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The Complexities Faced by South Korean Vietnam War Veterans: The Impact Towards Agent Orange Exposure

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Abstract

Although the Vietnam War (1955 - 1975) is widely acknowledged as a conflict that stemmed from intense American intervention that elongated the ongoing armed struggle for colonial independence, the magnitude of international forces that assisted the national security of South Vietnam during the war is usually shadowed by the notoriety of American presence and their wide-scale military operations. The nations that aided the American effort to retain a non-communist state in Indochina are South Korea, Australia, New Zealand, Thailand, the Philippines, and even Spain to a certain medicinal extent. From this American-led coalition under the Many Flags Campaign, the nation that sent the second-largest contingent, only eclipsed by the United States forces, is South Korea.

The ambition of this paper is to analyze the extent of South Korean service in Vietnam and specifically, underlie the implications these veterans faced following their service in a foreign environment. Ultimately, from the research conducted and through the extraction of experiences from veterans, the final deduction can be asserted that South Korean service in Vietnam not only affected the lives of veterans mentally but physically through the utilization of militarized chemicals such as Agent Orange. It would be further discovered, that the continued use of deleterious chemicals throughout the South Korean peninsula, especially the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ), would continue the health hazards of conscripted soldiers stationed in adverse areas.

Contextualization

The conflict within Indochina had been brewing since the removal of the Japanese colonial forces that occupied the region since the expansion of their empire throughout the Second World War. This brief external force, which differed from the historic French colonial presence, disturbed the social dynamics within Vietnam and bolstered the sentiments for Vietnamese sovereignty. With the rise of communist-influenced independence leaders such as Ho Chi Minh alongside his guerilla forces, the French return to claim their Asiatic colonial territories was met with harsh resistance. Even with the American equipment being transported to French forces in Indochina, the French administrational presence would ultimately come to a decisive close following their stark defeat in the Battle of Dien Bein Phu (1954). The Geneva Accords of 1954, attended by representatives from France, the United States, Great Britain, the Soviet Union, the People's Republic of China, the Viet Minh, and other Southeast Asian nations, would conclude with the separation of Vietnam across the 17th parallel with the North under communist administration while the South held a fairly, yet mostly superficial, democratic government.

With the kickstarting of the Truman Doctrine, which previously served to save the sovereignty of South Korea from communist takeover in 1950, American equipment would be further sent to bolster the military of South Vietnam. Even in this early period of brewing tension, the South Korean government, under the administration of President Syngman Rhee, would offer the deployment of South Korean soldiers in South Vietnam; a request that would be rejected by President Dwight D. Eisenhower (Kim 529). With the expansion of American conventional military doctrine under President John F. Kennedy, American military instructors were increasingly sent to South Vietnam to continuously hone its military (Park 220). Under the authoritative

administration of President Park Chung Hee, South Korea would continue to offer servicemen to assist American efforts in South Vietnam, only to be refused once again. It was with the assumption of the Oval Office by President Lyndon B. Johnson that the South Korean request to send its soldiers to Vietnam would be accepted in late 1964 (Kim 530).

The Rationale behind the Pursuit of South Korean forces in Vietnam

As mentioned beforehand, South Korea, under the administration of two presidents, continuously requested to provide South Korean soldiers to support American forces in Vietnam (Kim 528). Although there has been a general understanding that the peninsula nation's ardent requisitions stem from their desire to express gratitude for the service of American forces in maintaining the sovereignty of South Korea, "Korean soldiers fought in Vietnam for economic rewards as well as for the material and financial support guaranteed to the Korean government by the United States" (Park 220). In fact, "the troops with rural backgrounds—more than 100,000 Korean soldiers … will have a far-reaching impact on thousands of marginal farmers with two or three-acre plots" (Kim 522).

With the signing of the armistice of the Korean War in 1953, tensions stayed resolute between North and South Korean military personnel throughout the demilitarized zone. Furthermore, the continued presence of American soldiers in South Korea served as insurance for the wavering nation (Kim 530). As the conditions in Indochina called for increased American focus, the foreseeable transfer of American soldiers threatened the security of South Korea and ultimately coerced President Syngman Rhee to offer the service of South Korean soldiers to Vietnam instead to potentially hold political leverage over the United States and maintain their presence within the peninsula. This offer would be denied and the intentions for sending South Korean soldiers to Vietnam would alter under the presidency of Park Jung Hee.

President Park previously served as a lieutenant in the army of the Japanese Empire during the Second World War and as a moderate admirer of the Japanese cultural landscape and development, Park would hold a steadfast gaze upon the rapidly developing nation following the diminishing of its vast empire. He would ultimately deduce that the Korean War (1950 - 1953) kickstarted the economy of Japan following its stark economic stagnation from the destruction of many of its cities and industrial centers from the war (Kim 522). The constant channeling of American personnel through Japan alongside the creation of advanced medical centers to cater to American casualties would assist in the economic and infrastructural development of Japan. With this comprehension, President Park believed that the war in Vietnam would serve as a similar, if not the same, ignition of economic development of wartorn and rurally poverty-stricken, South Korea. The strategy depended on the catering and the exploiting of American foreign intentions.

The Magnitude of South Korean Presence

President Lyndon B. Johnson's acceptance of South Korean participation in Vietnam would slowly unwind the Korean faucet that would ultimately flood the vast jungles and hills of Vietnam. The Dove Division was the first South Korean unit to be sent to Vietnam. This division focused on logistically, technically, and medically supporting the South Vietnamese forces and the limited American contingent within the region. However, with the intensification of American presence in Vietnam following the Gulf of Tonkin Resolution in 1965, Johnson's administration would open to further increased South Korean and international participation (Kim 524).

South Korean soldiers in Vietnam were paid with American dollars, a far economically superior currency to the Korean Won back home. This aspect would inspire conscripted soldiers, career soldiers, and even veterans of the Korean War to serve in Vietnam (Park 234). The application pool was so overpopulated in South Korea that not only was service in Vietnam voluntary but only the best were selected and transferred to seasoned units that slowly grew adept to the functionalities of the lush landscapes of Vietnam. Although this foreign intervention would serve as the first South Korean military campaign outside of their home soil, their performance was often met with high commendations.

Before the Tet Offensive in 1968, South Korean operations were extremely aggressive as their military doctrine relied on premeditated offensives rather than a planned defense from an enemy attack. It is reported that South Korean soldiers were extremely well-disciplined and professional in their operational endeavors which led to an overall higher count of captured weapons from the Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army. Contrary to the American forces that faced severe difficulty in locating potential adversaries in rural villages, Korean forces would conduct precise and meticulous scanning of village hamlets to ensure the accurate classification of enemy presence. The rigorous methods employed by South Korean forces sometimes resulted in brutal outcomes, including the execution of war crimes, actions often overlooked by both South Korean and American high commands. Disregarding the quality of Korean service in Vietnam, by the end of 1969, around "49,000 South Korean troops were actively engaged in combat in South Vietnam, while an additional 15,000 civilian laborers and technicians were working there as employees of American and Korean firms" (Kim 519). Under the phased withdrawal of American soldiers under President Richard Nixon's Vietnamization plan, there was a period in 1973 when there were more South Korean personnel in Vietnam than American soldiers. Around 5000 Koreans were killed in action while 10,000 were injured. By the end of the devastating conflict, "about 220,000 Korean soldiers served in the Vietnam War when the rotation of personnel [was] taken into account" (Park 218).

The complete withdrawal of Korean forces in 1975 would lead to an influx of Korean veterans that would scatter across the peninsula with most residing in increasingly urbanized regions. Just as President Park Jung Hee predicted, the Vietnam War exponentially boosted the South Korean economy. The savings from Korean civilian employees "during a two-year tour in Vietnam has been estimated at from $5000 to $8000, and savings in excess of $10,000 are not uncommon … of these 40-50,000 civilians, [they held] enough capital to start small businesses" (Kim 522). Through the influx of American currency into the Korean economic complex through the salaries of soldiers and the bartering of American military technologies, South Korea was able to create the foundations for the second wave of its rapid development that would come in the 1980s. It was participation in the Vietnam War that allowed for the relative modernization of the South Korean airforce and the creation of industrial projects, most notably, the trans-national highway that connected the cities of Seoul and Busan in 1970 (Kim 530).

However, unbeknownst to the veterans returning, their exposure to a certain Monsanto chemical in Vietnam would haunt their futures, families, and offspring.

Agent Orange in South Korea

"The American military authority was in charge of the spraying of Agent Orange in Vietnam … The Korean government was neither given any right to participate in the decision-making process nor was the government aware of the potential danger of Agent Orange" (Park 217).

While the comprehension of the utilization of Agent Orange in Vietnam is widely understood, its usage throughout South Korea is extremely vague and even secretive in some instances. In fact, "Korean participation in the Vietnam War … has never been fully recognized or discussed either in Korea or in America" (Park 218), hence diluting the necessity to research the magnitude of health implications left on numerous South Korean veterans.

Efforts have been made by South Korean researchers to indicate the degree of Agent Orange exposure to Korean Vietnam War Veterans. As these efforts emerged much later than American realizations, the results of such objectives have been placed under scientific and administrational scrutiny. A study from 2001 from the *Korean Journal of Preventative Medicine and Public Health* has concluded that the testing of certain chemical exposures within the bodily system has been proven to be "significantly related to the total exposure score" (Kim et. al. 80) of Agent Orange. Therefore the study defines that its method of identifying Agent Orange exposure is valid. However, a meta-analysis report provided by *Veterans and Agent Orange: Update 2010* that overviewed South Korean attempts to handle its Agent Orange crisis has indicated that "the narrow range of results makes the biologic relevance of any differences questionable" (Veterans and Agent Orange 152). The late emergence of research and questionable data conclusions leave Agent Orange's exposure to South Korean Veterans as an indefinite topic from the perspective of the South Korean government. Therefore, the directive of medical compensation towards influenced veterans has stagnated.

It was reported that Agent Orange was sprayed throughout the demilitarized zone in South Korea to reduce the natural foliage around the boundaries. As the regions around the separation zone serve as an almost natural sanctuary for South Korean nature with the occasional minefields and forward observation posts, the utilization of pesticides was necessary to ensure accurate visualization of North Korean soldiers (Chung 161). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, unknown to the international community that was fixated on the war in Vietnam at the time, there was a near-second Korean War that was fought through skirmishes around the DMZ. North Korean officials took advantage of the American and South Korean preoccupation in foreign affairs and launched brief guerrilla campaigns to harass the patrolling American and South Korean soldiers. With rising tensions across the region, the United States, with permission from the South Korean government, utilized Agent Orange across the region to reduce the camouflage abilities of potential North Korean attackers (Chung 162).

South Korean soldiers hold the possibility of being stationed around the DMZ as part of their mandatory service. Therefore, it is evident that soldiers, not even in Vietnam, were exposed to the harms of Agent Orange due to ignorant placement. Additionally, cases have arisen recently when a few whistleblowers from past American army soldiers, stationed in Camp Caroll, Daegu in the 1970s and 1980s admitted to burying barrels of Agent Orange deep into the soils around the urbanized city of Daegu (Rowland). With the rise of physically impaired children in the Camp Caroll region alongside confessions of past soldiers, scientific tests by the South Korean government have been pursued. The tests "have found no definitive evidence that confirms the burial of Agent Orange at Camp Carroll at any time in the past" (Rowland) and once again, impairs the certainty of Agent Orange exposure among veterans serving in South Korea.

Ultimately, these instances portray the dubious stance regarding the prevalence of Agent Orange in the Korean peninsula and its potential harm to the South Korean population, especially uninformed South Korean conscripted soldiers. Exposure to such a chemical can maim the futures of young aspiring Koreans and the Korean government should pursue compensation efforts to alleviate the pains of the nation's servicemen and women. With American policies already being passed for medical compensation for chemical-exposed veterans, it is essential for the South Korean government to also heighten its compensation program for Vietnam veterans and potential victims of military-related chemical exposure.

Policy Suggestions

In order to accurately provide suggestions for South Korean veteran compensation, part of the South Korean government, must be an analysis of past cases of unrepresented victims and American policies for American victims of service-based chemical exposure.

In 2006, CBS News reported that the creators of the Agent Orange compound were forced to pay 62 million dollars in medical compensation in South Korea. The payment by the Monsanto Company was covering 6800 people who were victims of Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam War. With this court case taking place over 30 years after the end of the Vietnam War, it can be implied that many veterans faced medical hardships until their death without proper knowledge of their harmful chemical exposure. The United States has placed "support for the victims of Agent Orange in Vietnam … on domestic mechanisms as well as international non-governmental and inter-governmental agencies" and "in 1998 the national Vietnam Red Cross Society Agent Orange Victims Fund (AOVF) was set up with donations from local and international contributors" (Palmer 177). This shows that the veteran victims from both nations did not rely on government assistance and required external monetary sources to compensate chemical-exposed veterans. The United States Federal government passed the Veterans Health Care Act of 1992 that did allow for compensations towards Vietnam veterans but the Act was mostly geared towards the recent veterans of the Persian Gulf War that saw the use of chemical weapons. (Institute of Medicine 29). The Veterans Association, an organization that caters to the treatment of American veterans, currently provides healthcare for struggling Vietnam War veterans who potentially face Agent Orange exposure. However, the question now lies in South Korean policy.

A case in 2016, reported by Hankyoreh News, states that a court ruling in South Korea acknowledged Agent Orange exposure among soldiers stationed around the DMZ in the 1960s. This step in acknowledging can provide the first steps towards compensation for thousands of Korean veterans but the challenges remain due to the confidentiality of Korean military records. However, from this case, the Korean government has been urged

to provide long-term support for victims. A proposal from the *Korean Journal of Preventative Medicine and Public Health* in 2014 concluded that the Ministry of Patriots and Veteran Affairs has concluded that the Ministry of Patriots and Veterans Affairs fails to understand that there is an "absence of definite standards to classify the Agent Orange-associated diseases [which] was confirmed by recent Supreme Court sentencing which ruled in favor of US manufacturers" (Chung 157). The main proposal from this 2014 article is that there must be a change in welfare principles from a "presumptive or indefinite disease basis to exposure experiences combined with integrated disability evaluation" (Chung 157). This will allow more veterans to receive substantive medical assistance without having to commit to the lengthy process of proving chemical exposure with no clear documentation.

From the complex evolution of court cases relating to Agent Orange exposure to policy suggestions, it is clear that there is a need for a system that goes beyond fiscal compensation. The implementation of veteran-centered support programs is imperative. These programs would offer a diverse array of services that enhance the overall well-being of Korean veterans. Medical care should be tied to this communal program that will allow for the testing of foreign or harmful chemical exposure. As indicated by the policy suggestion in 2014, the current system of proof-based compensation withdrawal should be replaced with a testimonial system. As veterans would often remember the region of their deployment, the subsequent area should be screened through a history of military-ordered chemical coverage. In the case that a militarized chemical was to be used, the veteran should be informed of what chemical and the potential harm that it may induce. This system would provide support for soldiers who find themselves physically impaired without a direct correlation.

There would be sentiments that argue for increased taxation as a result of a less restrictive system. However, there must be a remembrance that the funds from the government go into supporting South Korean veterans and their affected families. This policy would honor the sacrifices made by veterans who served through storied periods of hardship and legacy.

Conclusion

South Korean soldiers have served throughout the conflict regions that were influenced by chemical defoliants, most notably Agent Orange. May this be through the jungle biomes of Indochina or the mountain crests of the demilitarized zone (DMZ), South Korean veterans return to their homes physically impaired due to harmful chemical exposure. It is estimated that around 300,000 South Koreans have served in Vietnam in either a military or civilian capacity and a greater number of conscripted soldiers have been stationed along the DMZ. Therefore, a significant portion of the South Korean population, throughout the past 50 years, has been influenced by the Agent Orange compound. This research paper argues the presence of a substantial amount of South Korean veteran victims and the need for a less-restrictive compensation system by the South Korean government to provide access the medical and fiscal benefits to veterans of the South Korean military.

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