



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Illinois



Mark David Finley

By Michelle Githens-Baugh

Two years ago, Mark David Finley rolled his mobility scooter into my office. He had come to talk about his tour of duty in Vietnam and to share how his service had wreaked havoc on his health.

Finley had served with the Third Battalion, Third Marine Division, with much of his time along the DMZ in places like Dong Ha. He recalled lying in weeds soaked in a liquid of some sort, "We just didn't even think about it. We didn't know what it was."

In 1971, Finley was back in Illinois and ready to put the war behind him. Fortune was with him on the day he met Alesia, a good Catholic girl who was working at the local drive in. He fell hard. It was the quintessential hometown romance, and soon they were married. In time, they had three sons, Adam, Aaron, and Isaac.

Life was good for many years.

Then, in 1998, Finley's health started to decline. At the time of our meeting, he had had four strokes and five heart attacks and was waiting for a heart transplant. He grinned, proudly noting, "I was only going to have two years, but I've gone longer than that."

Life for the family became a series of challenges. Finley struggled with the VA's claims process; he received less than adequate care at the VA; he fought to get bills paid; and he received denial after denial on a claim to make his home handicap-accessible.

Still, the Finleys were fighting the good fight. With news of his father's health deteriorating at an alarming rate, Adam quit his job in Mississippi to move back to Centralia. "That's when I went from being just his son to being his friend," he said.

A gifted musician, Adam recorded several of his father's favorite songs. Thereafter, Finley took pleasure in sharing these with his friends at the VA hospital. "That's my son playing! He made this just for me, isn't that just great?"

Adam recalls, with pride, how at the local VA, his dad would reach out to other veterans in need, offering them friendship and advice. And he would inspire these veterans to do the same for others. "As sick as he was, he always made the best of everything," said Adam.



Mark David Finley in Vietnam



The Finleys (Adam, far right)



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Mark Finley's Story Continued...

Finley continued to touch the lives of those around him until October 18, 2010, when he lost his fight with his Agent Orange-related illnesses, passing away at the age of 60. The members of VVA Centralia Chapter 176 stood by the family; they prepared a funeral dinner after learning that other veterans' organizations had turned them down.

"I had such a short time with my dad, even though he raised me. I wouldn't be so mad if I hadn't watched him suffer. It's like I watched him die for ten years," said Adam.

When Adam began researching the long-term effects of Agent Orange, it dawned on him that his own health challenges could very well be related to his father's tour of duty in Vietnam.

For years, Adam has displayed symptoms of attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD); he has trouble staying on task and struggled with jobs that required him to sit at a desk for extended periods of time. He experiences bouts of forgetfulness.

He recalled the time he set out for a local hardware store, only to find himself in another town. "I had to have driven over two hours, but I had no recollection of the drive or how I got there," he said.

Adam noted that his personality has "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde" qualities. He often considers that he may be bipolar. There are times when his skin

will burn and break out with hard, red bumps for no apparent reason.

Adam worries about his children. One son faces challenges with his speech and metabolism. In the face of his father's death and his own health issues, Adam wonders if he, too, will pass away at age 60, unable to see his grandchildren grow up. He admits, "This isn't just a closed chapter for me."

Adam remembers his dad's words: "You got to fight, fight, fight.... You went home from Vietnam fighting, and you're going to fight again... You're in a different war. It's the war called life."

Said Adam, "When I played 'Army' with my friends, every single time I had to be my Dad. He was my hero then, and he always will be. And I will fight the good fight for my children and the generations to come."

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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