



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Michigan



ROBERT CUMMINGS

By Jim Belshaw

It is hard to know when a group of disparate elements will coalesce in the mind to bring focus to a hazy, if not inexplicable, subject. “Connect the dots” might be the plausible cliché to describe the phenomenon, but “connect the dots” carries too little weight to describe the moment when clarity came to Bob Cummings.

“I probably started making connections between these things and Agent Orange when my grandson died in 1991, six days after he was born,” he said. “Then I started putting things together. I found out more about Agent Orange exposure and finally I thought: ‘It is me.’”

And so he began the struggle that so many Vietnam veterans face, the idea of their exposure to Agent Orange during the war explaining, not only exotic diseases visited upon themselves, but diseases, sometimes fatal, visited upon their sons and daughters and even their grandchildren.

“It’s hard to come to grips with,” he said. “They say these things are a one-in-a-million chance, and I’m asking, ‘What’s going on here? Was this me? Was this because of something I did?’ I have no history of it in my family; my wife has no history of it in her family. So you question it. You wonder and wonder.”

He has been married twice. From his first marriage, came Robbie, born with spina bifida; and a daughter diagnosed with Bell’s palsy. From his second marriage came Cole, born with a congenital heart defect. He has three other children, all healthy.

He said Cole’s heart defect has been more than just a physical detriment to his son.

“Cole is scared to death to get married,” he said. “It terrifies him no end to have a child with a birth defect, especially after what happened with my grandson who died. Cole said to me, ‘Dad, I’m so afraid to get married and have children. It really scares me.’”

Cummings said he is grateful his son spoke with him about it.

“I’m glad he said something,” Cummings said. “You know, there has to be a lot of kids out there thinking the same thing and too afraid to say anything about it.”

Cummings was born and grew up on the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation. He lives now in Michigan, about four hours north of Detroit. “God’s country,” he calls it.

In 1971-72, he served with the 101st Airborne and 1st Cav. He remembers clearly the aircraft overhead, spraying the defoliant, soaking the jungle and the troops below. He knew it was “weed killer,” but had no clue to its toxic effect on human beings.

So when Robbie was born with spina bifida, he never thought to connect it with Agent Orange.

“Robbie has no use of his limbs,” he said. “I’m still good friends with his mom (they’re divorced), and she pretty much takes care of everything he needs. Vietnam Veterans of America service representative George Claxton got a VA claim for him.”

His first marriage didn’t survive the stress of Robbie nor that of the war itself. He said he drank heavily upon returning from Vietnam, and his marriage fell apart, largely due to his alcoholism.





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ROBERT CUMMINGS's Story Continued...

"You go through a stage because of the guilt," he said. "You go through a suicidal stage. You go through a stage where you say, 'God, I don't ever want to go through something like this again. I don't ever want to have more kids.' There are so many feelings you go through. Parents of children with birth defects understand these emotions."

He remarried — an "angel," he said. Then Cole was born with a heart defect. Now 25, Cole has difficulty finding work. Because of insurance issues, employers are reluctant to take him on. Cole has a pacemaker and doesn't have the stamina of others his age. Bob Cummings once spoke with an insurance agent about health insurance for Cole. The agent said his company could pick up Cole. It would cost \$500 a month. Says Cummings, "Cole is my hero."

It was when he and others began a VVA chapter, and he started having conversations with other veterans, that the heretofore disconnected events of his life began to take on a more solid form. He started making the connections that led him to Agent Orange and its long-lasting effects, not only on veterans, but on their families as well.

It all came together at a state council convention in Marquette, Michigan, right after his grandson died. He started asking other veterans what they could do to focus attention on the Agent Orange issue.

"So a bunch of us in my chapter came up with the idea of the Agent Orange flag," he said. "We had done so much on the POW/MIA issue that we thought it was time to bring attention to the Agent Orange issue. I designed the flag, but it wasn't just me who made it. It was all the guys in the chapter, and the state council, too. The support I had for the project was mind-boggling."

Another surprise came with the flag project — telephone calls from the widows of men who had died from Agent Orange-connected diseases or whose children had died from strange diseases.

"They didn't know where or who to go to for help," he said. "I always told them to contact their veterans service representatives in their areas. But surprisingly, a lot of service reps in small communities, like the one I grew up in on

the reservation, have no clue what's going on. That in itself is horrific. How do we reach out to these small communities? Towns of a 1,000 people, places like that. They have no clue. We have an obligation to make sure they know."

Cummings threw himself into the Agent Orange issue until the day when one of his children surprised him with a question.

"One of the kids asked me when I was going to start spending some time with them," he said.

He said it was "like running into a wall." He curtailed his Agent Orange activities, telling himself the time had come for others to carry on.

Now, with his children grown, he says he is ready to increase his involvement in Vietnam Veterans of America.

"I want to find out what's happened with Agent Orange since I was gone," he said. "It looks like things have been progressing, but it's a slow process, and it shouldn't have to be this slow. I feel like all Vietnam veterans have a ticking time bomb inside of them, and we don't know when it will rear its head.

"My motto has always been, what can we do for the children who are the innocent victims of this war? We, as Vietnam veterans, have an obligation to do whatever we can to get help for our children. So I call on my brothers and sisters to stand up and get involved and help out. Call your chapters and different veterans organizations. We have not won the war that our children are fighting. We need to win the battle for these brave children who have stood with us through thick and thin. They are calling on us for help."

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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