



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Wisconsin



Mike Demske

By Jim Belshaw

Mike Demske remembers well the difference in Vietnam's riverbanks before Agent Orange and after the herbicide was sprayed. The riverbanks provided excellent cover for the guns trained on the Navy Swift Boats.

"We were just getting annihilated," he said.

Then Adm. Elmo Zumwalt ordered the river banks sprayed.

"I'll never forget the first time we went down a river where the bank had been sprayed," Mike said. "It was like looking at the moon. There was nothing."

He also remembers no attention was paid to the effects of Agent Orange on the health of the boat crews. That Vietnam's rains might wash the chemical into the river was of no consequence to the Swift Boat crews.

"A lot of times we'd tie our clothes to a rope and run them in the prop wash to do our laundry, not thinking that the river was filled with the stuff and it was soaking into our clothes," he said. "We were all 19 and 20 years old. We didn't know any better."

After his tour of duty, he wouldn't give Agent Orange another thought until

about 15 years ago, when he came home from a softball practice and couldn't get enough water to slake his thirst. He went to his doctor. He was diagnosed with Type 2 diabetes.

That same year, he attended a VVA National Leadership Conference. Of the 30 veterans meeting to discuss Agent Orange, five had received the same diagnosis of Type 2 diabetes.

"Everyone was telling me to file a claim with the VA," he said. "It wasn't listed as a presumptive disease then, but once it was, I received some compensation."

But his health problems were just beginning. On the same day he was diagnosed with diabetes, he also was found to have psoriasis. Then in January 2009, he was found to have Fournier's gangrene. An infection spread to his groin area, and he eventually had surgery that removed his scrotum.

Health complications would not be limited to him.

His son, Scott, born in 1973, began having seizures while serving in the Air Force and was medically retired. He is a school teacher today and still suffers from the seizures. Doctors told him



Mike Demske, 1969



David and Scott Demske, 1990



David (with fish)



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Mike Demske's Story Continued...

that an abnormality in his frontal lobes disrupted electrical signals in the brain, causing the seizures.

A second son, David, born in 1978, was diagnosed with juvenile diabetes at the age of ten. Diligent with his medical care, David was able to participate in his high school and college tennis teams. Scheduled to graduate from college in May 2001, he died of myocarditis (an inflammation of the heart muscle) in January of that year.

“For a long time, I made no connection between Agent Orange and Scott and David’s problems,” he said. “I probably started thinking about it after David died. It was really a tragedy. He was a senior in college, going to graduate in May.”

At a VVA meeting in Silver Spring, he was able to question the then- Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

“I asked him if he was aware of any studies that would link our exposure to dioxins to problems with our children and grandchildren, and he looked at me like a deer in the headlights. He couldn’t respond. He had no idea.”

“The VA secretary had an aide there,” Mike said. “He was writing everything down and basically told us, ‘We’ll get back to you.’ Which of course is bullshit. That’s why we’re trying to get enough evidence to prove there’s a problem out there and to do something about it.”

Because the VA refuses to conduct studies on the questions, the evidence gathered is anecdotal. But Mike Demske finds the anecdotes compelling.

“Money is one reason they won’t consider guys in the blue water Navy,” he said. “So many of those guys served on crews that worked on jets that flew through that stuff and brought it back to the aircraft carriers. We have one guy in our chapter who was on a crew. Those crews normally were made up of five guys. Well, four of the five guys on this crew have diabetes—and the VA won’t even look at them.”

At the very least, like so many other Vietnam veterans who have had to face similar health problems, he says the VA should fund studies to see if a link exists.

“I would want them to do decent studies of what the effects are on the children and grandchildren,” he said. “I’m sure there’s some kind of effect. My oldest son, Scott, has ADD, and his son has it, too. I never thought Agent Orange would be part of it, either, but everyone at that meeting was talking about problems their children and grandchildren have.”

Significant numbers of 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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