

LAURIE PAGANELLI, MOTHER OF JORDAN PAGANELLI, CHILDHOOD CANCER (SARCOMA) WARRIOR AND PAST RESIDENT OF U.S. NAVAL AIR FACILITY (NAF) ATSUGI, JAPAN

STATEMENT OF LAURIE PAGANELLI  
MOTHER OF JORDAN PAGANELLI, CHILDHOOD CANCER (SARCOMA) WARRIOR  
AND PAST RESIDENT OF U.S. NAVAL AIR FACILITY (NAF) ATSUGI, JAPAN  
FOR PRESENTATION BEFORE THE SENATE COMMITTEE ON VETERANS AFFAIRS,  
EXPOSURES  
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Good morning Mr. Chairman and members of the committee:

Thank you for this opportunity to present testimony on behalf of my family and as a representative for hundreds of Sailors, Marines, and civilians who were unknowingly exposed to and have been adversely affected by the contaminated air, soil, and water at U.S. Navy Air Facility Atsugi, Japan.

My name is Laurie Paganelli and I am a former resident of Atsugi. My husband is an active-duty Navy service member and we were given orders to report to Atsugi in 1997. Our tour of duty was from 1997-2000. Our only son, Jordan, was 5 years old when we arrived. While stationed at Atsugi, he attended Shirley Lanham Elementary School, played soccer, t-ball, and attended many other sporting/cultural events on the base throughout our time there.

On January 11, 2008 our lives changed forever. Jordan (then 16-years old) was diagnosed with a rare, vicious, and highly aggressive form of cancer—so aggressive in fact, that by the time he displayed any symptoms, his cancer had already progressed to a STAGE 4 condition. The name of his cancer is: Alveolar Rhabdo-Myo-Sarcoma (“ARMS” for short). ARMS is considered extremely rare because there are only about 350 cases diagnosed each year in the United States. And, because of its rarity, there is a severe lack of awareness and funding for this type of cancer. Only 3% of research money goes towards childhood cancer research, making the 5-year survival rate dismally low. Jordan’s protocol was an Intensive Multi-Agent Therapy, including Dose-Compressed Cycles which had us calling Walter Reed Army Medical Center “home” for most of the 15 months of continuous treatment. Jordan also battled through 12 total weeks of DAILY radiation: 7 weeks to his torso & lungs; and then 5 more weeks to his entire head following the discovery of additional cancerous lesions that had spread to his brain. Additionally, due to cancer-based damage to his hips, he spent 10 months on crutches and the rest with a cane—quite a contrast to the young boy who played at “Atsugi Base” and the high school cross country star he had been just months prior to diagnosis.

During our stay at Atsugi we were aware of the incinerator. It smelled, burned your eyes, and sometimes added a greenish glow to the air around us. We certainly were not aware of the effects it would have on our family years later. As most military families do, I trusted that the Navy wouldn’t let us live there if it was a danger to our health. I WAS WRONG.

From 1983 until 2001, sufficient and compelling evidence showed that a blend of highly toxic chemicals were released from the Shinkampo Incineration Complex (labeled the “SIC”) at levels that far exceeded the EPA’s health-risk-based guidelines. These chemicals severely contaminated

the residential area of Atsugi. A partial list of chemicals included: volatile organic compounds, poly-chlorinated biphenyls, pesticides, polycyclic aromatic hydro-carbons, dioxins, furans, particulates, and heavy metals. In 1990, U.S. Department of the Navy documents referred to this plume of smoke as a “witch’s brew of toxic chemicals”.

During the operation of the SIC, the Navy spent approximately 18 million dollars performing numerous ambient air and health studies at Atsugi. This data repeatedly confirmed that Atsugi was being polluted with carcinogenic and non-carcinogenic chemicals, many of which have been categorized by the EPA to have long-latency periods—meaning that their affects would be evident years after the exposure.

In 1997, the Navy began to communicate health risks to Atsugi residents. However, during the initial 12 years of incinerator operations, personnel had little or no knowledge of the potential health risks of their toxic exposure. In fact, a review of the Navy's Human Health Risk Assessment of Atsugi (prepared in 2001 by the Committee of Toxicology) stated: “There does not seem to have been a coordinated strategy for risk communication.”

In 1997, risk communication efforts included instructions for residents and school children to stay indoors when the plume of toxins blew towards the base. A “Standard Form 600” was added to personnel medical records stating that we were exposed to 12 toxic chemicals that exceeded Maximum Contamination Levels.

Although the NAVY had no control over the emissions of the SIC, they did have the ability to avoid exposing thousands of children to toxic chemicals. By early 1990, it was evident that base residents were being exposed to Dioxin and other toxic chemicals. In 1997, the Navy Inspector General reported that “The Navy must act decisively to reduce personnel exposure to incinerator contaminants. A range of options for accomplishing this, including (but not limited to) moving U.S. personnel to other locations, must be examined.”

The 1999 study conducted by the Government of Japan and the U.S. Navy, found dioxin levels in the air to be dangerously high. By 2000, Defense Secretary William Cohen and the Chief of the Japanese Defense Agency agreed that Japan would provide temporary off-base housing and that Japan would not object to the U.S. government's efforts to sue the SIC for violating environmental laws.

In 2001, the United States Department of Justice brought suit against the private incinerator in a Yokohama Court. The lawsuit claimed that toxic chemicals severely polluted the air, soil, and ground water and interfered with the U.S. Government rights of property use and possession. The SIC was closed when the Government of Japan decided to pay the incinerator owner the equivalent of 42 million dollars to shut down and dismantle the incinerators.

The NAVY had knowledge that Atsugi residents were being exposed to Dioxin in the SIC’s emissions by the early 1990’s; and they knew what detrimental affects such exposure would do to the human body. As you remember, Dioxin is what made “Agent Orange” so toxic. So, it’s no surprise that by 1998, the NAVY recognized their liability and instituted a one page waiver that did not convey information of the known long-term risk associated with the SIC. We were all REQUIRED to sign this waiver.

In 2007, after complaints of former residents, the NAVY provided a public website with some study-based information. However, the website has not been widely publicized and many former Atsugi residents still do not have knowledge of its existence.

Recently, the NAVY has stated that the 2009 Atsugi Health Study produced a registry. However, the study confirms that approximately 75% of the Atsugi population in the study was lost to follow-up, which adversely affected the study's end result—specifically because of the documented latency period of the toxic exposure.

Over the last three years, an estimated 750 former residents (including retired and former active duty personnel and their families) have come together for support outside the realm of the NAVY. Within just this group, at least 61 cancer cases have been reported—all of which have been directly associated with Dioxin exposure. They include Brain, Thyroid, Cervical/Ovarian, Colo-Rectal, Leukemia, Lymphoma and various other cases of sarcoma—many of which involve innocent children (like our son Jordan) who lived at Atsugi while their mothers and fathers faithfully served the United States of America while stationed in Japan.

Besides cancer, many former residents suffer from illnesses including; nervous system disorders, liver and kidney damage, auto-immune diseases, neurological disorders, cardiac irregularities, and other toxic related diseases as defined by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

In closing, I would like to state that we had the basic human right not to be exposed to the types of toxic chemicals that were highly prevalent at Atsugi. Our military family members are proud to dedicate their lives in defense of our great county; and, we support them and their mission each and every day. However, we trusted the Navy to provide a safe environment for our family members. But, they failed to do so by knowingly housing our families in a toxic waste zone.

We look to you, committee members, to rectify this gross misconduct and to take action to ensure that the VA is provided with an appropriate registry and an accurate list of cancer and non-cancerous illnesses associated with the SIC exposure. We urge you to ensure that all former residents are notified. Finally, we urge you to introduce a bill to enact a new law that allows former Atsugi residents and dependents to receive the appropriate VA benefits to include medical care and disability compensation.

My son has been fighting for his life; and his journey thus far is one that NO parent should ever have to take with their child. We will never know if his disease was caused (or brought about) by the exposure of toxic chemicals at Atsugi. However, the risk imposed to him and my family, and the lack of proactive risk mitigation, is an absolute tragedy. I pray that no other family has to endure the pain of watching their child fight for their lives.

Thank you for allowing me to speak to you today.