



## Agent Orange on Okinawa - The Smoking Gun: U.S. army report, photographs show 25,000 barrels on island in early '70s

[Japanese translation available [here](#)]

Jon Mitchell

During the Vietnam War, 25,000 barrels of Agent Orange were stored on Okinawa, according to a recently uncovered U.S. army report.<sup>1</sup> The barrels, containing over 1.4 million gallons (5.2 million liters) of the toxic defoliant, had been brought to Okinawa from Vietnam before being taken to Johnston Island in the Pacific Ocean where the US military incinerated its stocks of Agent Orange in 1977.



The discovery made the headlines of both the Okinawa Times



.. and the Ryukyu Shimpo

The army report is the first time the U.S. military has acknowledged the presence of these poisons on Okinawa - and it contradicts repeated denials from the Pentagon that Agent Orange was ever on the island. At the same time that the document was revealed, a series of photographs was also uncovered apparently showing many of the 25,000 barrels in storage on Okinawa's Camp Kinser near Naha City.

The army report, published in 2003, is titled "An Ecological Assessment of Johnston Atoll". Outlining the military's efforts to clean up the tiny island that the U.S. used throughout the Cold War to store and dispose of its stockpiles of biochemical weapons, the report states, "In 1972, the U.S. Air Force brought about 25,000 55-gallon (208 liter) drums of the chemical Herbicide Orange (HO) to Johnston Island that originated from Vietnam and was stored on Okinawa."

In the early 1970s, the U.S. government banned the usage of Agent Orange in Vietnam after scientific studies showed the dioxin-tainted herbicide posed a serious threat to human health.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the time frame stated in the report suggests that the barrels were a part of Operation Red Hat - the military's 1971 operation to remove from Okinawa its 12,000-ton stores of

chemical weapons (including mustard gas, VX and sarin) in preparation for Okinawa's reversion to Japanese control the following year.<sup>3</sup>

A previous statement from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in 2009 stated, "The records pertaining to Operation Red Hat show herbicide agents were stored and then later disposed in Okinawa from August 1969 to March 1972."<sup>4</sup> However, attempts to access the sources the V.A. used to make that statement - including the filing of multiple Freedom of Information Act requests - have been hampered by U.S. authorities.

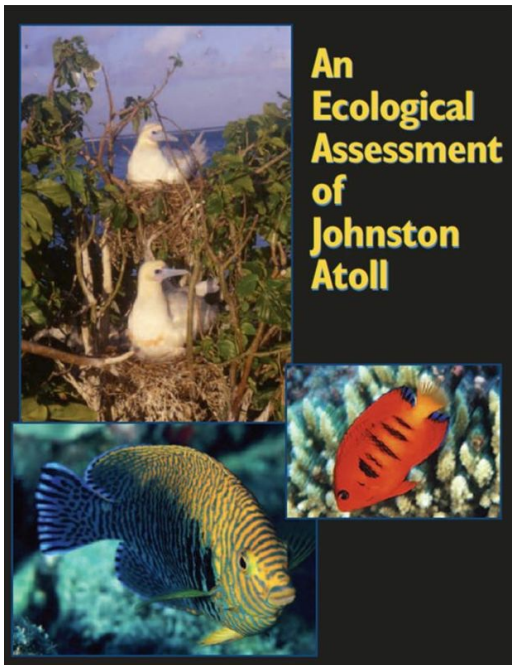
Lending weight to suspicions that the barrels were shipped as part of Operation Red Hat was the discovery by independent researcher Furugen Nao of a set of photographs in the Prefecture's archives. The images were taken during a U.S. military public relations event designed to assure the local media that the safety procedures in place for Operation Red Hat were sound. However, in the background of the shots, there is a large stack of barrels. Apparently striped with painted lids, they are consistent with the way in which the U.S. military shipped herbicides during the Vietnam War.

According to documents supplied by veterans involved in the shipment of stocks of Agent Orange to Johnston Island, the barrels arrived in various stages of deterioration. Some accounts indicate that almost 9000 of the 25,000 barrels developed leaks on Johnston Island - leading to the contamination of large areas of land.<sup>5</sup>

These accounts have caused alarm on Okinawa where local residents have, for the past 12 months, been urging the authorities to conduct environmental tests within the bases where U.S. veterans allege Agent Orange had been stored. However, both Tokyo and Washington have refused these requests.<sup>6</sup>

During the past year and a half, dozens of U.S. veterans have spoken out about their spraying, storage and disposal of Agent Orange on Okinawa during the 1960s and '70s. At this time, the island was a major staging point for the U.S. war in Vietnam where the American military sprayed millions of liters of Agent Orange poisoning tens of thousands of its own troops and an estimated 3 million Vietnamese people.<sup>7</sup> Many former service members stationed on Okinawa claim that they are suffering from similar illnesses due to exposure to the herbicide. However, the U.S. government is only known to have paid compensation to three of these veterans - including a former soldier who was poisoned whilst handling thousands of barrels of Agent Orange at Naha Port between 1965 and 1967.<sup>8</sup>

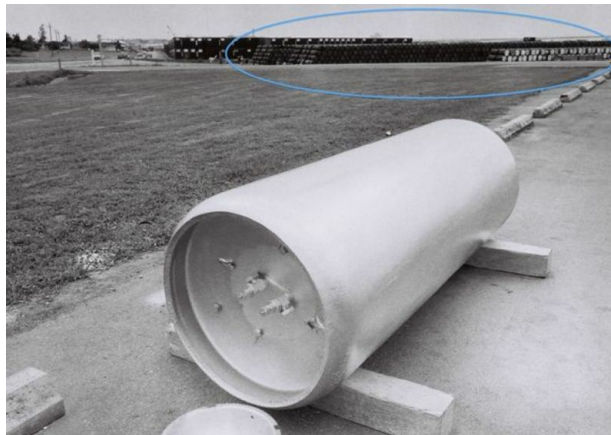
During the Vietnam War, 50,000 Okinawans were also employed on the island's U.S. installations and there is increasing evidence to suggest that they - and local residents - have been affected, too.<sup>9</sup> However, attempts to organize health surveys have been stymied by the authorities. According to Kawamura Masami, cofounder of Okinawa Outreach, the citizens' group at the forefront of demands for a full inquest into Agent Orange usage on the island, the Okinawan Prefectural government "claimed that if they 'investigated blindly' without identifying locations with 'high probabilities' of being contaminated with



An Ecological Assessment of Johnston Atoll



US military PR exercise for Operation Red Hat



Camp Kinser - Red Hat Preparations

AO, this could just create rumors harmful to the communities. [We] reminded them that it's the prefectural government's responsibility to protect Okinawan people's life, health and the environment and that the prefectural government has not fulfilled that responsibility." 10

Following the discovery of the army report, ten former service members wrote a letter to the U.S. Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs demanding a full investigation into the military's usage of Agent Orange on Okinawa. "We have a strong desire to do the right

thing for all of the U.S. veterans who were exposed to herbicides/Dioxin on Okinawa as well as for Okinawa", states the letter, organized by former Air Force sergeant, Joe Sipala.

Sipala, who believes he was exposed to Agent Orange on the island in 1970, and the nine other veterans have offered to travel to Washington to testify before Senators on the issue. The former service members were angered last year when the U.S. government and Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs stated that veterans' accounts of herbicides on Okinawa were dubious.<sup>11</sup>



Proud to serve - Joe Sipala - organizer of the veterans' letter campaign to the U.S. senate

"That is insulting to the credibility and integrity of the men and woman who served honorably, giving up years of our young lives to protect our great country of the United States of America and the island of Okinawa," says Sipala's letter.

Sipala said that he hopes the letter will convince the U.S. government to provide compensation to veterans who believe they were exposed to Agent Orange on Okinawa. At the moment, the government provides help to U.S. veterans who were exposed to military herbicides in Vietnam, Thailand and along the demilitarized zone in Korea. But Pentagon denials over the presence of these herbicides on Okinawa have prevented hundreds of veterans from receiving aid.

John Olin, the Florida-based researcher who discovered the 2003 army report, says he will keep investigating the military's usage of Agent Orange on Okinawa. "Right now we have two governments - Japan and the U.S. - who were actively working together for many decades to lie to their citizens. There is an obvious disinformation campaign on this issue that only makes me want to look closer."

This is a revised and expanded version of an article that appeared in *The Japan Times* on August 7, 2012. A Japanese translation is available [here](#).

**Jon Mitchell** teaches at Tokyo Institute of Technology and is an Asia-Pacific Journal associate. In September 2012, "Defoliated Island", a TV documentary based upon his research, was awarded a commendation for excellence by Japan's National Association of Commercial Broadcasters. An English version of the

program is currently in production in order to assist U.S. veterans exposed to military defoliants on Okinawa.

Updates on the issue can be found [here](#) and at Joe Sipala's [Facebook page](#).

Recommended Citation: Jon Mitchell, "Agent Orange on Okinawa - The Smoking Gun: U.S. army report, photographs show 25,000 barrels on island in early '70s," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 10, Issue 40, No. 2, October 1, 2012.

#### Notes

1. The full document, "An Ecological Assessment of Johnston Atoll", can be accessed from the U.S. Army Chemical Materials Activity homepage [here](#).

2. For a concise overview of the campaign to ban Agent Orange see Philip Jones Griffiths, "Agent Orange - 'Collateral Damage in Viet Nam'", Trolley Ltd., London, 2003.
3. For a more detailed explanation of Operation Red Hat, see: Jon Mitchell, "[Military defoliants on Okinawa: Agent Orange](#)", *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, September 12, 2011.
4. The full text of the V.A. ruling is available [here](#).
5. From interviews with author conducted Summer 2012. Plus see [this](#).
6. For an account of Okinawan NGO Citizens' Network for Biodiversity's June 2012 meeting with Okinawa Prefecture see [here](#).
7. See for example Fred Wilcox, *Scorched Earth: Legacies of Chemical Warfare in Vietnam*, Seven Stories Press, New York, 2011.
8. See: Jon Mitchell. "[U.S. Veteran Exposes Pentagon's Denials of Agent Orange Use on Okinawa](#)," *The Asia-Pacific Journal*, Vol 10, Issue 17, No. 2.
9. See for example: Jon Mitchell, '[Agent Orange on Okinawa - New Evidence](#),' *The Asia-Pacific Journal* Vol 9, Issue 48 No 1.
10. See [this](#).
11. Ibid.