



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Vermont



JOHN MINER

By Jim Belshaw

In 1975, when John Miner's son, Tad, was born, there was no reason for Agent Orange to enter into any discussion about his son's health problems. John was healthy himself, concerned only with raising a family. He went into the Army right out of high school in the summer of 1966, served two tours in Vietnam, one in Saigon and a second with an advisory team in the Delta. Then he came home for good.

It wouldn't be until the 1990s that he would become involved in veterans affairs and begin a long campaign to secure benefits for veterans and their families. In that same time frame, his health began to deteriorate — his heart, diabetes, and other ailments that would render him 100 percent disabled. By then, Agent Orange had very much become a part of the discussion for not only John, but for Tad as well.

Today, as John tracks the health and well-being of his fellow Vermont Vietnam veterans and those across the country, he sees a troubling trend. Vietnam veterans are dying at an alarming rate. Many are in their 50s and 60s; they are too young to be succumbing to any number of diseases, all of them with a common denominator — Agent Orange.

"About 12 in my chapter have died in the last seven years," he said. "That's a lot for one little area like ours. About 90 percent of them had diseases recognized by the VA as related to Agent Orange. Most of those I see now have developed some type of cancer, and it's showing up in great numbers. I look at *The VVA Veteran* every time it comes out and it's startling to see the number of obituaries in there. You see the numbers, and you realize that what's happening is what everyone is talking about. We're dying at a very fast rate."

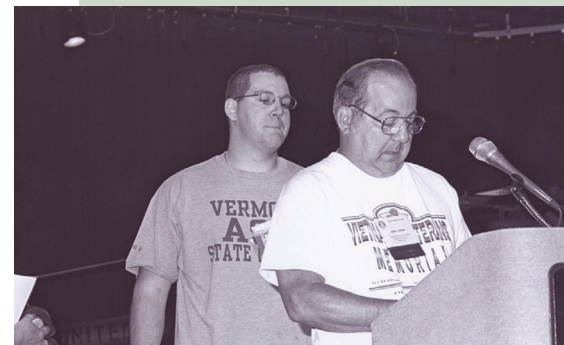
John's concern does not stop with the veterans themselves, but extends to their children and grandchildren, one of the most striking examples being very close to home, his 36-year-old son, Tad.

Born in 1975, Tad spent most of his youth visiting doctors and trying to get well. Shortly after birth, he began contracting what doctors called "pneumonias." By the time he reached 18 months old, John and his wife, Joyce, grew weary of the vague diagnosis and drove from their Bennington, Vermont, home to Boston, where Tad was evaluated at Children's Hospital. They stayed for a week.

"The doctors found out Tad had a gamma globulin deficiency," John said.



John Miner, U.S. Army, 1966



Tad with dad at in Greensboro, NC, where Miner is recognized as VVA's 2001 Member of the Year



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John Miner's Story Continued...

"He was missing something, and it was making him susceptible to disease."

For the next 18 months, John and Joyce drove the four-hour trip to Boston every three weeks so that Tad could receive needed injections. John had to take off from work, borrow a car (they didn't own one), and make the long drive. Eventually, they found a location closer to their Vermont home where Tad could receive the injections.

"In Boston, the shots were free," he said. "In Vermont, they would have cost us an arm and a leg."

After getting the gamma globulin deficiency under control, other problems arose to take its place — epilepsy, then asthma. Tad started having seizures, suffering a grand mal when he was 7 years old.

"There was damage to his motor control area, which affects mood and temperament," John said. "At about 12, he developed asthma."

Around 1994, when John began to encounter health problems, Agent Orange entered the picture. He began researching the chemical's connection to Vietnam veterans' health problems. Joyce looked into the connections heavily. They had an additional reason as well — their daughter, Tammy, had been diagnosed with asthma.

"The biggest story with Agent Orange now is showing the government that children are having Agent Orange-related problems," he said.

John emphasizes the importance of veterans keeping these issues in front of the VA. He has held town hall meetings

to discuss Agent Orange and its effects on veterans and their families. Every three months, he participates in "mini-MAC" (Management Advisory Council) meetings with VA officials. VA hospital directors and their staffs meet with veterans, opportunities Miner sees as critically important for veterans to make officials aware of problems and solutions.

He said the VA stopped the meetings last year, arguing that the problems had been solved. Miner saw something other than problems being solved.

"They were getting complacent," he said. "We've been dealing with the VA for 20 years on these issues, and it's very important for veterans to go to these meetings. They are important links between the veterans and the VA. These issues would just fade away if we didn't fight. The government won't do anything unless they're pushed. And VVA has stepped forward and advocated for all veterans and has taken the lead on these issues. We're a small organization, but we have produced good results. We've had an impact. We just have to keep working at it."

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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