



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

Kansas



ROLAND MAYHEW

By Jim Belshaw

The intense itching that afflicted Amber Mayhew Workman began in 2004. It led to sores that covered her from head to foot. It took four years before she finally found an answer — Hodgkin's disease, a cancer that begins in the cells of the immune system. Her father, Roland Mayhew, a former Marine who served in Vietnam in 1966-67, does not doubt that his exposure to Agent Orange is connected to his first-born child's battle with cancer.

The first doctor to see Amber told her she had scabies, an itchy skin condition caused by a tiny burrowing mite — *Sarcoptes scabiei*. She was treated for scabies twice. The terrible itching didn't stop; the constant scratching created more sores.

She next went to see a dermatologist and was told she had eczema. Then she saw a podiatrist. The itching had spread to the bottoms of her feet. She used a fork to scratch her feet in an attempt to gain relief. She said the doctor told her it was all in her head, that she didn't really itch.

She was so covered in sores that even in the middle of the hot Kansas

summer she wore long-sleeved shirts and long pants to hide the sores while she played softball.

Her gynecologist said she had a bacterial infection.

In February 2008, she noticed a large lump that appeared on her neck. She went to a doctor as soon as she could. A surgical biopsy was done. She finally had an answer — Hodgkin's disease.

Chemotherapy began. After the first treatment, she said the itching stopped. Following the chemotherapy and radiation treatments, Amber was cancer-free, though she still worries about the disease returning.

Her father, a life member of VVA Chapter 604 (Topeka), was a 19-year-old radio operator working alongside a forward observer with a Marine artillery unit. He spent a lot of time in the Vietnam "bush." He has no memory of any conversation with fellow Marines about Agent Orange.

"I stayed pretty busy," he said. "I was just trying to keep my head down. I was pretty young. I didn't know anything about us being sprayed."



Roland Mayhew in Vietnam, 1966-67



Amber Mayhew Workman, (top) with her oncologist, was treated at the Cotton-O'Neil Cancer Center for Hodgkin's disease



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Roland Mayhew's Story Continued...

In the bush for weeks at a time during Vietnam's monsoon season, he caught pneumonia. It took two or three days to get his temperature down. Weeks at a time in the bush in the monsoon meant being wet always.

"We lived in ponchos and stuff like that," he said. "Charlie Company was pretty well shot up when I joined it. Half of them were back stateside."

He doesn't care to talk about his own health issues, saying he feels fortunate that at 65 years old he is still alive.

"I don't want to talk about my own health situation," he said. "That's kind of personal to me. I went through quite a bit, and I'd just like to leave it at that. It took me about forty years to step forward on these things, and I just want to leave it there. I do feel fortunate being 65 and all. A lot of guys affected by Agent Orange didn't make it past 50 years old. The VA takes good care of me."

He takes good care of the VA and its veterans as well. He has volunteered at the VA for 16 years and has been involved with raising funds for the Wounded Warrior project in San Antonio. The initial success he and others had in obtaining needed items for veterans while meeting customers at a Walmart caused him to share the experience and knowledge with other Kansas VVA chapters.

"We collected almost \$6,000 worth of stuff the first time we did it," he said. "We stay focused at the VA. We get some grants from Indian casinos,

too, so we can spend funds on things veterans need at the VA. In San Antonio, we collected something like \$34,000 for the Wounded Warriors. It was awesome. Marines always give back for their own."

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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