

Suspicious Rise

Researchers and activists challenge the Navy's scientific methods and more

By Jaimal Yogis

In August 2000 a fire blazed underneath the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard landfill for three weeks before the Navy notified the surrounding community-allowing the community to be unknowingly subjected to toxic fumes for 21 days. Ever since, Keith Tisdale doesn't trust the Navy.

"There's so much they're not being truthful with," says Tisdale, the meeting and by-laws co-chair of the Restoration Advisory Board to the Navy. Tisdale's home overlooks the shipyard. "It just gets tiresome."

Other members of the Bayview Hunters Point community, who have watched the Navy repeatedly rescind its promises to get the shipyard clean, share Tisdale's distrust.

"I don't trust the Navy because they don't tell the community what's going on," says Marie Wilson, who works at the Roadhouse Café on Third Street.

The Restoration Advisory Board, a 20-member group of community activists and scientists, was created in 1995 to serve as a bridge between the Navy and residents but since its implementation RAB members say they have only grown more distrustful.

Chris Shirley, a RAB member and chief scientist of ARC Ecology, says that community distrust of the government has been there since the creation of the RAB, but has increased exponentially over the years-especially since the shipyard fire. Shirley has helped ARC Ecology repeatedly sue the Navy over the last seven years for various violations of environmental law in the naval shipyard-including 19,000 violations of the Clean Water Act in 1994.

"The Navy hates being caught in lies," says Shirley. "But the only way to get them to do anything is embarrass them." Suspicion of the Navy has become so endemic that a theory that the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were secretly built in the Hunters Point shipyard-theoretically putting all of San Francisco at risk-has developed amongst RAB members.

History of secrecy and broken pledges to clean up

Following World War II the Naval Shipyard was home to the top-secret Naval Radiological Defense Laboratory, which conducted a host of nuclear tests on both humans and animals. The shipyard was also used to sandblast ships that were exposed to radiation from atomic bomb tests in the Bikini Islands, which left nuclear charged particles scattered about the shipyard.

During the summer of love in 1969 the base suddenly shut down, leaving the shipyard a contaminated wasteland and thousands of Hunters Point residents out of work. The Navy has been promising for the last 10 years to get the shipyard clean so it can transfer the land to the city for redevelopment. But over \$200 million in cleanup operations has not allowed for the transfer of even one of the shipyard's six parcels and the community is getting frustrated.

"I've been working on this seven years," says Eve Bach, ARC Ecology's Economist and Planner. "Every

year the Navy has said the shipyard is two years away from being clean-and now they're saying four years. I'm beginning to think I'll never see it clean."

In the meantime, Hunters Point residents say the shipyard puts the health of the community at risk.

"Our kids have to grow up in a wasteland and it's not fair," says Wanda Grant, a long time resident and mother in Hunters Point. "Every year there's more cancer, more asthma."

Possible links to disease

A recent study done by the University of California shows that Hunters Point residents are four times more likely to be hospitalized for chronic illness than residents of the rest of San Francisco.

Although the study wasn't directly linked to the shipyard, many African Americans, who compose 52-percent of the Bay View Hunters Point and nearly 100 percent of the community closest to the shipyard, think the toxicity is killing their community. Olin Webb, Director of the Bayview Community Advocates, sees the Navy's treatment of the community as a subtle form of ethnic cleansing.

"Every generation gets a little weaker," says Webb. "All the Navy can do is kill. They don't know how to save lives."

Olin's father was a shipyard worker who was laid off when the shipyard closed down. "They laid off the black workers first and never retrained them," Webb recalls. "My father didn't get retrained and we went on welfare, but the white workers got retrained. That's racism." Webb's story is a common one in Hunters Point-a neighborhood that suffers from 11 percent unemployment and whose black community is gradually diminishing.

At the close of the shipyard Hunters Point was about 77-percent African American compared to 52-percent today. Webb thinks that African Americans are guinea pigs for a Navy experiment that is testing the effects of an open superfund site, an Environmental Protection Agency designation for highly contaminated areas, on the black community.

"I heard a Navy officer say it in City Hall," says Webb. "He said the canaries did not die and he was talking about the black community. I resent that."

Not all community members feel this way however. Jim Ansboro, a white Hunters Point realtor and community activist doesn't think the Navy would act any different if the shipyard was in Walnut Creek.

"The people here are a little paranoid," says Ansboro, who attends RAB meetings. "But it makes them vigilant... and vigilance is the only thing that's going to get that shipyard clean."

Toxics in similar communities

But census figures show that Hunters Point is no anomaly when it comes to toxic sites across the country. A [1983 government survey](#) states " minorities and the poor are more likely to live near hazardous waste landfills than other social groups."

But regardless of the reason, RAB members are vigilant. Attending a typical RAB meeting on a Thursday

night at Dago Mary's restaurant is a little like watching a boxing match. During a recent RAB meeting the Navy brought four radiological specialists to answer the community's top 40 questions about the shipyard, but due to constant challenges from the RAB they were only able to cover about 10. The Navy's answers were outlined in a short memo that RAB members thumbed through with a sort of religious fervor as the Navy's four specialist gave a power point presentation to explain their responses.

When RAB members began questioning the memo, Pat Brooks the Navy's remedial project manager, suggested that people just listen to him rather than trying to follow along with the memo.

"We want to make sure what you're saying matches what you wrote," said Karen Pierce a RAB member from the Department of Public Health. "I heard that," seconded one of the residents nodding her head and smiling at Pierce.

"Some of this information is just not correct," Dr. Ahimsa Sumichai, the medical representative of the RAB, followed.

The Navy sticks to its position

At a recent meeting the major disagreement between the RAB and the Navy was over the Navy's methodology in piecing together its Historical Radiological Assessment.

Currently the Navy is writing the Historical Radiological Assessment through its historical records and by conducting chemical surveys where they have evidence of high contamination.

"We're following standard procedure for the HRA," said Martin Offenhauer, a biologist for the Navy. "I'm just doing my job, not everyone's going to like it."

The problem with the Navy's technique, RAB members say, is the Navy didn't keep records of all their tests and many of the Naval Radiological Defense Laboratory's documents still remain classified.

"In the case of Hunters Point more has been declassified than remains classified," Offenhauer says. "And the remaining classified documents are classified for national security because they contain information about things that are still being used today."

The RAB would like the Navy to combine its scientific studies with oral histories from ex-shipyard workers and use a grid method to survey the shipyard, which they say would give a more comprehensive study of the actual contaminants in the shipyard-but is also more expensive and labor intensive.

"The methodology the Navy is using is flawed. They're relying on things that mysteriously pop up," said RAB member Lani Asher at Thursday's meeting. "We had talked about using a grid method last meeting."

"We're not going to use a grid method," retorted Offenhauer. "There's nothing mysterious about it."

One oral history that RAB members Maurice Campbell and Lynne Brown are particularly interested in contributing to the HRA is Captain Charles McVeigh's of the USS Indianapolis-the boat that carried the atomic bomb before it was dropped on Hiroshima during World War II. McVeigh's formal statement to the Navy reports that the Indianapolis picked up the atomic bomb called "Fat Man" at the Hunters Point Naval Shipyard on July 15 1945, the day before it killed over 130,000 people.

Brown and Campbell insist that McVeigh's statement along with an amalgam of other official documents prove that "Fat Man" was actually manufactured in the Hunters Point shipyard and that the evidence is hidden in the remaining classified documents.

"They had a full scale lab out here, over 600 of the best scientists, a centrifuge gage (used to break down Uranium-235), a particle accelerator... all the necessary components to build an atomic bomb," says Brown, the co-chair of the RAB. Brown has researched his theory for months now and has hundreds of pages of documents, which he says prove the bombs were built in the shipyard.

Officially the Navy has stated that the atomic bombs were built at the Los Alamos Lab in New Mexico where the first atomic test was performed on July 16, 1945.

"The bombs were not built here," Offenhauer says. "They were secretly transported here. The NRDL did no weapons work." Offenhauer says the bomb was merely loaded at Hunters Point, which McVeigh's statement says was done on July 15, 1945, the day before the first atomic test.

Campbell and Brown don't buy it. "Why would you go to all that trouble to secretly ship a bomb that you had never tested," Campbell says. Offenhauer says that the Indianapolis waited underneath the Golden Gate Bridge with "Fat Man" until the Navy had received word from New Mexico that the test had been successful. The atomic test in New Mexico was at 5:30 a.m. on July 16 and McVeigh said the Indianapolis set sail with the bomb at 8:00 a.m. the same morning.

Campbell still isn't convinced and plans to confront Offenhauer on this issue at the next RAB meeting. "I'm going to pull that information," says Campbell. "It's not over. I'm right, he's wrong."