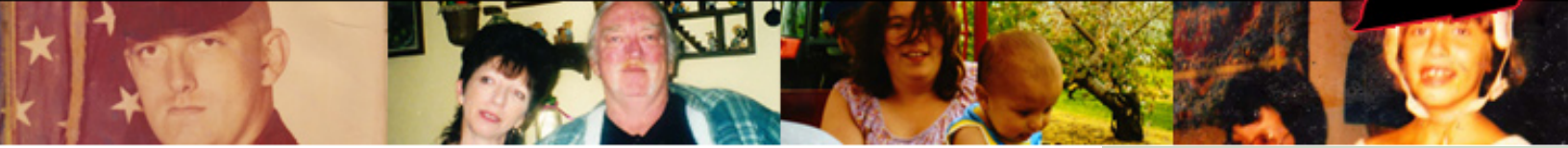




Faces of

AGENT ORANGE

Michigan



Arthur Dekoff

By Linda May

Arthur Dekoff says he is far from the only one in his family who is affected by the Vietnam War.

“My daughter wasn’t in that war,” he said. “But there’s no doubt in my mind that she’s paying the price because I was in it.”

Jessica Dekoff seemed healthy until she started kindergarten and a teacher said Jessica was dozing off in school. That’s when the seizures began.

“We took her to a children’s hospital. The diagnosis was epilepsy, and they treated her for that, but the seizures kept going,” Arthur said. “Then she had a stroke, and she lost the use of her right side, and it also left her mentally handicapped.

“The doctors kept questioning me about if I had ever been out of the country, and I told them I was in Vietnam. That was the end of the questioning. They didn’t need to talk about it any longer,” Arthur said.

The CT scan confirmed that it was Moyamoya disease, a rare condition first identified by the Japanese. It is more common in Asians but can affect anyone. Girls get it more often than boys. The walls of the internal carotid arteries of a person with Moyamoya, which supply blood to important areas of the brain,

become thickened. Blood clots can form which may cause strokes and transient ischemic attacks.

Moyamoya can strike at any age, but the average age of diagnosis is around seven years, right about Jessica’s age at the time. About seven percent of the time, the disease runs in families, and those cases are due to a particular genetic defect.

“They told me my daughter had a year to live,” Arthur said.

A trip to another hospital in Ann Arbor, Michigan, resulted in medication that controlled the seizures. Jessica lived, but at 34, she has the mental capacity of a 9-year-old. She can say words but not complete sentences and does not always understand what is being said to her.

The stress was too much on the marriage between Arthur and Jessica’s mother.

Arthur’s present wife lives with Jessica and Arthur in a small mid-Michigan town.

“She knew me before I went to Vietnam. She understands me,” he said.

With sores all over his body while in Vietnam, Arthur served as a supply convoy driver during his in-country tour from 1970 to 1971.



Art Dekoff and wife Terry



Art’s youngest daughter, Janay, and grandson, Billy



Jessica (right) at the Special Olympics



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

The Art Dekoff's Story Continued...

"When I got back, they asked me about getting sprayed. I wasn't looking at our planes. I wasn't worrying about them. I was watching for the enemy," he said.

He worked for General Motors until problems started—including neuropathy, kidney cancer, and Post-traumatic Stress Disorder—and he took a medical retirement. Now 60 years old, he has also had quadruple bypass surgery.

"I worked until '83 and then I couldn't deal with work any more," Arthur said.

What he calls his "world" is six wooded acres, with distance between him and his neighbors. He says of his fellow Vietnam veterans who, like him, left the metropolitan Detroit area for the quieter rural life, "there are a lot of us up here."

"I leave the house to check the mail, but I don't get together with other Vietnam vets. I don't like being around anybody really," he said.

He feels strongly that the VA medical system has failed him, especially with detecting and treating what Agent Orange might have done to him and his family.

Arthur has another daughter with a different woman.

That child has learning disabilities. Her siblings—who had a different father—do not have any apparent problems.

"My health was great before I was drafted into the army," he said. "I lifted weights in school. My first problem was those sores that started over there, and I didn't know what they were."

Places on his body where there are no sores, have scars from past sores.

"I figure we bathed in it (dioxin), drank it, and whatever else. There should be compensation for our kids," he said.

Jessica benefits educationally from a workshop that runs five days a week, but her family can only afford to send her two or three days per week.

At the sheltered workshop, she learns and enjoys the company of children or other adults with her level of function, and she participates in the Special Olympics as a swimmer.

"She loves school, and all I can afford is a couple days for her. If I had some extra money to give her a better life, that would be great," he said.

Considering what the family has given to the nation, it can't be asking too much.

Significant numbers of Vietnam 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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