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Chemical Warfare, An Endless Tragedy

Fred A. Wilcox, PhD – 04/28/2015

On April 30, 1975, North Vietnamese and Viet Cong forces arrived in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City) forcing the last remaining Americans to flee. The long, seemingly endless debacle in Vietnam appeared to be over. Forty years later, chemical warfare continues to take a terrible toll on hundreds of thousands of men, women, and children. Here, briefly, is that story.

Not long after returning from the killing fields of Southeast Asia, Vietnam veterans began to suffer from a variety of debilitating illnesses. Many of these soldiers were teenagers, in superb physical condition, when they went to war. Now in their twenties, they were urinating blood, their limbs felt numb, their bodies were covered with ugly rashes.

Staff at Veterans Administration hospitals told these ex-soldiers they were suffering from combat stress. Veterans were accused of being alcoholics, drug addicts, and malingerers. The Department of Defense argued that combat troops waited for six weeks before entering defoliated jungles. Moreover, said the DOD, the military had maps showing exactly where Agent Orange was sprayed. Veterans who said they were exposed to herbicides anywhere else in country could not remember, said the DOD, where they'd spent their tour of duty.

Today, the Veterans Administration compensates for twenty or more serious illnesses related to exposure to Agent Orange and other toxic chemicals in Vietnam. But compensation is not synonymous with justice. The government that poisoned its own army on the field of battle has failed to do scientific studies that would clearly demonstrate that dioxin, the contaminant in Agent Orange, has undermined Vietnam veterans' immunity systems, making them vulnerable to cancer, brain tumors, heart disease, and other deadly illnesses. Sadly, we will never know how many veterans have died, and are dying, from the effects of Agent Orange.

Forty years after the last spray mission in Vietnam, Dow, Monsanto, and other companies that profited from chemical warfare deny that Agent Orange poisoned millions of Vietnamese citizens, including hundreds of thousands of children. According to Dow and friends, there is no evidence that dioxin harms human beings.

These companies have not sent scientists to Vietnam to study samples of blood and fatty tissues taken from people living in areas still highly contaminated by dioxin. They have not visited Friendship Village and other centers where Vietnamese men and women lovingly care for beautiful children with missing arms and legs, missing eyes, huge heads, and other serious birth defects. They have not talked to former Vietnamese soldiers who are sick and dying from eating food and drinking water contaminated with Agent Orange/dioxin.

In 2004, the Vietnamese filed a lawsuit charging Dow et al. with war crimes. Like the class action lawsuit Vietnam veterans filed in the early '80s this one failed. Highly skilled lawyers argued that the chemical manufacturers of Agent Orange were trying to help the military win the war in

Vietnam. These companies, said Dow's defenders, were acting on behalf of the United States government. They wanted to save the lives of American soldiers. In essence, they were following orders.

In Vietnam, poverty-stricken parents care for off spring that will never attend school, never marry or hold a job. These seriously handicapped victims must be cared for twenty-fours a day. Their parents worry that once they are gone, their helpless offspring will be left to fend for themselves.

It would take very little money to help these families, but in order to offer them compensation the United States government would have to admit that it knowingly violated international treaties prohibiting the use of toxic chemicals in warfare.

A campaign has begun to turn the Vietnam War into a noble cause gone wrong. For the right price, advertising companies trained in the art of constructive deceit will polish old lies. We will honor our veterans with self-serving proclamations and parades. After all, the government did not mean to send its soldiers off to an unwinnable war. It did not intend to permanently destroy Vietnam's jungles forests, poison its own army, and then wait for this army to die.

Those who wish to transform the Vietnam War into a World War II morality play will say that they just want our country to heal. It's time to lay our differences aside, and to agree that while our nation might have its faults, we have always been, we are, and we will always be the only good guys in a very dangerous, evil, world.

Determined to justify the propaganda that led to the war in Vietnam, revisionists will write books, make films, and lecture at colleges and universities. Vietnamese victims of chemical warfare will not be invited to appear on popular talk shows. The widows of Vietnam veterans who died premature, painful, deaths from the effects of Agent Orange will not be asked to speak at academic forums on the war. Photographs of seriously deformed Vietnamese and American Agent Orange children will be left out of secondary school textbooks.

But no matter how hard the spin-doctors work to justify a decades of madness in Vietnam, they will fail to explain away the horrors of chemical warfare. In Vietnam, a third, and even a fourth generation of children are being born with serious deformities. The politicians who initiated the defoliation campaign in Southeast Asia have left this world. We must honor the victims of chemical warfare in Vietnam, and work to see that the world remembers this crime against humanity.

Fred A. Wilcox, author

Waiting for an Army to Die: The Tragedy of Agent Orange
Scorched Earth: Legacies of Chemical Warfare in Vietnam