

US panel to study Agent Orange residue exposure

May 14 2014, by Chad Garland

The U.S. Veterans Affairs Department has long resisted disability claims from service members who said chemical residue left in Vietnam War-era planes that were used to spray defoliants over Southeast Asia caused them severe illnesses, including cancer.

This year, a panel of independent scientists will try to determine whether those [veterans](#) could have been exposed to the toxins in defoliants, including Agent Orange, at a level that would be dangerous to their health.

If the panel finds a link, the service members could be eligible for tax-free disability compensation up to several thousand dollars a month.

That's something Wes Carter, a retired Air Force major, believes is long overdue.

"We've got some sick folks that are not allowed to go into the VA," said Carter, who believes his prostate cancer and other disorders are due to his exposure to dioxin, a contaminant found in Agent Orange.

Carter served on C-123s in the Air Force Reserves as a medic from 1974 to 1980. The planes were used to spray millions of gallons of defoliants to destroy crops and eliminate jungle cover used by the North Vietnamese Army and the Vietcong.

The military stopped the spraying by early 1971 over concerns that some

defoliants contained compounds harmful to humans. Air Force Reserve units in the U.S. continued to fly them on cargo and medevac missions until the early 1980s.

Over the years veterans who flew in those planes have been getting sick, and like many Vietnam veterans, they're blaming the defoliants.

The VA does not require Vietnam veterans to prove they were exposed to the herbicides.

Service members who served on the planes after their return to the U.S. need to "show on a factual basis that they were exposed in order to receive disability compensation," the VA said in an email statement.

Carter said the 2,100 veterans who served on the aircraft after the war should get the same benefit of the doubt.

Dr. Terry Walters, deputy chief consultant in the VA's Post Deployment Health group, said she understands the frustration, but the VA is simply following the law. She said Congress provided the presumption for Vietnam veterans because there was no way to measure their actual exposure.

The difference for the postwar C-123 veterans, she said, is that there are dioxin measurements from the planes that can be used to make a risk assessment. "You have to draw the line somewhere," Walters said.

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