

Pentagon admits to germ warfare tests in Pacific

Star-Bulletin staff and news services

WASHINGTON >> The U.S. military used two kinds of nerve gas and a biological toxin in tests on Navy ships in the 1960s, the Pentagon has acknowledged for the first time. Officials said veterans harmed by exposure to the agents could be eligible for health benefits.

The four tests in the Pacific from 1964 to 1968 used either the deadly nerve agent sarin, the nerve gas known as VX or a biological toxin that causes flu-like symptoms, Defense Department statements said.

According to a Star-Bulletin story published in November, a spokeswoman from the office of U.S. Rep. Mike Thompson (D-Calif.) said members of the Department of Veteran Affairs had contacted their clinics nationwide informing them that veterans "who may have been exposed to these tests need to be evaluated."

Earlier, a veteran contacted U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie (D, Honolulu), a member of the House Armed Services Committee, inquiring about the tests.

The tests, conducted on barges, tugs, destroyers and other ships, were to test the weapons themselves, protective gear and decontamination procedures.

killed to determine whether they were exposed to the weapons, Kilpatrick said.

Tests in 1964 and 1965 used VX, another deadly nerve gas. For the "Fearless Johnny" tests in 1965, the George Eastman was sprayed with VX and a simulant to test decontamination procedures. In the Flower Drum Phase II tests, VX gas tagged with radioactive phosphorus was sprayed on a barge to test decontamination procedures.

That second test used a compound that was 90 percent VX — "the most lethal nerve agent" and one that can linger for weeks, Kilpatrick said. But there is no evidence any people were on the barge sprayed with VX, which was towed nearly a half-mile behind a tugboat, he said.

A 1968 test used staphylococcal enterotoxin Type B — a poison produced by bacteria that causes flu-like symptoms such as fever, muscle aches, cough, vomiting and diarrhea.

During that test, the toxin was sprayed from tanks on airplanes over five tugboats, the USS Granville S. Hall and some parts of the Eniwetok Atoll in the Pacific. The test was to evaluate how the toxin — meant to incapacitate soldiers for up to two weeks without killing them — could be spread from the air.

Sketchy records of the tests and ships' logs do not indicate any of those involved in the tests suffered serious health problems at the time, said Dr. Michael E. Kilpatrick, a Defense Department health official.

"It may not be the best, but we believe if anything catastrophic happened or if there were large numbers of ill people, it would be in the log," said Kilpatrick, who was involved in reviewing the records.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has mailed letters to about 600 veterans who may have taken part in the tests, VA Secretary Anthony Principi said. Any who were harmed by the chemicals could be eligible for VA benefits.

The tests also used chemicals and bacteria meant to simulate weapons, as well as fluorescent or radioactive chemicals used as tracers, the Defense Department said. One type of bacteria used to simulate germ weapons was later found to cause infections, and a separate test where that germ was sprayed on San Francisco is believed to have caused an infection that killed a man.

The tests were among 113 conducted as part of a project called SHAD, or Shipboard Hazard and Defense.

Sarin, the deadly nerve gas used by a cult to kill a dozen people in a Tokyo subway in 1995, was used in a 1964 test code-named Flower Drum Phase I off the coast of Hawaii. Both sarin and a chemical simulant were sprayed onto the USS George Eastman from a turbine on the ship's bow and injected into the ship's ventilation system, the Pentagon statement said.

In 1963 a project called Autumn Gold was conducted about 60 miles off Oahu. According to the Department of Defense, "the tests involved military officials who were exposed to chemical agents meant to simulate the effects of deadlier germs such as anthrax."

Crew members wore gas masks during the tests, and those who worked most directly with the sarin wore chemical protection suits, the statement said.

Monkeys were used as test subjects during the exercises using nerve gas and were later