

FALLEN LEAVES, BROKEN LIVES:  
AGENT ORANGE'S LEGACY IN VIET NAM

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Viet Nam's endlessly rolling flatlands covered with rice paddies glow an emerald green. The Mekong Delta, stricken with killer floods for the past six summers, is a floating nest of variegated green vegetation. And the mountains of the Central Highlands, with their steep slopes and narrow, snaking highways, are covered with green weeds, scraggly bushes, or quick-growing trees.

This lush living carpet stretches from one end of Viet Nam to the other. But it is deceptive. After one recent visit to Viet Nam, I reported the Delta's opulence to an American veteran, a "river rat" who had patrolled the muddy Mekong in his deadly boat. "That's what it first looked like when I arrived in '65," he said. "By the time I left a year later, it was nothing but a wasted moonscape."

Smitten with vistas of proud, green-swathed Highlands' mountains balancing clouds on their summits, a contemporary traveler might think all is well. But upon close inspection, or interviewing peasants who live there or Vietnamese or American veterans who fought there, another story emerges. These Highlands, once thick triple canopy jungles with three levels of lush trees climbing as high as 120 feet, were among the most intensely defoliated. Photos of their destruction gave us our now-famous images of entire forests turned to shriveled matchsticks, jungles to barren mud. Between 1962 and 1971, the United States military sprayed 11.2 million gallons of Agent Orange on Viet Nam. By Vietnamese count, 60% of the country's mangrove forests, 2 million of their 10.3 million hectares (1 hectare = 2.47 acres) of forest, and 236,000 of their 2.9 million hectares of cultivated land were destroyed.

Viet Nam has made urgent efforts to reclaim and restore its land at the cost of \$300-500 US per hectare – a vast sum for an impoverished country in which the per capita income is only about \$350 a year. The Vietnamese plant fast-growing but nutrient-sucking eucalyptus trees from Australia on barren mountains away from farmlands. These prevent further erosion and are harvested to make paper. Peasants and cooperatives plant tea, coffee, pepper, and other cash crops. Now plantations, tree farms, or spreading scrub weeds instead of impenetrable jungle constitute the Vietnamese earth's green swath.

Yet the Vietnamese are less plagued by the impact Agent Orange has had on their land than by its ongoing impact on their people, from the war up through the present day. Viet Nam's heavy rains have washed much of the defoliant through the ecosystem and out to sea. But according to the Food and Drug Administration, its deadly poison dioxin is 100,000 times more potent than thalidomide as a cause of birth defects. It lodges in

human and animal DNA, having tragic and disastrous effects down the generations. We do not know when, or if, it can ever be cleansed.

From north to south, from Ha Noi to the Delta, families have suffered Agent Orange tragedies. In Hoi An, on the South China Sea coast, Do Thanh Son, a marble worker in his mid-twenties, had to quit school. He struggles in his tiny shop to support his elderly parents and older brother, who developed normally until age 3 but then disintegrated until he “became mad.” In the Hoi An Orphanage, home to 75 children, 16 orphaned children suffer severe Agent Orange disabilities. Most of these, with limbs twisted into grotesque shapes, are unable to do anything but lie in cribs all day.

Farther up the coast, in the ancient imperial capital of Hue, famous for the brutal battle documented in the movie “Full Metal Jacket,” Tu Ai, a woman in her twenties, tells her neighbor’s story. The family’s father was infected by Agent Orange during the war. Later he married and had seven children, all of whom who were “strong, intelligent, and attending school.” Each child, upon reaching the mid-teens, “became foolish.” Their minds seemed not only to stop maturing, but to regress and decay. They lost their abilities to read, speak, even carry on everyday functions, until every one became completely helpless. The aging, heartbroken parents had to keep them in wooden cages while desperately struggling to earn a subsistence living and seek “repair.”

In Ho Chi Minh City, Da Nang, and all major cities and towns of the south, children like these dot the sidewalks, begging as they push themselves on makeshift carts, crawl or walk on their hips with useless limbs dragging, dangling, or slung over their shoulders. In rural villages, where the vast majority of the population of 80 million lives, families and neighbors loyally tend these dependent children. With no medical or rehabilitative resources and surrounded by extreme poverty, they often spend their lives on tiny cots, in their mother’s arms or carried in a sling. Based upon extensive interviews of affected families in both the north and south, the Ha Noi based Research Center for Gender, Family, and Environment in Development summarized these children’s afflictions in their November 2000 report. Children in Agent Orange affected families may suffer “skin rashes, severe personality disorders, memory loss, enlarged head, organ and metabolic dysfunction, missing or abnormal reproductive organs, miscarriages, cancers, numbness, hearing loss, child deaths, birth defects.” The Center fears that such effects may “have no time limit” and call these survivors born long after the war was over, “victims of time-delayed violence.” Vietnamese refer to these children helplessly blown like motes across the cities and countryside *Tre Em Bui Doi*, the Dust of Life.

But there is a place where such children are not dust.

I first visited the Hong Ngoc Humanity Center in June 2000, just a month after the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of our war. With Prof. Steven Leibo, I was leading my first annual reconciliation journey for American veterans and citizens, students and teachers, through both north and south. In both cities and countryside, we had met countless numbers of people without arms or legs, or whose bodies were deformed, or who grew strange mushroom-shaped tumors on their scalps, faces, arms, or legs.

Then we arrived at Hong Ngoc, in Sao Do, a town nestled in the verdant stretch of rice paddies half way between Ha Noi and the Gulf of Tonkin. The Humanity Center was a long warehouse-like building containing a sheltered workshop for 270 disabled children. We toured the work and sales areas for their silk needlework, hand-sewn garments, and intricate wood and stone carvings, all made by residents.

Bucolic scenes of country life hand-stitched with shimmering silver, green, red, and yellow silk in thousands of tiny movements blared in pained contrast to the students' disabilities. From their teens through mid twenties, these young Vietnamese were deaf-mutes or severely physically disabled. One girl had no legs below her mid-thighs, wobbling as she struggled to keep her balance and walk. A boy with only an upper torso pulled himself along the floor on a makeshift wooden platform.

I spent much time with Van, a young man whose oval face was strikingly handsome, eyes blazing with intelligence, face beaming a beatific smile. But his hands and feet, where fingers and toes should be, were twisted, craggy claws. This was after surgical repair gave his extremities usable shapes. He was from this province, as all residents were. There had been no Agent Orange spraying this far north. But as a soldier in the south, his father had fought in the white-powdered jungle. After Van was born disabled, his parents wished to have one normal child. This is particularly important in Viet Nam as adult sons carry on the family name and heritage, keep the family altar to the ancestors, and care for parents in their old age. Van's parents had a second child with identical deformities. Then another. After their fourth identically disabled child, they gave up. Van was the only one lucky enough to find a place in Hong Ngoc.

Shocked, I turned to my guide, assistant director Nguyen Thanh Diep. "Don't worry," he said. "There are not so many children like this in Viet Nam. Now only about 35,000 children like this are born every year."

I have returned to Hong Ngoc for extended visits every year since. During my 2002 visit, my group was greeted again by Diep and another teacher, Doan Xuan Huan, both 27. Both came to work here immediately after high school, as Xuan says, "educated in the school of life." The French killed Xuan's two grandfathers and Diep's father spent 22 years fighting the French, Americans, and Chinese.

Xuan and Diep explained that there were 185 teens, aged 16- mid 20s, in the Center. 60% are deaf-mute. We were reassured that only 5% suffered from Agent Orange disabilities. As my group toured, I met many students, dressed in clean and heat-comfortable white shirts, silently sitting or gossiping as they labored over their sewing frames. I saw no disabilities difficult for the unfamiliar to tolerate. Had the Center, during the last year, transformed into a school and workshop for the deaf?

My group left to continue its tour to picturesque Ha Long Bay but I remained. Diep explained that, indeed, the Center had been forced to change its emphasis because there was no work, training, or government support available for Agent Orange disabled children. Further, it had proven too difficult to teach wood and stone work. Reluctantly, the Center had had to send severely disabled children home.

Was any of the deaf-mutism caused by Agent Orange? Where was their 5% Agent Orange population?

Making sure no tour buses were in sight, my friends brought out a few students with limb deformities who had been out of sight. They gently passed on a verbal invitation for others to join us.

First two, then three students limped over. One had shins shaped like flat plates standing on their sides. A second had a severe humpback. A third had hands and feet shaped like hooks. Others kept appearing. I asked Diep where they had been. "I must minimize Agent Orange reports to tourists because Americans and other nationalities do not want to see or hear of it," he explained. "We receive no government funding and are

dependent on selling our products. We cannot afford to lose customers because they don't want to see our students."

"But this is more than 5% of your population with Agent Orange disabilities right here," I said as more handicapped students gathered around us.

"5% is the number of medically proven Agent Orange disabilities."

We were surrounded by more young adults than I could count, all with twisted or misshapen bodies, all patient, friendly, willing to tell me their stories.

Tap, age 21, had severe hand and foot deformities, and of 5 siblings had one younger sister at home with the same disability. His father had been born in 1958 near the Laotian border in an area that was heavily sprayed with Agent Orange. He came north in 1978 to fight the Chinese, married and remained. Tap did not know if his disability was from Agent Orange, but said, "It isn't important."

Dang, age 19, had a humpback with severe upper spinal deformities. Her father had been in the North Vietnamese Army fighting in the heavily sprayed south. He was 48 and suffered severe red and crusty eye and skin rashes. Dang would also not say their disabilities were from Agent Orange. "In Viet Nam, people are very kind to the disabled. Every family had to send their children to war, so every family has the same problems."

Without definitive medical or genetic testing, Diep said, no officials or family members claim dioxin poisoning. Money and resources for performing such tests do not exist. In families with only one or two disabled children, no causal connection is claimed. Only when most or all of the children are disabled and the disabilities are similar do they feel confident claiming Agent Orange disablement. Thus the actual numbers of afflicted children probably far exceeds official estimates.

By mid-afternoon more than twenty young people had told their versions of the same story. As Dung, age 23 explained, "Every Vietnamese man age 40-57 would have been a soldier in the south, so most had fathers who had been sprayed." Others had mothers who had been soldiers and were sprayed. If both parents had been exposed to Agent Orange, inevitably they were infertile.

Hung Ngoc Humanity Center was founded by its director Doan Xuan Tiep. Tiep, a soldier along with the rest of his generation, had had no children, but wanted to help the children of his friends who had been disabled or died. He raised enough money to open Hong Ngoc for forty children in 1993. The Center, which receives no government funding, has been expanding ever since as money is raised and goods are sold. In addition to this facility, Hong Ngoc has grown to include two additional facilities about 25 miles from Ha Noi. During my most recent visit in June, 2004, Diep proudly showed me their expanded facilities. Hong Ngoc now has enough school, work and dormitory space for about 300 residents.

In addition to its main building with work and sales facilities and a cafeteria, wings contain residential living quarters. Tiny rooms that house between eight and twenty residents are lined with bunks two or three beds high. Trunks crowd the little available floor space. Every patch of exposed wall is decorated with photos of family members or fading magazine pictures. In spite of such crowded conditions, every resident expresses joy and gratitude to be at Hong Ngoc.

Some students arrive having previously been cared for like babies, their disabilities compounded by lack of exercise and movement. Such practices are changing in the cities but not in the countryside where there is extreme poverty. Here staff

provides physical therapy, practice, and training every morning. Thuy, age 22, only learned to walk at age 20, months after arriving at the Center.

Hong Ngoc is not only a refuge for the children of war. Dinh, age 55, has worked there since 1996. He was a truck driver on the Ho Chi Minh Trail from 1968 until the war's end. Hauling supplies from the north to the south, Dinh was wounded during B-52 raids over Laos and shot in both arms. He was exposed to Agent Orange in Laos and along the border. "The grasses died. The trees died. The ground was flattened. We had to get our food and water from the forest that remained and many of us got infected."

Though disabled from his service, he remained in the military until 1990. Then he received two years of re-education. "I came here to help other handicapped people," Dinh explained, "because there are so few good chances for the handicapped in a country as poor as Viet Nam." About the suffering caused by the war he said, as do most Vietnamese, "I do not think Americans made the war, but were forced to obey their government. It was a very hard time for everybody."

It is not only the Vietnamese who suffer Agent Orange disabilities, not only their veterans and children who are afflicted through the generations. On my most recent reconciliation journey to Viet Nam in May-June, 2004, two American veterans traveling with me were afflicted, and a third has numerous veteran friends who are.

Lynn Kohl, during the war a firebase nurse in the Central Highlands, reports, "When I gave birth to my daughters, I did what I thought was best -- I breast fed them. I did not realize that Agent Orange is stored in fatty tissue (breasts) and so my daughters received mega-doses. In addition, both girls were born with medical and other problems associated with AO. One father was a vet, the other was not, discounting the Veterans Administration's theory that AO is transferred through sperm. Their suffering because of this and my guilt has been tremendous. The VA refuses to address these problems and the MDs I've gone to (and there have been many) said things like: she's spoiled, you're an over-anxious mother, or knew nothing about AO and if it DID exist it wasn't their problem...it was a government problem!!! How can you fight that?"

Jim Helt, now 63, was an air force officer during the war. He explained, "I was exposed to Agent Orange during my year-long assignment at Bien Hoa Air Base. After my return home, I was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer; I believe it was related to exposure to Agent Orange. Later I became diabetic. I do not fit the profile of a diabetic and believe it is related to Agent Orange exposure. It took decades for the VA to recognize diabetes as an outcome of Agent Orange exposure."

And Robert Cagle has several friends whose families suffer. A colleague, "like me was a grunt who humped through the bush for a year. Fifteen years ago he was diagnosed with type 2 diabetes (no family history) and now has cardiac insufficiency from faulty heart valves (also no family history), also associated with Agent Orange.

"Another friend and her husband," Bob continues, "were married six months before he was sent to Viet Nam. He loaded defoliant onto the planes. He was drenched in Agent Orange many times from leaky drums or faulty release valves and never told of its possible effects. A year later he returned home to a beautiful wife and seven month old baby girl. But two years later his wife miscarried. A year later, pregnant again, she gave birth to a boy with serious congenital brain defects. Medical testing found genetic mutations present in each of them from Agent Orange. No more children.

“Over the years I have met numerous people who have suffered such effects. My heart goes out to them as I see the damage it has done to their lives and the insignificance of them to our government that caused this to happen.” These three veterans visited the Center with me. “My heart was broken as I walked in,” Bob declares, “and saw the rows upon rows of children affected by Agent Orange. The generational effects are overwhelming from several aspects -- the fact that defects can be passed along generation to generation, that in Viet Nam their government has asked, almost required, the affected children to not have children. What a horrible fate especially from their point of view where families are so important. How can anyone ask you to end your genealogical line, stop the existence of a family name?”

Veterans who return to Viet Nam to achieve reconciliation realize that the fate of Americans and Vietnamese are now one, our people united as victims of the same suffering caused by modern war. No one knows how long dioxin lodges in the DNA or how many generations will inherit it. Now Viet Nam has severe Agent Orange disabilities appearing in the 2<sup>nd</sup> generation since the war. In Hong Ngoc’s province with a population of one million, over new 300 cases of extreme disability were discovered last year.

Hong Ngoc is a haven from poverty, helplessness, and despair. Its three centers now serve a total disabled population of about 500 and through sales and help from friends abroad is growing. It is a beloved haven to its residents. However, all over Viet Nam there are an estimated 3 million such disabled young people, about 4% of the entire population of the country. As unfortunate a fate as they suffer, the young residents of Hong Ngoc are the lucky ones among their peers.

Not only Vietnamese find refuge and welcome there. About our recent visit, veteran Jim Helt says, “Returning to Viet Nam after a 35 year absence was so meaningful to me as I saw how Vietnamese people continue to suffer from exposure to Agent Orange. Seeing people being talented, productive workers, though suffering from Agent Orange related illnesses, caused me to reflect -- I want to be part of their healing, their well-being. I feel a collective responsibility for their welfare as I was a young officer who fought there decades ago. Now I want to respond with whatever help possible.” Jim is helping Hong Ngoc build another school building for an additional 80 residents.

And Bob Cagle says, “It is a nurturing environment that has given me a lift too, because I remember their country when it was full of rain forests and tigers. They are no more. I am healed each time I do something for another person and particularly in Viet Nam where I helped destroy so much.” Bob is creating a non-profit on-line sales operation to market Hong Ngoc handicrafts to Americans.

Love, respect, and commitment to their children and our veterans glow as beautifully as the silken embroideries made by the residents. “My generation will never be free of suffering,” said Dinh. “But we can work together for the future and for our grandchildren to make sure they never see war again.” And Diep explained that Hong Ngoc means Rosy Jade. “We chose this name for our center because our people are not the dust of life. No matter how disabled, our children are precious gems. Vietnamese people know who the gems are.”