



# Faces of AGENT ORANGE

New Jersey



## Dennis Whalen

By Jim Belshaw

Dennis Whalen’s memory of the Vietnam water is vivid, as vivid as the water’s color — “bright green.” He served two tours with the Marines, the first with the 1st Battalion, 9th Marines, up near the DMZ — “Con Thien, Khe Sanh, we did the whole bit.” They took the highest casualty rate in the history of the Marine Corps.

On his second tour, Dennis worked with the Popular Forces in Combined Action Groups, sometimes in compounds and, after Tet, in roving units, setting up for a few days in one area, then moving on to another.

He never heard of Agent Orange when he was in Vietnam. He didn’t have a clue about it. He was good with the Vietnamese language, though. He picked it up easily. For reasons he can’t explain, he had an interest in it. He’d been a “half-assed interpreter” and had attended Vietnamese language school in Coronado, but he was “dumped because I was a high school dropout, and I couldn’t understand why I was back in school.”

He said he hadn’t joined the Marines to go to school, anyway. He joined the Marines to be a Marine.

“We’d be working in the mountains up near North Vietnam, and there’d be water in the bomb craters, and it would be bright green,” he said. “We never heard

of Agent Orange. None of us knew what it was. Of course we drank the water out there. We drank water from the streams at the bottom of all those mountains. Hell, I drank water out of a dead NVA’s canteen. You drank water where you could get it.”

After he left the Marines in the early 1970s, he received a letter from a doctor connected somehow to Agent Orange. Whalen was intrigued by how the doctor knew what outfit he served with and where the outfit worked in Vietnam, but the letter said nothing about any kind of monetary compensation, and he never followed up on it.

“I didn’t know nothin’ from nothin’,” he said. “I just wanted to catch up on some partying. I should have followed up on it, but like a dope, I had other things on my mind.”

After he married and had children, Agent Orange became a subject of more interest.

He had three sons. Two of them were diagnosed with pyloric stenosis and would have to undergo surgery to correct the condition, though neither is completely recovered from the effects of it today.

Pyloric stenosis affects the gastrointestinal tract during infancy. It can cause the infant to vomit forcefully and often.



The Whalen boys: Sean, Keith, and grandson, James



Dennis Whalen, U.S.M.C., Boot Camp, 1967



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## Dennis Whalen's Story Continued...

"The food hits a certain point in the esophagus, and the baby can shoot it out ten feet," he said.

It can also cause dehydration. It is a narrowing of the pylorus, the lower part of the stomach through which food passes to enter the small intestine. The muscles in the pylorus can become enlarged to the point where food cannot empty out of the stomach.

"My middle son, Sean, was the first one," Whalen said. "Then my last son was born with the same condition, and it was my wife who picked up on it. She said she couldn't believe it was happening to us again. And sure enough, Keith had the same condition Sean did. The same doctor performed the surgery, and he said he had never seen two brothers have the same thing like this."

When Whalen found out that the VA recognizes pyloric stenosis as an Agent Orange-related birth defect in the children of female Vietnam veterans but not of male Vietnam veterans, he laughed dismissively.

"Unless it was an NVA, I didn't see any women up on the DMZ," he said. "That's like a slap in the face to me. We rolled in that stuff [Agent Orange]. We lived like animals in that stuff. And they say only women Vietnam veterans can pass along these diseases? I think it's a way for the government not to pay the dues on it. It's an insult to me and other guys, too."

The VA has rated him as 100 percent service-connected disabled with PTSD, but it has found no connection between Agent Orange and other health problems he deals with. He is now recovering from his fifth melanoma surgery and underwent an Agent Orange screening with the VA, but was given no benefits.

"I don't understand the VA on this, and I do understand the VA on this," he said. "It's the money. I'm not looking at me for the future. I've got this melanoma. My days are numbered as far as the future is concerned. I know that. I'm hoping that some day down the road the government will compensate my wife and sons for having these surgeries when they were babies. They've got bum stomachs to this day."

More than anything, he wants one thing in particular from the VA.

"I want honesty from them," he said. "I want them to man up and say, 'Gee, you were in that area. You came into contact with that stuff. We know you drank the water, you laid on the ground.' I would want the VA to say maybe we can compensate the family some way. They should at least put the effort in. This isn't a fairy tale. It's not a made-up story. I joined the Marine Corps. I went to Vietnam. I went twice. And I'd probably do it again if I was in the same situation. I put my ass on the line, and now it's time for the government to come up with something for my family."

*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](mailto:mporter@vva.org) or call 301-585-4000, Ext. 146.*

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