



Faces of AGENT ORANGE



Jim "Butch" Whitworth

By Jim Belshaw

When Jim "Butch" Whitworth went home to Missouri from the recent Vietnam Veterans of America Leadership Conference in Orlando, he needed to buy an extra suitcase to take back all of the Agent Orange materials pressed upon him by those at the conference who had been involved with the issue for many years.

Butch, too, stresses the importance of communication when it comes to such matters. It is critical that Vietnam veterans know they may be due substantial assistance from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) concerning diseases related to Agent Orange exposure.

"When they gave me that material, I copied and copied and copied, until I finally had to buy a \$60 suitcase to bring all the stuff back for my fellow veterans in St. Peters VVA Chapter 458," he said.

He had a special, compelling interest in the Agent Orange material, the most striking being that after years of battling disease himself and having gone through the heartbreak of serious medical difficulties with his daughter, he had been unaware of the VA help available to him. He hadn't even considered contacting the VA about it.

He was, in fact, exactly the kind of veteran to which he now finds himself so dedicated.

"People in VVA gave me the information," he said. "And I read articles in *The VVA Veteran*. I've got a couple of guys in my chapter with problems or their kids or grandchildren have problems. I'm reading all this stuff, and I know something's not right. And people from VVA are telling me I needed to make a claim with the VA. Well, I hadn't done any of that."

Over the years, he had spent \$10,000 of his own money on insurance, and \$5,300 for medicines.

"The people at VVA were flabbergasted," he said. "I didn't figure the government owed me anything, and boy, they jumped all over my butt."

He served in Vietnam in 1968 as a radio operator with the 1st Air Cav. In addition to the workaday exposure to Agent Orange, he remembers reading in later years about chemicals involved with the diesel fuel used to burn human waste.

"I remember wearing gloves but no mask," he said. "I remember that black smoke curling up all over the place. We all had to take a turn at it. It was a detail like KP or guard duty."





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Jim “Butch” Whitworth’s Story Continued...

About eight years ago, his heart problems began. Today, he’s on his second pacemaker. A third back operation in 2002 ended his career in construction. Then in December 2007, he had a terrible pain in his groin area. He couldn’t shake it for weeks and finally went to see a doctor.

Blood tests were ordered and a CT scan done on his stomach area. There was no hernia. But there was leukemia.

Admitted immediately to a hospital in St. Louis, chemotherapy began. Then a bone marrow transplant when it was found that his sister was a perfect match. He lost 33 pounds.

“It was quite an ordeal for me and my sister,” he said. “I got the transplant and spent three weeks and three days in the hospital. I’ve survived two years this past July.”

Long before his own health deteriorated, he and his wife faced a long, difficult battle with a brain tumor diagnosed in their toddler daughter, Emily, in 1978. She was 2 ½ years old. A neurosurgeon told them Emily would not live to see her tenth birthday.

Today, she is 32, married and a marine biologist at the Mayport Naval Base in Jacksonville, Fla. But she must deal with severe handicaps as a result of the brain tumor and the efforts to control it.

“We fought it for 18 years,” Butch said. “They’d bore holes in her head and run tests. They put in a shunt that became infected, and finally they went after it with a Gamma Knife. They took out all of the tumor, except for one little piece. She’s handicapped now. She has a terrible

limp, her right foot is turned inside, her hip gives out, and she lost the use of her right arm.”

Butch’s father gives insight to his granddaughter.

“My dad said, ‘That daughter of yours has the most incredible drive and determination. She’ll work four hours to do a job that would take you or me two minutes.’”

Butch has three claims pending with the VA. In addition to his VVA friends, his own doctor insisted on him making the claims when she found out he was a Vietnam veteran. He’s on YouTube, too, doing everything he can to spread the word.

“If nothing else, I’m hoping that sharing my story will help,” he said. “I just tell people this is what I had, and I had it bad.”

He comes from an extended family with many children. He is unique among them.

“I’m the only one who has these cancers,” he said. “I’m the only one who has a pacemaker. And I’m the only one who served in Vietnam.”

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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