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Gagetown vets get shorted

Agent Orange compensation better for Canadians exposed in Vietnam war

By **GREG WESTON**

One day in June, 74-year-old Anthony Ferguson found a heart-stopping surprise in the mailbox of his Edmonton home: a cheque from the federal government for \$38,000.

Inside the brown envelope, there was no explanation, not even a covering letter. Nothing but the totally unexpected windfall of public cash.

Turns out, the money was to compensate the former Canadian soldier for exposure to the poisonous Agent Orange herbicide in Vietnam where he was part of an international observation force more than 30 years ago.

Like thousands of Vietnam vets, Ferguson now suffers from diabetes and other debilitating ailments commonly associated with exposure to toxic Agent Orange, used by U.S. forces to defoliate huge swaths of jungle during the war.

In addition to the \$38,000 lump-sum payment, the Canadian military has awarded Ferguson a disability pension of about \$150 a month, plus a range of benefits to cover drugs and other medical services.

Grateful for the assistance, Ferguson is nonetheless angry that potentially thousands of other Canadian veterans like him may be getting shafted.

He is probably right.

During the late 1960s, the U.S. military spray-bombed the Canadian infantry base at Gagetown, N.B., to test Agent Orange for use in Vietnam.

Last week, the Conservative government announced \$20,000 in compensation would be paid to everyone who lived on or near the Gagetown base during the spraying, and who is now suffering from any of the long list of cancers and other illnesses associated with Agent Orange poisoning.

By comparison, the same government has given Ferguson almost twice that much, plus a monthly disability pension and other benefits.

The only difference is he got poisoned in Vietnam; the Gagetown victims were on Canadian soil.

"That just doesn't seem right," Ferguson says. "I'm concerned all those other people aren't being treated fairly."

He has a point.

Years ago, in an act of compassionate politics, American legislators wisely concluded that ailing Vietnam vets could never conclusively prove a causal link between Agent Orange and an illnesses appearing decades later.

Instead, compensation was paid to more than 10,000 U.S. vets on the assumption that anyone who served in Vietnam was exposed to Agent Orange, and anyone suffering from diseases associated with the chemical had indeed been poisoned by it.

DIFFERENT STORY

Here in Canada, it has been a whole different story. For almost 40 years, successive governments treated sick and dying victims of the Gage-town spraying with a mix of contempt and deceit.

Two years ago, we broke the story about the Canadian military finally awarding a \$600 monthly disability pension to Gordon Sellar, then a retired and dying general who had commanded an infantry unit at Gagetown during the Agent Orange spraying.

Almost immediately, then Liberal defence minister Bill Graham promised compensation for all Gagetown victims, and publicly urged ailing vets to file immediate claims for disability benefits.

Two years later, Veterans Affairs says that as of last month, a total of 1,652 Canadian vets had filed disability claims.

So far, only 41 have been approved, and 32 of those were Canadians who, like Ferguson, served in Vietnam.

For all the political bluster, the feds have approved only nine pension claims from Gagetown grads.

That's Gen. Sellar and eight others among all the thousands of soldiers and their families posted to the Gagetown base while the U.S. was bombing the place with poison.

Instead, the Conservative government is now giving everyone a flat \$20,000 for being sick and having lived at the base.

No one seems to know where that figure came from, or why it is so much less than what the same government is giving a handful of vets for suffering the same horrible illnesses from the same Agent Orange as everyone else.

And don't even ask why it only applies to vets who lived long enough to see Stephen Harper become prime minister.

If the \$20,000 is compensation for being poisoned on the job at Gagetown, why not give our veterans proper disability pensions and other medical benefits?

If it is not compensation for Agent Orange, what is it?

One way or another, as Anthony Ferguson would say, it just doesn't seem right.