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NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "AIR FORCE STUDY FINDS NO MORTALITY RISE IN AGENT
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Air Force study finds no mortality rise in Agent Orange handlers

By NORMAN BLACK
AP MILITARY WRITER

WASHINGTON — The Air Force, which is conducting a 20-year mortality study, said Tuesday it has so far failed to find any evidence that servicemen who handled the defoliant Agent Orange in Vietnam are dying at a faster rate than other military personnel or civilians.

"This second mortality analysis, like the baseline mortality study released in June 1983, did not reveal any statistically significant differences in the deaths recorded in the Ranch Hand group and the comparison group," the Air Force said.

"When compared to the U.S. white male population, the Ranch Hand officers . . . are living significantly longer than expected. Although Ranch Hand enlisted are living longer also, the difference is not significant."

Operation Ranch Hand was the Air Force's code name for the aerial spraying of Agent Orange that occurred during the Vietnam War. The spraying was performed to defoliate large sections of the countryside to deny ground cover to North Vietnamese soldiers.

Agent Orange and some of its chemical components, such as dioxin, have since been identified as possible cancer-causing agents. Thousands of veterans have charged that exposure to Agent Orange caused them to suffer ailments ranging from skin rash to cancer.

In 1979, the Air Force launched a special 20-year-long "epidemiological investigation" to compare the mortality rates of 1,256 officers and enlisted men who worked on Ranch Hand with a comparison group of more than 6,100 officers and enlisted men of similar age, occupation and background.

The mortality rates for the Ranch Hand group are also compared to those for the entire white male population; civilian government workers; and all active-duty Air Force personnel.

The first mortality report stemming from the study was released in June 1983. It reported finding no evidence of "health effects which could be conclusively attributed to herbicide or dioxin exposure."

The new report updates that finding by conclud-

ing there are still no "statistically significant differences in the deaths recorded in the Ranch Hand group and the comparison group."

The researchers said they have found 15 deaths among Ranch Hand officers and 39 deaths among Ranch Hand enlisted personnel, or 3.2 percent of the officers and 4.9 percent of the enlisted men. Within the comparison group, on the other hand, 91 officers, or 4 percent of the total, and 174 enlisted men, or 4.5 percent of the total, have died.

"There have been only four deaths in the Ranch Hand personnel since the last report — one for lung cancer, one stomach cancer, one circulatory and one undetermined," the report states. "The 15 deaths in the comparison groups (since the last report) include: four circulatory, two digestive, four cancer, one homicide, one respiratory, one parasitic infection and two suicides.

"All groups had a mortality experience similar to the civil service population."

The Air Force also said there were many fewer deaths among Ranch Hand personnel than what was projected for the general population.

For example, 15 Ranch Hand officers have died, compared with 36 projected deaths among a group of the same size drawn from the entire white male population.

Patty Turner, a spokeswoman with the Air Force's Office of the Surgeon General, said those figures could be explained in part because of the general good health of servicemen.

"Anyone who served in the armed forces was probably in good health and had no known life-threatening diseases, which of course is different than the general population," she said.

The report concludes by recommending the Air Force continue the study as originally planned "since the study groups are still relatively young and healthy."

"While sufficient time may have elapsed for some clinically significant conditions to occur, additional time is necessary for other conditions, which may possibly be attributable to herbicide exposure, to develop. At this time, however, there is no evidence of increased mortality as a result of herbicide exposure in those individuals who accomplished the Ranch Hand spray operations in Vietnam."