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Faces of AGENT ORANGE

New York



Msgt LeRoy Foster

By Jim Belshaw

LeRoy Foster never set foot in Vietnam. He didn't serve in the blue water Navy off the coast of Vietnam, either. In fact, he didn't come within about 2,400 miles of Vietnam. But the chances are good that he spent as much time in the company of Agent Orange as those who came into contact with it in Vietnam. He was the scrawny little guy with a "wand" in hand, working his way along a pipeline or security fence on Andersen Air Force Base in Guam. When he showed up, someone would see him from afar and say, "Here comes that little bastard spraying again."

He spent 10 years on Guam. He first got there in 1968, a fuel specialist working with the B-52s of Arc Light. But the Air Force found other work for him, too. In the stifling heat and humidity of Guam, he wore rubber boots that came up to his knees, rubber gloves that came up to his elbows, and a rubber apron that ran from his neck down to his feet.

"After awhile, you'd start shedding that stuff, because it got too hot," he said. "I had a face shield, but it only covered the front of my face. It didn't cover the sides."

He hand-sprayed Agent Orange from a 750-gallon tank on a trailer. The

Air Force wanted security fences and pipelines kept clear of vegetation. The trailer had a 50-foot hose with a wand on the end to spray Agent Orange. The guys who saw the "little bastard" coming to spray felt sorry for him.

"A sergeant named Ralph Stanton remembered me," the retired master sergeant said. "He remembers me spraying that stuff. He remembers me wearing the rubber boots and gloves and sweating to death in all that heat. He said he felt sorry for me."

Foster started spraying Agent Orange in September 1968. In October, the outbreaks of chloracne began. Marked by eruptions of blackheads, cysts, and pustules, chloracne has been linked to dioxins, including those connected with Agent Orange. Nobody told him much about Agent Orange. Nobody told him there was anything to worry about.

"I've got a re-enlistment photo from March 1971 at Guam, and you could see the chloracne down the sides of my face," he said. "I was covered with the acne. It was all over my body – my chest, my buttocks, the upper part of my thighs, my back. It started in October 1968. I didn't know it at the time, but it wasn't a coincidence. There I was breaking





Faces of AGENT ORANGE

LeRoy Foster's Story Continued...

out all over my body, and I didn't know what it was. I thought it was the heat or something."

He hand-sprayed the pipeline for six years. He married an Air Force dependent living on Guam and repeatedly went back for tours there, spending a total of 10 years.

"Nobody told me anything," he said. "Nobody told me I was going to be damaged the rest of my life by this stuff."

He retired in late 1987. He made claims to the VA. He was denied. Other illnesses came.

"The whole time, I'm fighting the VA," he said. "It was a terrible thing for me to discover that all my illnesses are connected to Agent Orange. Nobody said a word."

In 1987, he took a test for employment with the Postal Service. He did well and was ordered to take a physical. He didn't get the job. He would never get the job. The Postal Service told him the physical found evidence of severe spinal stenosis and ankylosing spondylitis, a chronic, inflammatory arthritis and autoimmune disease.

Eighteen years ago, he and his third wife had a daughter, Alicia Jean Foster. She was born with asthma and has suffered weight problems and emotional difficulties all of her life.

"There may be things wrong with us that we don't even know," he said. "She's always had this rash on her body, and the skin on her feet is always cracking."

His persistence with the VA eventually led to a 100 percent disability rating in

2005. But the anger remains.

"They said I had no proof I was exposed to Agent Orange," he said. "And you know what? It's right there in my Airman Performance Report. It's called Vegetation Control. But they don't put in any details, because it was such a menial task, and then they say I don't have any proof. How many guys are going to document every little thing they did when they were in the service?"

Early in 2010, his daughter gave birth to her own daughter, Amelia Ann. The baby suffers from multiple birth defects. He firmly believes all the illnesses — his, his daughter's, and his granddaughter's — are linked to Agent Orange.

"If they look at all the illnesses I had when I was on active duty, if they look at those records and the VA records, they have a road map of a man, a veteran, who was exposed to Agent Orange, and it's progressed through my life. It's a road map! They can see it. I'd like to have somebody come up to my face and tell me I'm lying. I really would."

Significant numbers of veterans have children and grandchildren with birth defects related to exposure to Agent Orange. To alert legislators and the media to this ongoing legacy of the war, we are seeking real stories about real people. If you wish to share your family's health struggles that you believe are due to Agent Orange/dioxin, send an email to mporter@vva.org or call 301-585-4000, Ext. 146.

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