



Faces of

AGENT ORANGE



Zack Earp

By Jim Doyle

The worst thing is not having an answer,” says former California State Council President and longtime VVA activist Zack Earp. “I know there are lists of birth defects and stories about how Agent Orange affects veterans and their children, but still, I don’t have any definitive answers.”

Like other Vietnam veterans, Earp is deeply concerned about the effects of his exposure to Agent Orange while patrolling the DMZ from Dong Ha to Con Thien for 8 months in 1967-1968, where nearly 180 thousand gallons of toxic herbicides were sprayed. Earp has battled prostate cancer, and he wrestles with Parkinson’s disease, but what weighs on him is how his three sons and his grandchildren have been affected.

“I’ve reviewed many of the AO stories,” says Earp. “All of these kids have very serious health issues, and my kids’ health issues aren’t as obvious or as serious, but I still wonder, was it me?”

Earp’s oldest son, Clayton, was born in 1972 with a heart murmur. He has fought a lifelong battle with hives. “He has these large welts all over his body, head to toe,” said Earp. As an adolescent, Clayton experienced uncontrollable neurological tics.

Seth, born in 1977, exhibited more profound health issues. At 16, he began experiencing grand mal seizures, which precipitated numerous trips to the hospital. Efforts to identify the causes of his seizures were inconclusive. “When Seth was young, his arms would go rigid for no reason. Tests by pediatric neurologists at Cedars-Sinai Hospital, affiliated with the UCLA Medical Center, provided no answers,” said Earp.

Despite his neurological problems, Seth was a bright, intellectually curious student with advanced language skills who hoped to become an English teacher. He wrote short stories and poetry. He played the piano. “Seth’s seizures continued.... There was no warning, no pattern, no regularity.... Over the years, test after test produced no answers.” On Christmas Eve 2009, at the age of 32, Seth died at home after a violent seizure.

“Seth had wanted to have brain surgery to remove the part of the brain that was causing his seizures,” said Earp. “The Chief of Neurology at UCLA wasn’t eager to do the surgery, because it would have involved Seth’s frontal lobe, which was far riskier than temporal lobe surgery. Seth never had a chance to be a regular kid.”



Zack receiving the Purple Heart at Camp Pendleton U.S. Naval Hospital



Seth, Josh, Zack, and Clayton



Seth and his mustang, which he was never able to drive due to his seizures



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Zach Earp's Story Continued...

Earp's third son, Joshua, was born in 1978, and although his was a normal birth, "I could feel something was wrong," he said. By the time Joshua was 15 months old, he was in respiratory distress and had to be hospitalized at March Air Force Base near the family home in Riverside, California. "He couldn't keep any food down. He weighed about 12 pounds, less than half the normal weight of a baby his age. He was put into an oxygen tent with pneumonia."

After consultations with a succession of specialists, it was determined that Joshua had an obstruction in his throat as well as a hole in the upper chamber of his heart—atrial septal defect. "If that wasn't enough, the poor kid's main coronary artery was going to the wrong side of his heart," said Earp. "Three boys in six years, each with birth defects, what was I supposed to think?"

At 2 years 3 months of age, Josh underwent surgery to correct his heart defect, but the damage had been done. His growth was stunted, and he never matched his contemporaries in size. He was able to resume typical "kid activities" but did not have the stamina to keep up. "Josh had to stop for a break all the time," Earp said. "I think his limitations contributed to his anger issues later in his life. I don't think he was ever able to relate to his peer group."

"None of my boys had a normal childhood," said Earp. "All three of them were bright and inquisitive, but each of them had health issues that affected the way they lived and played. Today, Clayton, the healthiest of my three, still lives with the hives all over his body.

"For all his neurological problems, Seth lived a full life; he had rich friendships and experiences. He suffered quietly with his seizures. Though he was never able to drive, his friends and family helped out, and if we weren't available, he rode the bus."

Earp wages a daily battle with Parkinson's; his prostate cancer is currently in remission, but his health issues are secondary to the concerns he has for his sons. Now Earp's worries extend to his grandchildren. "My granddaughter recently attempted suicide," he says, pausing to collect his thoughts. "I can't make sense of all this."

"We need answers. I think we are far beyond the blame game at this point, but it's not too late to stand in the public square and wave signs and raise our voices. If we can engage the public in our mission, we can be successful," said Earp. "If we know our exposure to Agent Orange caused these problems, it makes the search for solutions easier. It puts treatment and care within reach. Is that too much to ask?"

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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