



Faces of AGENT ORANGE



JOE INGINO

By Jim Belshaw

“I never put two and two together,” Joe Ingino said.

It took a long time before he could do the math, and even after the metaphorical numbers in his Agent Orange equation added up, he still had difficulty talking about it. He does to this day.

“Talking about it now, you just get choked up,” he said. “Sometimes you want to punch something, you know? You just keep blaming yourself. I went to two Agent Orange town hall meetings and listened to other fathers talking about their children, and it just gets very emotional. It’s very difficult to listen to them and then to speak about your own children. It’s very hard.”

Joe served with the First Infantry Division in 1969-70. In 1971, he met the woman who was to be his wife. In 1972, they married. His wife would suffer through several miscarriages, but eventually they had six children, one of whom lived for only a brief time.

“My wife carried our daughter for seven months, and something happened that caused the baby to break away from her,” he said. “She lived for a day and a half, maybe two days. Then she died.”

One year later, another daughter,

Katie, was born. At birth, she was diagnosed with an “imperforate anus” and scoliosis. A specialist performed emergency surgery that saved her life; several months later a second surgery came. The physicians wanted to move her to another hospital for the initial surgery, the same hospital in which Joe’s daughter had died the year before. He couldn’t bring himself to take another infant through those hospital doors. A different hospital was chosen.

In the course of Katie’s hospitalizations, a physician showed Joe pictures of his daughter’s spine.

“It looked like a bag of bones,” he said. “It was just a whole thing of bones, and none of them were together or connected.”

Katie would not be the only Ingino child with longstanding health problems. All of his children have asthma; all of them showed learning disabilities in their school years. In later years, Katie would give the Inginos a grandson, but he, too, would be diagnosed with health issues — hearing difficulties and autism.

None of the birth defects or illnesses had shown up anywhere in Joe Ingino’s family medical history or his wife’s.

Joe had been going to the VA for many years. On one visit, after routine blood



Joe Ingino, 1968,
Fort Mead, Maryland



The Ingino Children
(l to r, back to front):
Annmarie, Joseph Jr.,
Stephanie, Lisa, and Katie



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Joe Ingino's Story Continued...

work was done, his PSA numbers came back alarmingly high. He went to see a urologist. He was diagnosed with prostate cancer. It was the beginning of a long decline.

"I had prostate surgery," he said. "Then everything escalated — diabetes, coronary problems, hypertension, a pacemaker."

The residual issues often related to prostate surgery forced him to give up his job as a truck driver for a local municipality, but he was still active in VVA. He served as president of Chapter 82, Nassau County, Long Island. He attended conferences and town halls, listening to other veterans speak of Agent Orange-related issues for them and their families. He began to see his own health problems and his children's in a different way.

"I thought I was just another regular Vietnam vet with some PTSD problems and stuff," he said. "Then everything started weighing on me more with my children."

An insidious side effect — guilt — came with the knowledge of Agent Orange-related health issues. He blamed himself for his children's health problems.

"We blame ourselves," he said. "It bothered me immensely. It really bothered me. Just the idea of it."

A veterans' counselor told him of "false guilt," assuring him that he had done nothing wrong. His family supported him unequivocally, a unified stand for which he is appreciative. But he still speaks of guilt with difficulty.

"Everyone said, 'You didn't do anything wrong,' but it's still this guilt you have and you're blaming yourself," he said. "It might be 'false guilt,' but it

doesn't feel like it. We all feel like we brought this stuff to our families. I don't have to tell you how much it pisses us off."

He continues to be active in VVA, encouraging veterans to learn everything they can about Agent Orange and its effects. He said that in his time as president of Chapter 82 he frequently received calls from veterans' wives with questions about their husband's health after they read Agent Orange stories in *The VVA Veteran*.

He visits congressional offices whenever he can, often finding young aides who want to be helpful but who know little or nothing about Agent Orange. They've heard of it, but often just hearing of it is the extent of their knowledge.

"I just want Vietnam vets to please get checked out," he said. "Learn everything you can about Agent Orange. Go to the VA or find a service officer and ask questions. There's lots of information at VA hospitals. There are a lot of things the VVA has about Agent Orange. Vets need to get their stories out about children, and let the country know what they're going through, and what their children are going through."

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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