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IMMEDIATE RELEASE

July 1, 1983

AIR FORCE RELEASES RANCH HAND BASELINE MORTALITY STUDY

The U.S. Air Force today released the first mortality report of its Ranch Hand (Agent Orange) study, an epidemiological investigation of the possible adverse health effects from herbicide exposure of Air Force members who conducted aerial spraying missions in Southeast Asia (Operation Ranch Hand). The purpose of the study is to determine whether long-term adverse health effects exist and whether they can be attributed to occupational exposure to herbicides and their contaminants.

The mortality analyses described in the report have not revealed any statistical excess in the deaths recorded in the herbicide/dioxin-exposed group. At this time, there is no indication that Operation Ranch Hand personnel have experienced any increased mortality or any unusual patterns of death in time or by cause. They are not dying in increased numbers, at earlier ages or by unexpected causes.

Twelve hundred sixty-nine individuals who were assigned to Air Force units directly involved in Operation Ranch Hand were identified through extensive searches of military historical and personnel records. Most of these men were exposed to herbicides for up to 10-12 hours a day, five to six days a week, for periods of at least one year. Thus, the Air Force considers them to be the most heavily herbicide-exposed group of U.S. military personnel in Southeast Asia.

For the purposes of statistical comparison, a group of other Air Force personnel assigned to duty in Southeast Asia were matched to the Ranch Hand group by race, job and date of birth. Five comparison subjects were selected for each Ranch Hand member to improve the ability of the study to detect a difference in the death experience. The death experience of the herbicide/dioxin-exposed group was contrasted with the death experience of the matched group, as well as with three other groups external to the study: the 1978 U.S. white male population, a Department of Defense (DOD) retired population, and the 1956 graduating class of West Point.

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Analyses showed that, to date, the mortality experience of the Ranch Handers is identical to that of the matched comparison group. The overall rates and causes of death are not significantly different between the groups. However, it does appear that officers are living longer than enlisted personnel in both groups.

The Ranch Handers did show a relative decrease in cancer, but an increase in liver disorder deaths; however, both these findings are statistically nonsignificant. There were no soft tissue sarcoma deaths diagnosed in either group.

Analyses of both the Ranch Hand and comparison groups to the 1978 U.S. white male mortality experience showed highly significant findings of lower mortality rates among Air Force members. Most of these differences can be attributed to the healthy worker effect (due to the fact that individuals must be in good health upon entry into the military, while the general U.S. population is not subject to this form of "selection").

The DOD retired and West Point data were used for further analyses in an attempt to correct for the healthy worker effect. The contrast with the DOD data again demonstrated significantly less mortality for Ranch Hand officers, comparison officers and comparison enlisted men; however, there was not a statistically significant favorable mortality rate for Ranch Hand enlisted personnel. The West Point comparison had to be restricted to an analysis of the officer groups since all West Point graduates become officers. This analysis revealed no differences in mortality.

The fact that adverse effects have not yet been detected does not imply that an effect may not become manifest in the future. For this reason, further analyses are intended and mortality in the study population will be ascertained annually up to the next 20 years.

The data from the Ranch Hand questionnaires and physical examinations will be published in October 1983 when the morbidity report is completed.

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