

Testimony of Vietnam Veterans of America



Presented by

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BEFORE THE

**House Foreign Affairs' Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and
the Global Environment**

REGARDING

**Our Forgotten Responsibility: What Can We Do To Help
Victims of Agent Orange?**

May 15, 2008

Good morning, Mr. Chairman, and Members of this distinguished Subcommittee... On behalf of VVA National President, John Rowan and all of our officers and members we thank you for the opportunity for Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) to appear here today to share our views on the issue "Forgotten Responsibility: What Can We Do To Help Victims of Agent Orange. I ask that you enter our full statement in the record, and I will briefly summarize the most important points of our statement.

Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) took our first mission back to Vietnam after the war in December of 1981. That mission was led by our then President, and founder, Robert O. "Bobby" Muller. The substance was two fold: first to start the process of securing cooperation of the Vietnamese government in achieving the fullest possible accounting of our POW/MIA from the Vietnam war (or "the American war" as the Vietnamese called it) and to move toward research in Vietnam as the natural laboratory for research into the epidemiological impact of Agent Orange and the other toxins used or inadvertently deposited in Vietnam during our presence there.

VVA has returned to Vietnam many times since, always focusing on these two core missions. Since the early 1990s, VVA has had the "Veterans' Initiative" (VI) of collecting information about graves of North Vietnamese Army casualties after battles with our forces that are contributed by American veterans who fought in Vietnam, including information, artifacts, etc. that VVA has transmitted to the Veterans Association of Vietnam. This veteran to veteran project has, according to the Vietnamese, contributed to the continued high level of cooperation that the Vietnamese have accorded the J-Pac forces searching for American remains in an effort to locate remains of missing American service members, repatriate them, and help bring closure to the families that have waited so long for final word on the fate of their loved one. Additionally, the Vietnamese have used the information imparted to continue their process of locating the remains of their MIA, and bringing closure to the Vietnamese families in a similar fashion. Our most recent VI mission to Vietnam was just last October.

As to Agent Orange, VVA continues to be the leader among American veterans groups in pressing for more research regarding the deleterious and adverse health effects of Agent Orange and other herbicides and toxins to which we, and Vietnamese forces and population were exposed to during the war. Much of the residue of these toxins remains in Vietnam, and continues to expose the population to these dangerous chemicals. The common perception is that it is an "Agent Orange" problem, but that is only one of the herbicides used in Vietnam, and only accounts for about 48% or 49% of the aerial spraying. There is still debate about whether Agent Orange was and is harmful to human beings. Dr. Alvin Young continues to say, as he put it in testimony to the panel of scientists convened by the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academies of Sciences (NAS) last year: "The bad news is that Agent Orange was so widely dispersed by aerial spraying, ground vehicles, and by hand that virtually all who served there would have come in contact with it, but the good news is that most of it is not harmful." Dr. Young's contention is that only the Agent Orange that contains 2, 4, 5T was harmful, and that only very limited amounts were used during the early years of the spraying. VVA has

reason to doubt that dioxin is good for you, and has told that to Dr. Young repeatedly. It appears that actually the highest concentration of 2, 4 D and 2, 4, 5 T was actually contained in Agent Pink, which was used extensively and primarily along roads and perimeters.

These were a total of at least 15 different agents used at one time or another during our military presence in Vietnam for defoliation and (apparently) for crop destruction to deny food to enemy forces during the war. A number of these agents were used only in very limited tests for possible effectiveness, and therefore only minute amounts of these toxins were left behind. However, Agent Blue, Agent White, and Agent Purple were used extensively, particularly for destruction of rice crops, and for defoliation along roads. The basic ingredient of these agents was calcium arsenite with lithium, more commonly known as salt of arsenic. You do not have to be a chemist to understand that arsenic is not healthy for humans and other.

Because of the hard work of advocates outside of the Congress, as well as advocates in the Congress over the last twenty five years, such as Congressman Lane Evans of Illinois as well as Senator Tom Daschle, Senator John Kerry, and Senator Tom Harkin and others a number of maladies suffered in disproportionate numbers by American veterans of Vietnam have been recognized as being service connected presumptive. What this means is that if a veteran has this malady, and can prove that he or she served on the ground in Vietnam (or in some case elsewhere in Southeast Asia or the DMZ in Korea) then it is adjudicated by the Veterans Benefits Administration of the Department of Veterans Affairs as being a result of the exposure in military service, entitling the veteran to compensation and health care.

VVA has continued to press for additional research into the effects of the toxic environment in which we lived and fought during our time in the military in Vietnam. One key aspect of that was seeking to get research going in Vietnam, as it is still the "natural laboratory" where all of this actually took place, and when we left the toxins were left behind.

Really from the 1980s forward, and intensively from about 1995 until 2001 VVA pushed hard to secure an agreement, and the funds, to bring about scientific research in Vietnam about these toxins. Thanks in particular to the Senators noted above, and Congressman Lane Evans, the funds were appropriated for three years in a row to the National Institute for Environmental Health Sciences (NIEHS) specifically for this purpose, but remained unused. Some of the delay was due to recalcitrance on the part of NIEHS and some due to the reluctance of the Vietnamese to down this road. Frankly, the Vietnamese makes sense to a layman in that they believed that the adverse effects of the toxins on the environment and on human health was pretty much self evident, and that the U.S. Government should accept responsibility for this and move to transfer funds and technical assistance to the Vietnamese to provide medical care and compensation to their citizens and to clean up the toxins still in their environment.

In 2001 the former National President of Vietnam, Thomas H. Corey, a wheelchair bound former infantryman with the First Cave who was shot through the chest in what we still call the Ashau valley during the war, led a delegation to Vietnam where a key official of Vietnam finally agreed to move toward an agreement to conduct the research. For three years the NIEHS had blamed the Vietnamese for lack of progress in actually utilizing the funds for the purpose intended by the Congress. Once the Vietnamese said yes, then NIEHS came up with all kinds of “reasons” and excuses as to why they could not move ahead.

Finally in the fall of 2001, the NIEHS agreed to move forward, and the first ever International Conference on Agent Orange was held in Hanoi in late February/early March of 2002. Scientists, physicians, and officials from more than 90 countries attended, and many gave papers, served on panels, or presented scientific “posters.” At the end of that Conference, the United States government and the government of Vietnam signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) to move forward with a joint scientific effort. The environmental survey was to be jointly executed, with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) having the lead on the American side. The NIEHS had the lead on the American side to move forward with epidemiological studies of the population in Vietnam that was exposed.

The EPA did its job, and significant progress was being made on the ecological survey for the first three years, although not nearly as quickly as VVA believed possible. The NIEHS never did get a specific epidemiological study in place.

By the mid to late 2005 it was clear that there was an impasse that was unlikely to be resolved any time in the foreseeable future. In the spring of 2006, the Ford Foundation stepped forward and started providing funds for a survey of the “hot spots” with a view toward cleaning up those worst spaces, and least from dioxin and Agent Orange. Others at this hearing will I am sure provide a more complete picture what has been accomplished there as a result of Ford Foundation’s leadership in stepping into this deadlocked situation.

As you know, President Bush visited Vietnam in late 2006, and Vietnam was able, with the assistance of the United States to achieve several major economic and trade goals that will (and already has) result in much investment in infrastructure, more free flow of goods from Vietnam to international markets, and a significant growth in the standard of living of the Vietnamese people. Vietnam still remains as one of the poorest countries in the world in regard to per capita income, despite the industriousness and creativity of their people.

So why does VVA have stake in what happens now? By forgoing the epidemiological studies in Vietnam, the research that we believe would have been immediately applicable to American veterans and their families is not going to take place. The Vietnamese are getting largely what they wanted, and doing the best by their people in securing capital, expanding scientific and industrial capacity, and acquiring the resources to provide more

health care to their people. They will also get remediation of their worst environmental “hot spots” at least for dioxin.

Who loses are American veterans who do not get the benefit for studies that would be directly applicable to American veterans, particularly as to birth defects in not only our children for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren. It strains credulity that this is all by accident.

There is currently not a single study regarding the adverse effects of Agent Orange being funded by any of the National Institutes of Health, nor by the Defense Department, nor by VA nor by the EPA. Nor has the VA commented on the latest findings from the IOM pursuant to the Agent Orange Act of 1991, which was due months ago. Even the \$1.5 million for the Medical Follow-up Agency of the IOM to care for the data from the now defunct Air Force “Ranch Hand Study” and to make it available to the scientific community mysteriously disappeared from the latest VA budget.

American veterans still do not have the answers we need. While we wish the Vietnamese people all the best with their problems due to Agent Orange, it is a fact that American veterans of Vietnam, and our families, are being cast aside by the ay things have developed in the past seven or so years.

Thanks you for the opportunity to provide our brief remarks. I will be happy to answer any questions.

RICHARD “Rick” WEIDMAN

Richard F. “Rick” Weidman serves as Director of Government Relations on the National Staff of Vietnam Veterans of America. As such, he is the primary spokesperson for VVA in Washington. He served as a 1-A-O Army Medical Corpsman during the Vietnam War, including service with Company C, 23rd Med, and AMERICAL Division, located in I Corps of Vietnam in 1969.

Mr. Weidman was part of the staff of VVA from 1979 to 1987, serving variously as Membership Service Director, Agency Liaison, and Director of Government Relations. He left VVA to serve in the Administration of Governor Mario M. Cuomo (NY) as statewide director of veterans’ employment & training (State Veterans Programs Administrator) for the New York State Department of Labor.

He has served as Consultant on Legislative Affairs to the National Coalition for Homeless Veterans (NCHV), and served at various times on the VA Read adjustment Advisory Committee, the Secretary of Labor’s Advisory Committee on Veterans Employment & Training, the President’s Committee on Employment of Persons with Disabilities - Subcommittee on Disabled Veterans, Advisory Committee on veterans’ entrepreneurship at the Small Business Administration, and numerous other advocacy posts in veteran affairs.

Mr. Weidman was an instructor and administrator at Johnson State College (Vermont) in the 1970s, where he was also active in community and veterans affairs. He attended Colgate University (B.A., (1967), and did graduate study at the University of Vermont.

He is married and has four children.

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
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The national organization Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a non-profit veterans' membership organization registered as a 501(c) (19) with the Internal Revenue Service. VVA is also appropriately registered with the Secretary of the Senate and the Clerk of the House of Representatives in compliance with the Lobbying Disclosure Act of 1995.

VVA is not currently in receipt of any federal grant or contract, other than the routine allocation of office space and associated resources in VA Regional Offices for outreach and direct services through its Veterans Benefits Program (Service Representatives). This is also true of the previous two fiscal years.

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