

# AGENT ORANGE: WAS CANADA A TEST-GROUND OR UNWILLING VICTIM?

by Sue Drapeau of the Picaro

The Canadian political arena has been buzzing lately with the news of a secret testing of the herbicide Agent Orange on Canadian soil. The testing, which happened in 1966 at CFB Gagetown, New Brunswick, was not well known about even in political circles in Canada until about four weeks ago.

It was only two weeks ago Friday that a defense department spokesman acknowledged that the armed forces had worked with the U.S. army in testing chemical defoliants during the Vietnam war. That acknowledgement came after New Democratic Party MPs Simon de Jong and Terry Sargeant revealed an October 1968 U.S. army report which detailed the Canadian testing of Agent Orange at CFB Gagetown. They were able to obtain the report as a result of recent American freedom of information legislation.

De Jong, (Regina East), NDP science spokesman said he was concerned about health problems which could be caused around Gagetown as a result of the use of Agent Orange. His concern centered around claims of ill effects from U.S. veterans who served in Vietnam. "We know of thousands of Vietnam vets who are now in the midst of court battles with their government over the effects of Agent Orange on their health and the health of their children born since their return home," said de Jong in a statement to the press two weeks ago.

Since the announcement by the two NDP MP's, the federal minister of health, Monique Begin and New Brunswick minister of health Brenda Robertson have jumped on the bandwagon and have decided to carry out some testing in the area surrounding Gagetown, to determine whether or not there have been any hazards to the health of local residents as a result of the spraying.

One thing which Begin said will complicate their studies is the still widespread use of the main components of Agent Orange, 2, 4-D and 2, 4, 5-T, in Canadian agriculture and industry. Robertson reported that those chemical components are still in use in New Brunswick. She said the province banned the use of 2,4,5-T two years ago but forestry company pressure led to its use again last summer over 35,000 acres of remote woodland. Its use was later banned again in any form. Other uses of 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T as late as 1980 have been reported by Catherine Richards, of Concerned Parents Group in New Brunswick. Her reports were confirmed by provincial officials, but Ken Brown, chairman of the provincial department's Pesticides Advisory Board, said the use of the defoliant is prudent, careful and justified.

Environmentalists are also up in arms about the recent debate surrounding Agent Orange. Dana Silk, president of the conservation council of New Brunswick, said that the recent report is another example of how New Brunswick has been repeatedly used as a dumping ground for chemicals that other provinces would not accept. She was upset that New Brunswick continued to be a dumping ground, but did not lay any blame, either with the provincial or federal government.

Jean Foster, president of the Concerned Parents Group of New Brunswick, said she hoped the controversy would result in a public outcry against the use of herbicides and pesticides everywhere in Canada. She reported that dioxin, a lethal chemical contained in the defoliants 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T, has found its way into the food chain and has been found in birds' eggs along the Bay of Fundy.

The controversy was complicated by a statement made by the only Canadian who was involved in the Agent Orange testing at Gagetown in 1966. He flew the helicopter which did the spraying over the area and said he didn't know what all the fuss was about. He reported being "drenched in the stuff" during a test run, but was not concerned since he had suffered no ill effects.

## The History

Agent Orange is not a new problem in the political or environmental arena. Its use seems to have been very secretive in Vietnam and there is conflicting data about when it was in use, how much of it was used, the safety precautions that were taken and the American Veterans Administration's insistence that Agent Orange is not endangering anyone's health.

Reports of the length and extent of its use in Vietnam vary. The use of Agent Orange to defoliate underbrush began around 1965 and supposedly its use was stopped in 1969 when public protests demanded it. Many journals, however, reported its use in Vietnam as late as 1972. 45 million litres of it was dumped on Vietnam in this dubious time frame.

There are also discrepancies in reports of the safety precautions taken during its use in Vietnam. The Defense Department claims that there were no American troops near Agent Orange spraying sites for four to six weeks after spraying. Another government department says however that it knows of 16,100 marines between 1966 and 1969 that were assigned to regions that came close to or into regions that had been sprayed with Agent Orange no more than four weeks earlier. 5900 of those were there on the day of spraying.

## The Current American Debate

In the last three years over 4,000 Vietnam veterans have filed claims against the Veterans Administration. Their medical complaints include headaches, nervous disorders, chloracne, tumors, liver problems and birth defects.

Baltimore native Franklin Sorenson thought he was a freak of nature until he started hearing about others who had returned from Vietnam and were experiencing similar medical problems. His include headaches and an unusual urinal discharge. His first child born after his return was normal, but the second has a deformed hand. His wife's last two pregnancies have resulted in failure; one was stillborn, the other miscarried and the Sorensons are afraid to try again.

Last February when 300 Long Island, N.Y. veterans met in Bay Shore, they exchanged tales of terror, the terror of theirs and their families' maladies since their return from Vietnam. The reported ailments ranged from the constant pain of Jim Albrington, 34, from pus filled lumps of chloracne on his skin, to the 18 birth defects of Mike Ryan's eight year old daughter, Kerry. Kerry's defects include missing bones in her right arm and intestinal malformations.

The tales of terror could go on ad nauseum but the real fact remains that returning Vietnam veterans by the thousands are facing the kind of medical maladies described above. The real fact also remains that the Veterans Administration are being very slow to act.

The attitude of the VA has been that none of the claims of the veterans can be conclusively linked to the use of Agent Orange. The claims coming in are based on a belief that the impurity in Agent Orange, dioxin, is one of the most toxic substances known to man. The VA is denying any such claims though. So are the five manufacturers of Agent Orange, including Dow Chemicals.

The VA's attitude is that "no casual relationship has yet been proven to exist between the exposure to Agent Orange and the grim litany of horrors suffered by the veterans of Vietnam."

There are five studies on hazardous health effects on humans which were released by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to the VA which haven't yet appeared in any documents released by the VA on Agent Orange. Two of these studies include the death of Swedish railroad workers who were exposed to phenoxy acids and showed similar medical complaints to that of the Vietnam veterans. Other studies showed higher incidence of stomach cancers and lymphatic cancers as a result of exposure in Sweden and West Germany to phenoxy acids.

The Agent Orange manufacturers have

jumped on the legal bandwagon as well. In the threat of a class action suit involving more than 2,000 American servicemen, they have filed suits themselves against the government, claiming that the chemical was misused and that the government was warned of the potential dangers and chose to ignore them.

The way the battle looks now is that it will take years of suits and countersuits in the highest courts in the country before anything is settled and any blame is laid. Meanwhile thousands of veterans are waiting, and suffering.

## Environmentally Speaking

The principle components of Agent Orange are 2,4-D and Trichlorophenoxyacetic acid or 2,4,5-T. Both are commonly used herbicides and their effect is in killing broadleaved plants by altering growth processes.

An impurity, a bi-product often found in Agent Orange, is tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin (TCDD). This is perhaps one of the most deadly substances known to man and is the one causing most of the controversy over ill effects suffered as a result of exposure to Agent Orange.

The phenoxy acids, the group which 2,4-D and 2,4,5-T belong, is a widely used range of herbicides. Environmentalists are concerned that the defoliation it is intended to put into effect is also causing a broader ranged problem in the ecosystems where they are used. Aside from upsetting a delicate ecological balance, there is some concern that the defoliants are also having effects on any other vegetation in the area. Animal life is at risk as well.

The concern is not just a suspicion. Phenoxy acid compounds have been known to retard the growth of pine and fir trees, the trees which the defoliation in the forestry industry is supposed to benefit. There have been battles going on for years over the suspected hazards and the dubious benefits of the use of defoliants such as Agent Orange.

Dioxin, which is found as an impurity in many of these herbicides, is of major concern to environmentalists. Its toxic effects on man are starting to be felt and there are concerns that even those not directly exposed will eventually be affected via the food they eat.

A big question about dioxin several years ago was whether or not it would accumulate in the food chain. If one organism can't rid its body of the chemical before it is eaten by another organism, one level higher up the food chain, then the effect is cumulative. As it moves up the food chain, it becomes more and more concentrated. This makes the potential danger very great for man, being an omnivore. All meat eaters, carnivores and omnivores have cause for concern.

It has indeed been found, through a study of fish populations in Vietnam in 1973, that dioxin is moving up the food chain. Concentrations as high as 975 parts per trillion were found in these fish.

Some American cattle have also been found to have unacceptable levels of dioxin in their system.

Government regulations and acceptance of responsibility haven't helped. In both Canada and the U.S. there have been cases document where laws were passed banning the use of such chemicals and then broken through the pressure of strong lobbying groups such as forestry and chemical manufacturing industries.

The way the laws have been established, at least in the U.S. is that in order for the EPA to do anything to help an environmental concern group, they must provide an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) and this puts the burden on the plaintiff to prove that some environmental harm has already been done.

In the case of Agent Orange and other herbicides like it, the damage is only now beginning to show up, years after the damage is done, and too late to save the victims.

Government regulation and bureaucracy finds us all sitting on our hands and biting our tongues waiting for something to be done.