKYOREH

USFK officer battles with VA over Agent Orange exposure

Phil Steward says the U.S. government is not stating the full truth about defoliant exposure

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» Lieutenant Phil Steward holds an oar and poses for a commemorative photo with other members of the Imjin River Patrol in the spring of 1969. (Courtesy of Phil Steward)
By Kwon Tae-ho, Washington Correspondent

As the dispute over burial of Agent Orange at Camp Carroll continues, one retired United States Forces Korea (USFK) officer is fighting another battle with the U.S. government for the sake of his former subordinates who are suffering from the after-effects of the defoliant.

Phil Steward, 63, who served as a 2nd Engineer Battalion captain at Camp Peterson and Camp Ethan Allen in the US Army 2nd Infantry Division, controlling the Imjin River area in northern Gyeonggi Province, from October 1968 to December 1969, shared his story through a telephone interview with the Hankyoreh on May 28.

“The men in my unit and I sprayed around 300-500 drums of Agent Orange and monuron around our camps, on the banks of the Imjin River, on Freedom Bridge and on roads in the DMZ at that time,” said Steward. “We did this in order to secure visibility over areas of North Korea and to remove weeds from around the barracks.”

Neither he nor his subordinates, however, knew at the time how dangerous defoliant was. They washed themselves and drank water right next to where they had sprayed it.

After being discharged in November 1970, Steward spent the next 20 years working in legal professions. He has run a company selling Stars and Stripes flags in Georgia since around 1990.

In 2003, Steward experienced heart attack symptoms. In 2006, he collapsed from a stroke. In addition, he was overcome by an array of illnesses at the same time: diabetes, coronary artery trouble, high blood pressure, nervous disorders, senile cataracts, disk trouble and skin cancer. These had nothing to do with his genes. He knew intuitively that his diseases were after-effects of defoliant. In 2009, after a long struggle with the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), his "damage due to past duty" was acknowledged.

As he fought with both his illnesses and VA, he felt the promise he had made to his subordinates 40 years ago gradually coming back. In April 1969, he had promised before 285 subordinates, "If you follow my orders, I will take full responsibility for you." His men faithfully carried out their duties.

"I set out to find my men again five years ago, after I started wondering, if I was in this state despite not even having sprayed defoliant myself, how must the men who sprayed it with their own hands [on my orders] be?" he said. He posted a message on a former USFK personnel website and made contact with one person at a time. Some of his men called him at 2 a.m. and made emotional reunions over the telephone.

To him, such events were not a quest to find affectionate memories.

"Three of my men died from the after-effects of defoliant. Around 150 are sick. I found out that a considerable number of them [unlike me] have not had their conditions recognized by VA," he said.

He has lost full control of both his legs and arms to peripheral vein disorders. Working with a computer takes him a long time, and walking for long periods is hard for him. He is still pursuing VA on behalf of his former subordinates, however, applying for defoliant-related damages and reassessments, gathering old documents and evidence, and meeting and appealing to government officials and lawmakers. As a result, not only his former comrades but some other retired servicemen suffering from the after-effects of defoliant are getting in contact with him. VA's extension, in February this year, of the defoliant exposure compensation period for US servicemen stationed in Korea, from April 1968 to July 1969 by two years to end in August 1971, was also thanks to his persistent protests and document submission.

"The U.S. government is not stating the full truth about defoliant," he said. "We fought a silent war on Korean soil 40 years ago in order to defend freedom, and now we are fighting another war with the U.S. government, which does not acknowledge those suffering from the after-effects of defoliant." He emphasized, "I will keep on fighting, for the promise I made 40 years ago and for my former comrades."

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