

# Agent Orange catching up to Vietnam veterans decades later

OWENSBORO, Ky. (AP) — Snow fell outside the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post 696 as its members held their monthly meeting Feb. 9, 2016

Although attendance was down, most of those present were Vietnam veterans receiving some percentage of disability benefits from their exposure to Agent Orange — a herbicide sprayed by the United States military during the Vietnam War from 1961 to 1971.

Among them were Billy Milan, Lou Drawdy and Terry Stinson.

They were like thousands of other Vietnam vets who returned home unaware that they had been exposed to the same toxic dioxin that was meant to combat their enemies — the Viet Cong guerrillas and the North Vietnamese Army, known as "Charlie" to U.S. forces.

Now, decades later, Agent Orange is catching up with Vietnam veterans, leading to debilitating and deadly health problems that range from heart disease to various forms of cancer.

The three men said they were proud veterans, but, like many of their comrades, struggle with their Vietnam experience because they live every day with a multitude of illnesses stemming from Agent Orange exposure.

"It was bad enough that you were over there, and (the guerrillas) didn't like you," said Drawdy, 73, who served as a Marine and whose diabetes has been attributed to Agent Orange. "... Then you find that all of the hazards that you were exposed to, that maybe, the U.S. government didn't like you."

Stinson, 64, served in Vietnam from 1970 to 1971 as an Air Force aircraft mechanic, working and flying on planes that sprayed Agent Orange.

"I started showing signs when I was 26 years old," said Stinson, who is a severe diabetic due to his exposure. "Now, here I am 64 years old and I'm taking seven insulin shots a day. ... I can't feel my feet anymore."

Milan, 73, served several tours in Vietnam as part of the Army's Special Forces, 173rd and 101st Infantry Divisions. His first tour was in 1962 and his last in 1971.

"I thought I was a resident of Vietnam," said Milan, who receives 100 percent service-connected disability benefits for high blood pressure, an irregular heart beat and post-traumatic stress disorder. "I knew something was wrong because when the planes flew over to spray for mosquitoes and (the foliage) there was a different smell to it. ...So I had a taste of the Agent Orange."

It wasn't until 1991 that Congress passed the Agent Orange Act that gave the Department of Veterans Affairs the power to declare certain health conditions as "presumptive" to dioxin exposure.

The VA, however, doesn't have an accurate count of how many Vietnam veterans suffer from Agent Orange exposure.

"I can't get the Agent Orange statistics because it's not a general diagnosis," said Beth Lamb, Marion, Illinois, VA public affairs spokeswoman.

In Daviess County, there is no shortage of Vietnam veterans who are either suffering or dying from exposure to the herbicide.

John Yates used to be involved with local veterans organizations such as the Veterans of Foreign Wars, but his health has declined to the point that he rarely leaves his Cedar Hills home.

He now draws 100 percent disability benefits from his service-connected congestive heart failure and diabetes.

He served in Vietnam as a Navy hospital corpsman with the Third Marine Division from 1968 to 1969.

"I was out in the bush all the time," Yates, 71, recalled. ".I slept on the ground and drank from the streams. The Agent Orange was all over."

He now functions by taking a daily regimen of medications used to control his plethora of health problems he says were caused by his exposure.

"The medications help, but you still hurt and you still suffer," said Yates, whose calendar is filled with doctors' appointments.

To help flag any changes in her husband's condition, Cecelia Yates tracks his medical information by recording it in a notebook daily.

The Yateses blame the Agent Orange effects for John Yates' early retirement from his job as an educator in 2007.

"He's frustrated and angry because he feels like he was robbed," Cecilia Yates said. "He loved teaching, and that just broke his heart when he had to quit."

Agent Orange — named for the color of the metal drums in which the chemical was stored — was the main herbicide the U.S. Air Force used to reduce the jungle canopies as part of "Operation Ranch Hand."

An estimated 19 million gallons were sprayed over 20 percent of Vietnam in an attempt to uncover roads and trails used by the Viet Cong.

Sharon Westerfield watched her late husband, Larry Westerfield, struggle with the effects of Agent Orange for the last seven years of his life. Larry Westerfield died in 2012 at age 63 of congestive heart failure.

He served in Vietnam from 1969 to 1970 as a member of the Army's 14th Engineer Battalion.

"After they sprayed the Agent Orange, he went in with a 'dozer and knocked down the foliage," Sharon Westerfield said. "So it was all over him."

According to Sharon Westerfield, it wasn't until 2005 that her husband discovered that there was something wrong.

"He had stubbed his big toe," she said. ".And one morning about 3 o'clock, he said, 'I think you're going to have to take me to the hospital.' So when I looked at his toe, it was black. .They were able to save his leg but they took his big toe and part of his foot. He had trouble with that forever. He was at the wound center all the way up to the day he died."

Sharon Westerfield said her husband was then diagnosed with diabetes and learned through an Internet search that Agent Orange exposure was a related cause.

"It was like a domino effect," said Westerfield after her husband's diabetes diagnosis.

Larry Westerfield underwent open heart surgery for five bypasses in 2006, followed by bladder failure in 2009 and skin cancer in 2010.

Before dying two years later, Sharon Westerfield said her husband's congestive heart failure would cause fluid to build up throughout his body.

"His was so bad that his legs would swell up, and water would seep out," she said. "He couldn't sleep in a bed from 2005 until he passed. He slept in a recliner because he was unable to lie down."

It's through local Disabled American Veterans organizations that Vietnam veterans are finding help with medical and financial coverage for their illnesses associated with Agent Orange. The DAV aids veterans in filling out their disability claims to the VA.

Ross Jewell, a volunteer service officer for the Owensboro DAV, said there are many Vietnam veterans out there suffering but are only now coming forward.

"I just helped a (Vietnam) veteran who's had heart problems since he was 28," Jewell said. "And he just passed away in January a week after receiving his (financial) award from the VA. The one thing he wanted was to make sure that his wife was taken care of."

Jewell said there are still Vietnam veterans who are unaware of what the DAV can do for them and others who have been disheartened from previous denials from the VA.

"The people who come in here tell me the stories they're not willing to tell their doctors or their families," Jewell said.

Jewell recommended that any veteran who has an illness or injury that could be service-related visit a local DAV.

"The majority of the people who come through here today are Vietnam-era veterans," said Jewell about those who are filing VA disability claims. "It's a painless process with a lot of painful memories."

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