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THE GULFPORT EFFECT



JAMES EDWARD BATES/THE SUN HERALD

Valerie Fryou, who has lived next to the Seabee Base most of her life, says that many of her family members and neighbors on and around 30th Street in Gulfport have died from cancer due to contamination from chemicals stored at the base.

Gulfport residents fear silent killer stalks them

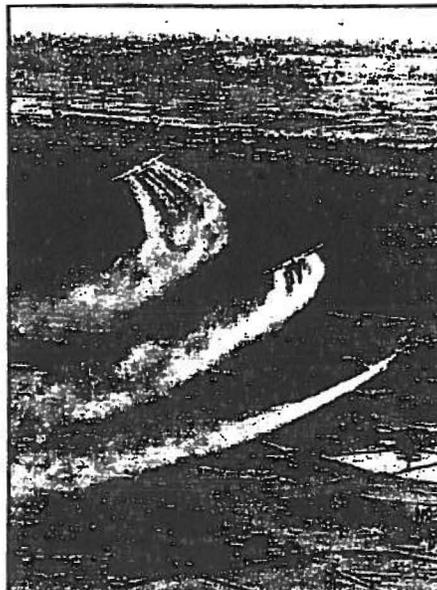
ENVIRONMENT One month after ATSDR gives the "all clear" to current dioxin risk, the U.S. Navy prepares for a new cleanup effort for heavy metal pollution.

By **GREG HARMAN**
THE SUN HERALD

GULFPORT — These are not new stories. The tales of sickness, misery and death blamed by many families around the Naval Construction Battalion Center in Gulfport on Agent Orange contamination have been passed back and forth from front yards and over coffee shop countertops for decades.

"That whole neighborhood is dying over there, and it's not a quick, painless death," said 33-year-old Stephanie Ragar, who grew up playing at her grandparents' house two blocks from the base. "I watched my mother throw up her liver in a trash

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THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

U.S. Air Force planes spray the defoliant chemical Agent Orange over dense vegetation in Vietnam in 1966.

Dioxin may play role in birth defect

By **GREG HARMAN**
THE SUN HERALD

GULFPORT — New information suggests that at least five cases of a rare birth defect occurring around the Naval Construction Battalion Center in the late 1970s, written off by doctors at the time to "chance," may have been linked to dioxin contamination.

Dr. Robert Edwards, who performed some of the autopsies in 1979, said there was no link to Agent Orange exposure and the

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can."

Federal and state regulators have been tracking and trying to clean up Agent Orange pollution north of the base, first traced into neighborhood ditches and streams in 1979, for years.

Suzanne Collum, who grew up a block north of the base, can cast her eye almost in any direction on her old street and find them.

On her left is a father lost to cancer whose infant daughter was diagnosed with childhood leukemia. On her right are two learning disabled children. Collum's own children suffer from recurrent reproductive problems.

"There's a lot of heart problems, liver problems, but especially kidney problems," Collum said. "We have 13 retardations in a five-block radius."

While federal agencies have tracked the pollution in the soils and water, the residents themselves say they haven't received the attention they deserve.

"They keep saying they're testing this and testing that, but when it comes to the sicknesses and diseases in our neighborhood, they're saying, 'We can't believe this is happening now from something back in the '70s,'" said Valerie Fryou.

In a report released last month, the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry found that the principal chemical of concern in the Agent Orange — tetrachlorodibenzo-p-dioxin, or TCDD, is not a public health risk. The more difficult question, whether lives were put in jeopardy in years past, or if current illnesses may be linked to old exposures, could not be determined because of a lack of information, the report states.

Requests by residents for the agency to take blood samples in hopes of showing what, if anything, is in their bodies making them sick were turned down based on a lack of demonstrated risk.

About seven years ago, just a few years after the Seabee Base was rejected as a potential Superfund site, a federal designation given to the most polluted sites in the country, surveyors hired by the U.S. Navy walked the streets around the base to talk to residents.

What they found — story after story of failing bodies, sickness and death, mostly blamed on leaching chemical pits and Agent Orange leaks from the base — left the surveyors suffering "significant emotional stress," according to the Navy report.

"Although the surveyors were trained in how to deal with stories like these, they were surprised by the number of cancer incidents in the neighborhoods, and this was a source of significant emotional stress



DREW TARTER/THE SUN HERALD

Gordon Crane, the environmental program manager at the U.S. Naval Mobile Construction Battalion Center, sits next to tons of soil covered with plastic. The soil is contaminated with dioxin from Agent Orange stored on the base during the Vietnam War. This soil, along with tons of other soil to be removed from wetlands just north of the base, will be mixed with cement to form a 13-acre concrete mobilization area.

to several of them," the report reads.

The Mississippi Department of Health has never done a similar survey to try to determine if clusters of related illnesses exist that could be blamed on toxic exposure, according to numerous sources.

Requests for information on this point e-mailed Monday to health department officials — who require all questions from The Sun Herald to be submitted in writing — had not been answered by Friday afternoon. Even the Navy has been unimpressed with the MDH's response through the years.

The health department's habit of comparing county-to-county statistics, rather than walking door to door as surveyors did in 1997, is not the best way to study illness in a specific neighborhood, the Navy's 1997 report states.

"While this practice can help identify cancer clusters by statistical comparisons," the report says, "it is of less use for smaller study areas, such as the survey neighborhoods."

The scarcity of hard data maintained by the U.S. Navy has been frustrating for Gordon Crane, the base's environmental program manager who complains that records about Agent Orange predating 1982 are virtually nonexistent.

Although numerous cleanup efforts have been performed through the years both on and off the base, the Navy has identified yet another stretch of wetlands along Canal Road that still requires remediation. Along the way, the effort being joined by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

will include tests for any other hazardous substances. These include lead and cadmium that has leached from the base's waste pits into groundwater beneath the base, Crane said. **NOT SAID.**

Former dockworkers who unloaded railroad cars of Agent Orange weekly at the Port of Gulfport to be shipped off to Vietnam from 1967 to 1969 have their own horror stories.

"We poured out more stuff on the docks down there than we did in Vietnam," said Frank Ladner, who retired from the port in 1985. "Nobody's saying anything about that . . . All those boys that worked with me are damn near dead."

Ladner says he has suffered severe nerve damage and has had numerous joints replaced. He talks about forklifts punching holes in the drums and of black fluid spraying out, or barrels dropping from pallets being hoisted by crane onto waiting vessels.

"I've had this stuff in my eyes. I've had it all over," Ladner said.

Joe McKay, who spent about 45 years on the docks, said he recalled such spills but doesn't share Ladner's health complaints.

Not familiar with the toxic nature of the liquid, workers would spray spills off into the water, both said.

"We didn't know what we were working with," Ladner said. "So help me God, we didn't know."

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Study

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children born with gastroschisis because there were no known leaks at the base.

However, only two months after Edwards' report came out, dioxin contamination from leaking drums of Agent Orange was tracked into the drainage ditches and streams in the neighborhoods outside the base.

Gastroschisis, a condition in

which a defect or hole in the abdominal wall allows the abdominal contents to protrude outside the body, typically occurs in one out of 10,000 births.

And while studies have suggested potential links between Agent Orange exposure in Vietnam veterans and birth defects for years, studies just being completed at the University of Arizona are making that link clearer.

"I can see a repercussion maybe, if you look at the first

stages of development," said Ornella Selmin, an assistant professor of microbiology at the University of Arizona, who has just completed a series of studies of dioxin and estrogen production.

"If the embryo . . . is exposed to dioxin, maybe we can have an alteration on development . . . I can't really say what the outcome would be, but any subtle change in hormone development maybe could have an effect on a future cancer development."

Already known to harm the network of glands, hormones and receptors that help link the nervous system with reproduction and immune system functions, dioxin also may sow the seeds of breast cancer both in exposed women and their newborns, she said.

A 1997 report of the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry suggests that women who live near toxic waste sites are more than three times as likely to give birth to children with gastroschisis.