

## **Veteran wins groundbreaking claim for Agent Orange exposure at Georgia military base.**

A U.S. veteran living in Tennessee has won what's thought to be the first Veterans Administration claim for exposure inside the continental United States to **Agent Orange**, an herbicide that was used by the military to clear jungles during the Vietnam War.

Agent Orange -- which got its name from the color of the barrels it was shipped in -- was among the herbicides used the U.S. military during the Vietnam era that were contaminated with dioxins, chemicals known to cause birth defects and genetic mutations as well as cancers. It was produced by companies including Dow Chemical and Monsanto.

Earlier this month, the VA granted the claim of James Cripps related to his exposure to the chemical while he was stationed at **Fort Gordon, Ga.** He sought compensation for medical conditions related to Agent Orange including chloracne, diabetes and heart disease.

Cripps, who currently serves as the chair of the Vietnam Veterans of America Tennessee Agent Orange Committee, announced the news in an online veterans' issues forum:

*On November 2, 2009, I won the first ever VA claim for Agent Orange exposure, "inside the Continental United States." The claim was granted for Chloracne, Diabetes and Heart Disease with ICD implant, as due to Agent Orange exposure at **Fort Gordon GA.** in the years 1967-1969. You will be able to read the Board of Veterans Appeals detailed decision along with the supporting evidence at [WWW.va.gov](http://WWW.va.gov) in a couple of months when it is posted. From the web site choose Board of Veterans Appeals, and then click on Decisions. Next type in the search box Docket No.08-11 937.*

**A Vietnam War-era Army veteran, Cripps worked as a game warden at Fort Gordon near Augusta, Ga. He was exposed to Agent Orange while spraying the chemical in the lakes around the fort to kill weeds. When he left the military he suffered from chloracne and later developed other health problems related to his exposure.**

Documents obtained by WTVF NewsChannel 5 Investigates in Nashville, Tenn. showed that helicopters sprayed at least 95 gallons of Agent Orange at Fort Gordon in 1967. As the station reported last year:

*... Cripps is on multiple medications and he's struggling to pay his medical bills. And now the VA is actually garnishing his Social Security checks.*

*"We have discussed of late, even yesterday, the thought of suicide," he confides.*

*After years of service, Cripps and his wife feel broken and betrayed.*

*"I can see why some veterans would give up," Sandra Cripps says. "It's not fair."*

Other stateside areas where Agent Orange use has been documented include Fort Chaffee in Arkansas and the Apalachicola National Forest in Florida.

In 1991 Congress passed the Agent Orange Act, giving the Department of Veterans Affairs the authority to declare certain health conditions related to Agent Orange exposure and making affected veterans eligible for treatment and compensation.

Among the longtime "presumptive conditions" are various cancers, type 2 diabetes and chloracne. Earlier this month the VA added three new conditions to the list: Parkinson's disease, ischemic heart disease, and B cell leukemias.

And it wasn't only U.S. military personnel who were exposed to Agent Orange: Vietnam estimates that 400,000 of its people were killed or hurt by the chemical defoliant, 500,000 children were born with birth defects related to their parents' exposure, and another 2 million people suffered related cancers or other illnesses.

By now, we've all heard stories about Agent Orange and how it was sprayed on the jungles of Vietnam. What you probably don't know is that while the military used it there, they tested it at more than 30 sites in the States...including Fort Gordon.

In the summer of '67, Fort Gordon was a very different place. Lou Krieger should know. He was training here before shipping out to Vietnam. Lou remembers a place they called Camp Crockett. It was in an isolated spot off Gibson Road near Leitner Pond, far removed from the center of the sprawling Army post.

"Camp Crockett was used for the training of pre-airborne school and also pre-special forces. Some of the guys in Crockett were there over three months," Krieger told News 12.

Soldiers who trained here also talk of a village set up to look like one you might see in Vietnam.

We're sitting at a table, covered with documents from the 1960's. Krieger has a map in front of him.

"Right about here was the actual Vietnam village, where they put you through the training, going through the village and clearing it out," Krieger said.

And that's not the only thing the Georgia Army post once had in common with Southeast Asia. While they sprayed Agent Orange over the jungles of Vietnam, they tested it here. News 12 obtained a map prepared by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. It's based on aerial pictures taken in 1967 and shows the rectangular areas where Agent Orange and other "tactical herbicides" were sprayed. There are 23 sites.



When you look at the same area today, 43 years later, you can clearly see what appears to be a massive dead zone right next to it. The area is called Training Area 47. It's at the southernmost part of Fort Gordon and only about six miles away from towns that include Wrens, Harlem and Dearing. News 12 has documents showing this spraying was done by air.

James Cripps also sprayed Fort Gordon, but he did his spraying on the ground.

"I believe the herbicide I sprayed was indeed Agent Orange," Cripps told News 12. "At the time I thought I was six or seven thousand miles away from Agent Orange."

The Tennessee veteran was a game warden at Fort Gordon who actually did the spraying around some of the lakes there.

"I remember the lakes by name. And the best I remember is I'm thinking either 13 or 14 (years old)," he said.

He's also the first person to prove to the government that he was exposed to Agent Orange, not in Vietnam, but in America. In Augusta.

Dr. Nanci McPhail has seen more than her share of veterans exposed to Agent Orange. She used to see two or three cases a week at the Augusta VA. Now it's as many as 25 a week.

"We don't want those unanswered questions lingering out there if we can help it," Dr. McPhail said.

"As far as you can tell, does Agent Orange continue to affect a victim years and years after exposure?" I asked.

"Absolutely," Dr. McPhail responded. "Research teams have gone to Vietnam in the last ten years, and they've found hot spots of dioxin in the soil, which makes you think it's in the food sources grown on that soil. So yes, it does have lingering effects."

In a room surrounded with documents, where history and mystery collide, I talked to Lou Krieger about Fort Gordon.

"You're saying only one thing remains, and that's the poison?" I asked.

"Yeah, it doesn't go away," Krieger said. "It's still hot over in Vietnam."

All of this has serious implications for Congress. Just this month, the VA began offering benefits for up to 200,000 Vietnam veterans who may now qualify for Agent Orange health care. But what about the ones who might have been exposed to dioxin here?

Senator Lindsey Graham admits there's much we don't know.

"We don't know the scope of its use," he said. "So here we are 30 or 40 years after its use, and still finding evidence that Agent Orange was used in places we never understood before."

Sen. Graham is on the Committee for Veterans Affairs.

"I am astonished that it was being treated at Fort Gordon and we're just now knowing," he said.

Graham wants to find out more about what went on at Fort Gordon in the summer of 1967. About where it was sprayed. About who might have been exposed.

"The final chapter hasn't been written," Sen. Graham admitted. "So we need to reopen the book on Agent Orange."

Meanwhile, veterans like Lou Krieger and Patrick Burke, who was exposed to Agent Orange in Vietnam, know the clock is ticking.

"What got you started in all this research?" I asked the men.

"Well," Krieger paused. "It's a thing called death."

"I'm 66 years old," Burke said. "What's going to happen when I reach 67--if I make it to 67?"

In the very back of a Veteran's Magazine, in a section simply called TAPS, they list the names of the dead and their ages.

"61, 57, 59," Krieger read them aloud. "This one died of Agent Orange diabetes. We're dying at over 300 a day right now."

There is some promising news to report on all of this. In addition to reopening the books on Agent Orange exposure, Sen. Graham is working to set up a walking tour of Fort Gordon to find out more about a story that was nearly forgotten. About a part of Augusta, Georgia with a very strong connection to a sad chapter in American history.

One final note about the veterans we interviewed in this News 12 Special Assignment. Two of them have been diagnosed with medical conditions related to Agent Orange exposure. Patrick Burke is still trying to prove his claim. Those conditions can include a severe skin reaction known as chloracne, diabetes, various cancers, and heart problems.