

Agent Orange | A Toxic Legacy

Forty-two years after the fall of Saigon, veterans from The Villages® and countless others are still battling the aftermath of Agent Orange.

It was 1966. Bob Westfall was just 19, a kid really, too young to vote but old enough to fight for his country. He wasn't much different than most of the young men who were either drafted or enlisted for an unpopular war halfway across the world. How bad could it be to leave a hardscrabble life on the poor side of the tracks in Newburgh, N.Y. for an adventure paid for by Uncle Sam? A lot worse than he could have imagined.

"I suppose if you got out of it alive, you did ok," says Westfall, now 70. More than 58,000 of the 2.6 million Americans sent to the Southeast Asian country didn't make it, their names now inscribed on The Wall at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.

Westfall spent 23 months there, mainly in A Shau Valley in the northernmost part of South Vietnam, a key infiltration route for North Vietnamese forces and site of some of the most fierce battles of the war.



Purple Heart honoree Bob Westfall was 19 when he was sent to A Shau Valley's brutal battlegrounds. He made it out alive, but later suffered from lymphoma and PTSD.

By the time he completed two tours of duty as an Army communications specialist, Westfall survived bungee pits, a cyst on his spine and a peppering of shrapnel that was removed on the field by a medic with pliers. Westfall took home a Purple Heart for his combat injuries and enough bad memories to fill the next five decades.

What he didn't know was that after leaving the steamy jungles of Vietnam, he would go home to fight a different war – this one with Agent Orange.

"We saw what it did to the land," he says of the powerful herbicide used in Vietnam by the United States military. "No one was thinking of the damage it was doing to the humans."

A resident of **The Villages** in Central Florida, Westfall has fought lymphoma, a blood cancer that traveled through his neck, groin and spleen. He ingested so much chemotherapy that it calcified his adrenal gland and thickened the walls of his bladder. He has dealt with depression, alcoholism and post-traumatic stress disorder. Because the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs considers lymphoma one of **18 presumptive health conditions connected to Agent Orange** exposure, Westfall earns a monthly disability check.

But that's not the end of it. Some studies have linked birth defects and other medical issues to children, and even grandchildren, of Vietnam veterans at a higher rate than the general population. Westfall says it is no coincidence that his 43-year-old daughter and two grandchildren struggle with learning disabilities.

Veterans now face a different war: VA delays, roadblocks, tangled bureaucracy and endless paperwork.

The VA only recognizes spina bifida in offspring of male veterans as a direct link to Agent Orange, and 18 other diseases in the children of the small number of female Vietnam vets. Unwilling to sit back and wait, many advocacy groups are funding their own research and waging a public campaign to prove their case. That process may be accelerated.

In December, Congress passed a long-awaited bill that requires the VA to pay for an analysis of all research done so far on the descendants of veterans with toxic exposure. It also directs the department to review the feasibility of future research.

Westfall doubts any of this will be resolved in his lifetime. He says veterans and their families are accustomed to VA delays, roadblocks, tangled bureaucracy and endless paperwork. In his case, it took three years of appointments and appeals to get his Agent Orange benefits. He wants the same for his descendants if it is shown that his exposure caused their physical issues

“There’s a whole lot of us who’ve been affected by this,” he says. “And we’re getting older. I think the idea is to keep knocking you down until you give up and eventually die. Don’t give up.”



Haunted by the memories, Westfall paints peaceful natural landscapes to try and erase the horrors of the war. His paintings now cover the walls of his home, instilling a sense of quiet, stillness, and loneliness. Decades of counseling have helped him cope with his anger and depression.

FROM 1962 UNTIL 1971, THE U.S. MILITARY SPRAYED MORE THAN 19 MILLION GALLONS of herbicides from cargo planes, trucks, helicopters and by hand to defoliate nearly 4.5

million acres of upland forests and farmlands in southern and central Vietnam in a program codenamed Operation Ranch Hand.

Its purpose: Destroy the foliage that provided cover for North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops and wipe out crops that were feeding them. The most used herbicide was Agent Orange, which contained the dangerous chemical dioxin, a highly toxic pollutant linked to numerous cancers, birth defects, diabetes and other disabilities.

With concentrations up to 20 times higher than normal agricultural use, it did the job.

“We didn’t pay much attention,” says Pete Wagner, a resident of The Villages who was sent to Vietnam for 13 months in June 1967 as a specialist fourth class in the Army. “One day the vegetation was there; next day, gone.”



Drafted during the Tet Offensive, Pete Wagner is still haunted by his infantry days. Today, he can’t see dried blood without flashing back to the blood-caked clothing of dead enemy soldiers.

Military personnel were told not to worry, that the chemical was harmless. At the time, Wagner says, they had no reason to doubt it. Wagner, 71, is president of The Villages chapter of the Vietnam Veterans of America, the largest group in the state and ninth largest in the country. Like many of his fellow members, he has his own Agent Orange story.

Besides PTSD, he now suffers from neuropathy and diabetes – both among presumptive health conditions resulting from exposure. He also was diagnosed with bladder cancer and hypertension, neither of which is on the list. Nonetheless, he has submitted claims that were denied. He’s appealing in hopes the VA will eventually add them.

With no family history of any of those diseases, he’s convinced Agent Orange is responsible. If approved, it could change his disability benefit from its assigned 70 percent to 100 percent.

To this day, Wagner can't look at dried blood without experiencing a quick flashback to his infantry days during the Tet Offensive, one of the largest military campaigns by the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese in the 19-year war. It brings back memories of being ordered to go through the pockets of dead enemy soldiers, their slight bodies stiff and with blood caked on their clothes, searching for personal effects.

"That kind of memory never leaves you. Never," he says.

Despite the outcome of the Vietnam conflict, he doesn't regret his service. He was a hawk then, and he's a hawk now. The problem with war isn't the military commitment to the mission, Wagner says. It's the politics back home.



Despite his many health problems, Wagner is not bitter. He knows the intention of using Agent Orange was to help save American lives.

"If you get into a war with no clear plan on winning it, or you try to micromanage it from Washington, that's not a good formula," he says. "As for Agent Orange, that was an unfortunate thing. But mad? I can't be. It wasn't done out of malice."

That doesn't mean the government accepted responsibility without a fight. As evidence became clear of the potential human toll from the herbicide's toxicity, the U.S. halted its production in the early 1970s and collected and destroyed all existing stocks.

Acknowledgment of Agent Orange's impact on veterans was slow to come. Returning veterans were getting sick at an alarming rate. Their wives were having miscarriages and children were born with birth defects. In 1977, they began filing claims to the VA for conditions they felt were caused by the dioxin-laced spray.

But they had to provide tangible proof that the condition began while they were in service, or within a year of discharge.

More than a decade went by before Congress finally passed the Agent Orange Act, an important step in helping more veterans qualify for benefits.

The controversy simmered. The VA began offering free examinations to veterans and started issuing notifications as new revelations about the herbicide's impact came to light. It established an Agent Orange Registry to keep track of each vet's health history.

Only after years of research and study was it scientifically accepted that herbicides such as Agent Orange could stay in the system and manifest later in life. Finally, in 1991, Congress passed the Agent Orange Act that required the National Academy of Sciences to **periodically review all medical and scientific research** on the health effects related to Agent Orange and other chemicals used during the Vietnam War. It also gave the VA power to declare certain health conditions as "presumptive" to dioxin exposure.

"That certainly changed the game," says Fred Harrop, a retired Veterans Service Officer who worked for both state and county agencies.



Fred Harrop advises veterans to get their conditions on file so if new ones make the list, they can receive retroactive payments. "You may not be around to collect it, but your widow may be," Harrop says.

"At that point, all you had to do was prove you were boots on the grounds in Vietnam, the perimeters in Thailand or the Korean DMZ during a certain time period. If you had one of the specified conditions, you qualified for benefits."

Harrop's chief role in his two decades working with veterans was to help them navigate a complicated and frustrating bureaucracy. He recommends that veterans also have a trained professional as an advocate.

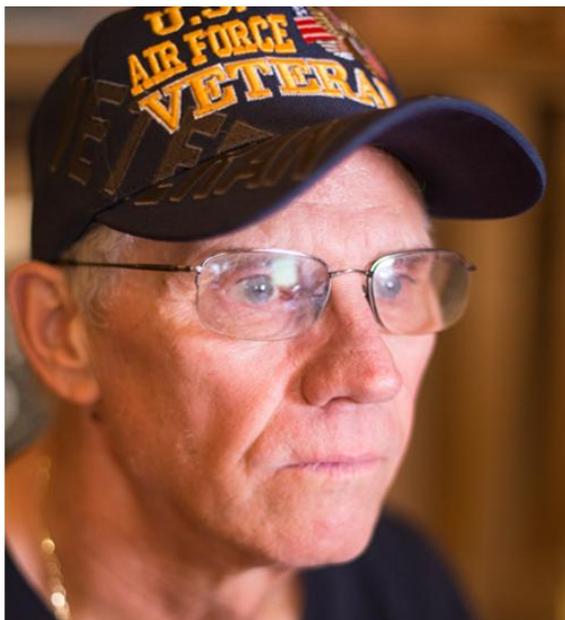
He says the VA has two tracks to qualify for Agent Orange benefits: The veteran provides proof of service and documentation of the medical condition, which generally takes four to six months; the veteran relies on the VA to provide the service record, the medical exam and diagnosis, which can take a year to 18 months.

Harrop, another resident of The Villages, advises all Vietnam veterans to sign up for the registry, get the protocol exam and document all medical issues, regardless of what they are.

"Because you never know when the VA will add more conditions that relate to Agent Orange exposure to the list," Harrop says. "Get it in your file. If something changes, you could get retroactive payments. You may not be around to collect it, but your widow may be."

Ed Fink, 63, is one of those hoping that the VA will change its guidelines.

In 1971, at just 17, he enlisted in the Air Force. He got orders to go to Vietnam in October 1973 – the same month a draft of the peace accord was released by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. With that development, Fink instead was sent in January to an airfield base in Korat, Thailand, from which military pilots flew war-related missions.



Ed Fink has been battling the VA for six years. To give in to depression would “give them a victory,” Fink says.

Though it took years for the U.S. government to admit using herbicides to clear vegetation at military installations in Thailand and Korea, it eventually conceded it had been used around the base perimeters. Hence, claims were limited to those who patrolled specifically in a 500-meter buffer zone.

Fink worked on the flight line as an aircraft repairman. Though he crossed the perimeter regularly to court and then marry his Thai wife, Fink is not eligible for the benefits. But he firmly believes his medical history supports a case of exposure to the toxic defoliant.

Among his issues: Multiple myeloma and a subsequent bone marrow transplant, and ischemic heart disease, leading to five stents and a triple-bypass surgery. Both are presumptive conditions on the VA list.

His daughter, now 38, was diagnosed with thyroid cancer four years ago. With no such family history, he also believes she may be a second-generation casualty of Agent Orange.

He’s been battling the VA for six years. To give in to depression would “give them a victory,” Fink says. So he keeps his cheerful attitude on the job as a supervisor for Community Watch in the The Villages. In his spare time, he enjoys line dancing and golf, and spending time with Noy, his wife of 42 years.

“Patience,” he says. “For years, it was deny, deny, deny, when it came to the impact Agent Orange had on those who served. So I have reason to hope they will come around one day for veterans in my situation.”

When 70-year-old Rick Houseman hears the horror stories, he counts his blessings.

He was 19 when drafted by the Army. Houseman was supposed to serve two years, but 11 months into his tour in Vietnam, he was shot in the leg.



When Rick Houseman was drafted, he did his duty. He didn't know the aftereffects would hit him 46 years later: ischemic heart disease and a triple bypass.

After a two-month stint in the hospital, he was sent home in 1969 to Springfield, Ohio. He wasn't ashamed of his service, though war protestors tried to make him feel that way.

"The way I look at it, the government asked us to serve, we went and we did our duty for our country. My friends who ran off to Canada were no longer my friends," says Houseman, a retired aluminum salesman who now lives in Inverness.

Five years ago he was diagnosed with ischemic heart disease and underwent a triple bypass. Just three months earlier, the VA had added that condition to the presumptive conditions list. Houseman got a \$21,000 check, reflecting retroactive payments, and he now gets a monthly disability check just under \$300.

"It was a surprise to me. I wasn't looking for it, and they didn't have to give it to me," he says. "I was living my life, with or without it. But I am thankful."

Even though the VA had examined more than 668,000 Vietnam vets, they hadn't focused on how their exposure to dioxin harmed the children they birthed or fathered after the war.

One of his sons was stricken with diabetes more than 20 years ago. Houseman doesn't know if there's an Agent Orange connection. He will leave that decision to the researchers and the VA.

"I see a lot of bitterness with Vietnam vets," he says. "A lot of drinking going on that they blame on the war. That was 50 years ago. Get over it and get on with your life. If you don't, then you let them win."

THE AGENT ORANGE CONTROVERSY HAS BEEN PASSED TO second- and even third-generation descendants of those who served in the war. The jury is still out: To what extent is the collateral damage in children and grandchildren of Vietnam vets?

In December, The Virginian-Pilot teamed with ProPublica, a nonprofit newsroom that produces investigative journalism in the public interest, on the in-depth project “The Children of Agent Orange.” The story revealed that even though the VA had collected reams of data in its Agent Orange Registry and physically examined more than 668,000 Vietnam vets over the years, it hadn’t studied it enough for the clues that supported the long-held suspicions of their subjects: That their exposure to dioxin harmed the children they birthed or fathered after the war.



“Operation Ranch Hand” was the codename for the U.S. military program that sprayed more than 19 million gallons of herbicides to defoliate nearly 4.5 million acres of Vietnam’s upland forests and farmlands.

The project team conducted an analysis that found the odds of having a child born with birth defects were more than one-third higher for veterans who handled, sprayed or were directly sprayed with Agent Orange than for those who said they weren’t exposed or weren’t sure.

“It’s like a sign that says ‘Dig Here’ and they’re not digging,” said Dr. David Ozonoff, a professor of environmental health at Boston University and editor-in-chief of the online journal Environmental Health, told the project team after reviewing its findings. “It raises questions about whether they want to know the answer or are just hoping the problem will naturally go away as the veterans die off.”

“Vietnam was the largest living laboratory of people exposed to a very potent poison. The problem is the VA doesn’t want this on its plate. The powers that be would prefer it all just go away.”
–Betty Mekdec, Founder of the Orlando-based Birth Defect Research for Children

Betty Mekdeci is doing her part to make sure the unanswered questions are addressed and challenged.

She's the founder of the Orlando-based Birth Defect Research for Children, which provides birth defect information to parents and investigates the cause of birth defects that could have been prevented.

The nonprofit is rooted in her own personal journey. When her son was born with multiple birth defects in 1975, she and her husband Mike contacted the FDA about medications prescribed for Betty during her pregnancy. With the help of whistleblowers at FDA, they focused on Bendectin, a medication approved to treat nausea and vomiting during pregnancy. Seven years of research and relentless efforts led to Bendectin's removal from the worldwide market in 1982.

Against everyone's advice, she left her career in advertising copywriting and started the foundation to help parents in her same situation. The grass-roots operation, with a \$200,000 budget cobbled together mainly with grants and donations, now has a staff of three, a contract worker who analyzes data, a volunteer nurse and student helpers from the University of Central Florida.



Mekdeci's foundation released its latest report in June on the data she has been gathering for three decades. The results were startling.

In 1986, Mekdeci worked on a project that involved counseling veterans' families and creating a series of fact sheets on the disabilities they were reporting in their children. That led her to set up the National Birth Defect Registry, which includes information from thousands of families of Vietnam veterans that shows a consistent pattern of disabilities in their children.

"Vietnam was the largest living laboratory of people exposed to a very potent poison," Mekdeci says. "The problem is the VA doesn't want this on its plate. The powers that be would prefer it all just go away."

But saying it can't be done only makes her work harder.

Mekdeci has presented data she's collected over the years to the National Academy of Sciences, congressional committees, the VA and in national media forums. Current scientific evidence, she says, argues that not only is dioxin a potent carcinogen, but it also triggers reproductive, developmental and immunological defects.

In June, the foundation released its latest report, comparing the differences in structural and functional birth defects in children of Vietnam vets compared to children of non-veterans in the registry. The results were startling: The children of the veterans fared worse in most categories, including learning disabilities, immune response disorders, endocrine defects, cancer, benign tumors, and liver, bile duct and spleen defects.

"We made a contract with our veterans. If they get hurt, we take care of them," Mekdeci says. "And if their children have been harmed because of their service to our country, we owe them, too."

Tanya Mack is one of those children.

Now 42, she's the daughter of an Air Force combat controller who was part of a Special Operations Squadron in the A Shau Valley from 1966 to 1968. When he returned from war, he suffered from PTSD and alcoholism. Lung cancer took his life at age 64.



Tanya Mack was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer caused by extreme exposure to arsenic. Over 50 percent of the compound used in Agent Orange was arsenic.

Mack was born two years after her father returned from war with severe hip dysplasia – one of the birth defects covered for children of female Vietnam veterans, but not male. Health issues have consumed her life.

"The funny thing is, if it was my mother who had gone to Vietnam, then the VA would have recognized my specific medical conditions as Agent Orange-related," she says.

She had 15 hip reconstruction surgeries and five hip replacements. After developing multiple basal cell and squamous cell carcinomas, genetic testing revealed they were the result of a mutation in her PTCH1

gene, which her doctors attributed to her father's exposure to Agent Orange. Of the 198 skin biopsies she has undergone, 181 tested positive for cancer. She has battled melanoma and thyroid cancer, underwent a total hysterectomy after cancer was found in her uterus and ovaries. She also has Lupus and Reynaud's Disease.

In August 2011, Mack was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer called Bowen's Disease. It's caused by extreme exposure to arsenic. Though she never had been exposed to herbicides and pesticides, her father was in Vietnam. Over 50 percent of the compound used in Agent Orange was arsenic.

There's no question in Mack's mind that she's a second-generation victim of the dioxin-laced defoliant that thinned out the jungles and ravaged crops in Vietnam. Feeling disconnected and discouraged, she began seeking out other descendants for support and solidarity in the struggle to be recognized by the VA and to get benefits that will help with the onslaught of medical bills.

She knows it's an uphill battle. Since 2001, according to The Children of Agent Orange project, the VA has received claims from more than 8,100 offspring citing spina bifida and other birth defects. Of those, only 1,325 claimants have received benefits.

Six years ago, Mack co-founded Children of Vietnam Veterans Health Alliance, giving voice to some 4,300 members who share their stories and exchange information. Conditions that dominate the conversation lately, she says, are "off the charts" female reproductive issues, autoimmune diseases and aggressive brain cancer.

"If I knew then what I know now, I probably wouldn't have had children. I don't want my child to go through what I've gone through."

-Tanya Mack

On Oct. 5-8, the group will sponsor its first national convention in Washington, D.C., featuring speakers, panel discussions, social time and a group visit to the Vietnam Memorial Wall.

"It's good to know you're not alone," she says. "We're not imagining these issues. This is real life for us. It's not going away."

Mack, a mother of three, curses Agent Orange for yet another reason. Her 11-year-old daughter suffers from a connective tissue disorder, leaving her ligaments loose and unable to hold her joints in place. Mack can't help but wonder about its origin.

"If I knew then what I knew now," she says, "I probably wouldn't have had children. I don't want my child to go through what I've gone through."

MORE THAN 40 YEARS HAVE PASSED SINCE THE FALL OF SAIGON. Yet the emotional and physical scars of the survivors of this complicated and divisive war still resonate.

Not just in America, but in Vietnam as well. Dioxin, now regarded as one of the most toxic chemicals ever produced, remains in the country's ecosystem, in the soil and in the rivers, which provide fish and drinking water.

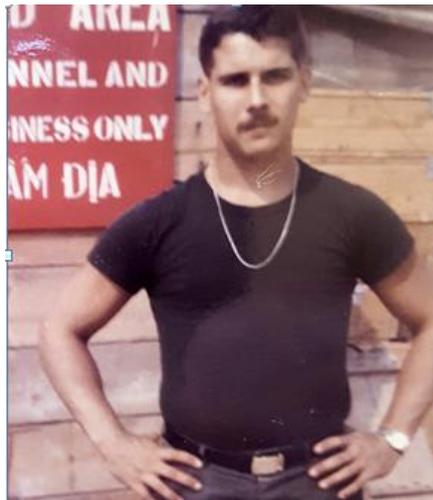


Agent Orange will be one of many facets examined in “The Vietnam War,” a Ken Burns documentary series that premiered Sept. 17 on local PBS stations.

According to the Red Cross of Vietnam, up to 1 million Vietnamese are disabled or have severe health problems due to Agent Orange, 100,000 of which are children. Millions more have been exposed, causing at least some 400,000 deaths.

The herbicide’s terrible legacy will be one of many facets examined in “The Vietnam War,” a 10-part, 18-hour documentary by award-winning filmmakers Ken Burns and Lynn Novick. The film series premiered Sept. 17 on local PBS stations, and featured testimonies from nearly 80 American and Vietnamese witnesses, from those who fought in the war to those who opposed it.

Bob Westfall sees an irony in all the renewed interest in the war.



Westfall still remembers bathing in bomb craters filled with rank water, an oily substance floating on top.

“When we got home, nobody wanted to talk about it with you,” he says. “That included the guys who served over there. It wasn’t a popular subject.”

A self-described recluse, he tries to shut the memories away by painting landscapes and nature. But he can’t always escape them. He still remembers bathing in bomb craters filled with rank water, an oily

substance floating on top. He's now convinced that was the residue of the Agent Orange sprayed from above by cargo planes. Decades of counseling have helped him cope with his anger and depression. Considering all that he's gone through, Westfall says he's doing better than expected.

He had multiple health issues, but still outlived his first wife. She died of sternum cancer after 35 years of marriage. He remembers what she used to tell him in his darkest moments:

“You're a survivor, Bob. Others would have crumbled, but not you. You are a survivor.”

[Source: Evergreen Wellness | Michelle Bearden | September 20, 2017 ++]