



Faces of

AGENT ORANGE

Michigan



Linda May's Story

By Jim Belshaw

Linda May's story is brought to you by the Vietnam Veterans of America Buckeye State Council.

Nine days before the Christmas of 1982, Linda May looked upon her newborn son, Steven Burdette Shaffer, and mourned the losses to come.

"He suffered horribly," she said. "I think I grieved for him from the moment I first saw him, because I knew I wouldn't have him long."

She would never see him walk or hear him talk. There would be no high school graduation, no college diploma. He would not marry. She would have no grandchildren.

"I was grieving all those losses even though I still had him," she said.

Today, on the CdLS-USA Foundation Web page, characteristics of the Cornelia deLange syndrome may be found, some of them being: low birth weight, slow growth, small stature, small head size, microcephaly, thin eyebrows that frequently meet at midline, long eyelashes, downturned lips, excessive body hair, small hands, gastroesophageal reflux, seizures, heart defects, and others.

Doctors told her he would not live through the night; then they said the week; then the month.

"After about a year of them saying not

to expect a long life span, I finally gave up and said I'm not going to listen to this any more," she said. "In my own thoughts, my own instinct, I didn't expect him to die in the hospital. I expected to have him for years longer."

Steven died on Jan. 15, 1998, a few weeks after his 15th birthday.

"Our pediatrician knew what kind of syndrome he had," she said. "It was very unusual. Many doctors were not familiar with the syndrome, at least at the time. But the pediatrician was very well read. He is a wonderful man."

Her then-husband, Larry Shaffer, was not a pediatrician. He was a former Air Force mechanic stationed in Thailand during the Vietnam War. He told her of a chemical that sometimes dripped on him from aircraft he walked beneath, on his way to fixing instruments on the F-105 Thunderchiefs.

"The first words out of his mouth when he saw Steven were 'Agent Orange,'" she said.

They found a doctor who had been with the Army's Special Forces in Vietnam. In addition to his medical degree, he held a doctorate in genetics, and he suffered from diabetes connected to Agent Orange.



Larry Shaffer in 1968 stationed at McConnell AFB in Wichita a few months before he was sent to Korat, Takhli, and Nakhon Phanom



Larry Shaffer, Steven Shaffer, Linda May



At our church naming ceremony. (Steven was baptized by a nurse a few minutes after he was born.) Larry Shaffer; Steven Shaffer; Linda May; Linda's sister Nancy Cryderman and Larry Shaffer's brother-in-law, Larry Cartwright, a two-tour recon pilot, now dead of cancer of the parotid.



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Linda May's Story Continued...

“He was a friend of our pediatrician, and when our pediatrician had no more answers about whatever was going on, we would see him,” she said. He’s now dead from the diabetes.”

A friend who was a Vietnam veteran with a son who had Down syndrome went to see the pediatrician, too.

“The doctor said that, anecdotally, he had learned to ask the dads of such children if they were Vietnam veterans,” she said. “He had a cluster of them. He said, ‘I just really have to believe there’s something to this. We have all of these odd things going on with children, and they just happen to be the children of Vietnam veterans.’”

Five years after Steven was born, the marriage between his parents ended. Linda said her former husband had undergone a severe personality change, though he was physically healthy when they split up. But he had begun to drink heavily, and his temper became explosive. She believes he then was diagnosed with PTSD and awarded 100 percent disability by the VA. About a year after he left her, his physical health rapidly went downhill.

Around 1988, he was diagnosed with lung cancer. He said during a Friend of the Court hearing that he developed high blood pressure, sleep apnea, and other conditions. He died in 2007 of an apparent heart attack while undergoing chemotherapy for thyroid cancer.

Linda has had no interaction with the VA, though she remains convinced that her former husband’s exposure to Agent Orange during the war played a role in her son’s physical disabilities.

“The VA has yet to acknowledge that my son’s disabilities had anything to do with Vietnam,” she said. “My ex-husband

went to the VA hospital and had all these things documented, and for him, there was help in the form of a paycheck.”

She believes the VA should commission a study to see if there is a link between Agent Orange and the children of Vietnam veterans.

“When I first met my current husband, I went to a Vietnam Veterans of America chapter picnic, and I asked: Where are the boys?” she said. “There were so few boys compared to the number of girls. It’s probably anecdotal stuff, but that was the first thing I noticed. Vietnam vets have an amazing number of girls, but they seemed hardly to ever have boys. And the boys at this picnic, well, some had disabilities. I believe there are all kinds of things they need to pay attention to, and they’re trying to avoid it.”

She wishes now that over the years she had written down the events of her life, kept some kind of running journal, so she would have at her fingertips all of the details.

But some details don’t need to be written down. Some are not easily forgotten.

“I miss my baby very much,” she said.

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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