

N62604.AR.000053
NCBC GULFPORT
5090.3a

NEWSPAPER ARTICLE "MEANWHILE RUSTY DRUMS GET RUSTIER ON COAST" NCBC
GULFPORT MS
9/16/1976
MISSISSIPPI SUN

Meanwhile, rusty drums get rustier on Coast

PAUL JACOBS

Special to Newsday

The six rows of leaking, corroding, rusty drums, each holding 55 gallons of heavy, viscous fluid, lie stacked three high on their sides and extend for nearly a half-mile on the flat ground in the outdoor storage area of the Navy's Construction Battalion base at Gulfport, Miss.

Each one is stenciled, neatly, with now meaningless military abbreviations but a few words from the past leap out: "POD" (Port of Destination) and "Saigon Vietnam Herbicide Butyl Esters."

A painted band, six inches wide, runs around the middle of each drum. By now, the hot sun, humid air and salt spray from the Gulf of Mexico have gradually turned the bands brown.

Originally, they were or-

ange. Those orange stripes became the basis for the designation of the drums' contents, "Agent Orange," the herbicide whose use as a defoliant in Vietnam stirred up one of the most controversial disputes in that controversial conflict.

Chemically, Agent Orange was composed of equal amounts of two commercial herbicides, 2, 4, dichlorophenoxyacetic acid, known as "2,4,d," and "2,4,5,t."

2,4,d contains no dangerous dioxins. But when 2, 4,5,t is manufactured, the process always produces, as a by-product, TCDD, the killer chemical. The amount of TCDD produced depends on how carefully the 2,4,5,t is manufactured and on the sophistication of the equipment used to produce it.

During the Vietnam War, when large compa-

nies like Dow and Monsanto and smaller ones were under pressure from the Air Force to turn out large quantities of Agent Orange, no one made much effort to keep down the TCDD content in 2, 4,5,t. Even if they had, the Air Force would have overruled them because it wanted quantity, not quality control.

The Air Force sprayed more Agent Orange - "We prefer to call it 'Herbicide Orange'," an Air Force official said - over Vietnam than it did any other defoliation weapon: more than 11 million gallons from August 1965, until the defoliation program ended in 1970. And every gallon contained some of the deadly TCDD.

Initially, the fierce controversy over the use of defoliants as military weapons focused on the long-term effects of the herbicides on the Vietnamese environment. In late 1966, for example, the American Association for the Advancement of Science passed a resolution expressing its concern "regarding the long-range consequences of the use of biological and chemical agents which modify the environment."

But in 1966 not many people listened to that kind

of arguments when charges were made that an abnormal number of Vietnamese babies, born in the sprayed area had birth defects.

Among scientists, those charges have been disputed bitterly, and unfortunately the controversy remains unresolved, for no new data has been made available by the new government of Vietnam.

At about the same time, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, after a series of tests on animals limited to domestic commercial use of 2,4,5,t to range land, pasture land, nonfood crops except for rice, and weed and brush control programs. When that ban was issued, some of the major producers of 2,4,5,t quit producing that specific herbicide, leaving it to Dow, which still dominates its production.

When the Air Force finally discontinued using the dioxin-contaminated Agent Orange, it was left with a surplus of 40,000 drums, more than 2,000,000 gallons, worth then about \$16 million to \$17 million. Of the 40,000, 15,000 drums remained in Gulfport and the remaining 25,000 were shipped from Vietnam to

See MEANWHILE, A-14

MISS
SUN
SEP 16
76

1976

Meanwhile, drums get rustier

Continued from A-12

Johnston Island in the Pacific 650 miles south of Hawaii.

So in both places, the drums sit, while the Air Force tries to decide what it should do with the contaminated herbicide. And do something it must, soon, for the drums are deteriorating so badly that until the end of June, a "drumwalker" was employed at Gulfport to do nothing but make a daily round of inspection, looking for leaky drums, which were then repaired at an annual cost of \$140,000.

Air Force planned, initially, to incinerate the Agent Orange either at Johnston Island or on an incinerator ship at sea. But that meant burning up not just the \$16 million the herbicide had cost originally but the \$30 million to \$60 million the herbicide had cost originally but the \$30 million to \$60 million it would be worth today if its TCDD content could be re-

duced to meet EPA standards and it could be sold commercially as a herbicide.

So the decision was made to attempt reprocessing the Agent Orange to take out the dioxin. Only one company, with the oddly appropriate name of Agent Chemical, bid on the job.

The technique Agent Chemical proposed for removing the TCDD involved passing the Agent Orange through filters of charcoal made from coconuts, somewhat like the process used in making sour mash Bourbon. But the dioxin-saturated filters would be so deadly afterward that they, too, would have to be disposed of in some safe way.

From early June to early July of this year, Agent Chemical ran 1,000 gallons of Agent Orange through the filtering operations it set up at the Seabee Base in Gulfport. At the end of the experiment, according to the Air Force

official in charge of the project, 93 per cent of the TCDD in the 1,000-gallon test batch had been removed and was now contained in the filters.

The filters, each one about five feet long and six inches in diameter, were then wrapped in layers of polypropylene and placed inside tubes of steel, three-eighths of an inch thick. The tubes were then welded shut at both ends. After that, the steel cases were wrapped in one-inch thick layers of plastic material.

Finally, the steel canisters were shipped by truck to the BKK Co., a Wilmington, Calif., firm that specializes in dispensing of dangerous wastes by dumping them into special landfills that are licensed to hold any kind of dangerous disposables except nuclear wastes.

"Of course, they are completely harmless as they are now contained," insists an Agent Chemical official, who gets support in the assertion from one

of the BKK people.

BKK plans to bury the nine canisters in a West Covina canyon 300 feet deep and about one-eighth of a mile long. Houses have been built on two sides of the canyon and the residents complain, occasionally, about the material placed in the canyon by the BKK company, which leases the land.

But the city officials in West Covina are satisfied that the wastes are disposed of in the canyon under the safest conditions. At the moment, however, the nine canisters are being kept in Wilmington inside what a BKK official calls a "secure warehouse."

At the same time, a committee of various Pentagon agencies has been meeting to make the final determination about the Agent Orange's fate. Naturally, Agent Chemical, which has reportedly invested \$600,000 already in the project, is anxious to get the contract.