

Ghosts of Agent Orange

The notorious defoliant continues to ravage generations of Vietnamese. Now a group of veterans is using film to drive social and political justice.

BY EMILY GREEN
STAFF WRITER

Former Marine and member of Portland's Veterans for Peace chapter, Dan Shea knows the lasting effects of the Vietnam War all too well. In 1977 his first child was born with a number of birth defects that he believes were the result of his exposure to Agent Orange. His son, Casey, came into the world with a cleft palate, congenital heart disease and no abdominal walls. Shortly after birth he suffered a seizure, but eventually was able to come home and live a happy childhood, playing often with his younger sister between doctors visits. In 1981 Casey went into a coma after a 10-hour heart surgery. For seven weeks Shea and his wife hoped for a miracle every day as they sat at their son's bedside. But a miracle never came and they ultimately decided to take Casey off the respirator. Shortly thereafter he died in his father's arms. He was three years old.

Shea's story is familiar to others survivors of the Vietnam War, American and Vietnamese, and the ongoing effects of Agent Orange that continue to this day.

The subject now comes to a wider audience on May 18 in Portland with the world premiere of the documentary "Lighter than Orange."

The premiere is part of the Full Disclosure Film Festival, May 17 and 18, at Fifth Avenue Cinema. The event includes several documentaries that examine the American war in Vietnam. The festival is part of a nationwide effort by Veterans for Peace to ensure that the horrors of the Vietnam War and its long-term effects, still felt today by many American and Vietnamese citizens, are not forgotten.

While the loss of a child is the most difficult effect he's endured, Shea has suffered from the psychological effects of war too. Like so many relatives of Vietnam veterans in the U.S., he watched post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) destroy a family member, his brother Michael, who was also a Marine in the Vietnam War. Shortly after Shea was shipped to the Philippines with jungle rot on his feet, his brother was sent on an operation in his place.

"They brought him home in a straight jacket," said Shea. "He self-medicated over the years with drugs and alcohol; later it was mainly alcohol." Shea's brother died in 2010 of liver problems. The brothers had grown apart because, Shea said, he didn't want to be around a drunk. Luckily they were able to reconnect in the end. Shea also lives with PTSD as a result of the war. "I relive those experiences every day of my



PHOTO COURTESY OF
MATTHIAS LEUPOLD

Bui Ba Khang and his grandchild walk through the rice paddies of Vietnam where Agent Orange was sprayed more than 40 years ago. Today his grandchild suffers the birth defects common among Agent Orange victims. They are featured in the new documentary "Lighter than Orange."

life. I go to therapy once a month for post-traumatic stress. Each veteran's story is different, but those are the stories that is Full Disclosure."

Today, Shea is a member of the Vietnam Agent Orange Relief and Responsibility Campaign committee, which is working to pass legislation that would extend medical assistance to more individuals affected by the use of herbicides in Vietnam. While Shea blames Agent Orange for his son's death, the Department of Veterans Affairs does not recognize birth defects such as the ones Casey had as being a result of serving in Vietnam — unless the child is born to a female veteran.

While tens of thousands of Americans were exposed to herbicides like Agent Orange during the war, studies estimate that between 2.1 million and 4.8 million Vietnamese were also exposed, and many continue to be exposed because the toxins are still present in many areas of Vietnam.

Vietnam Veterans of America, a congressionally chartered veterans group with more than 70,000 members in 48 states, is in the midst of its own Agent Orange campaign. It is currently hosting a series of meetings across the U.S. titled "Faces of Orange," which are intended to make Vietnam veterans aware of the illnesses and birth defects associated with Agent Orange so that they can get help if they or their children are affected. Meetings in Oregon took place last week, and there will be a meeting in Seattle on May 10. So far, 10 states have hosted Faces of Orange town hall meetings, but the VVA hopes to

see more chapters sign up.

The documentary "Lighter Than Orange" poignantly shows a Vietnamese perspective on the legacy of Agent Orange. Directed by Matthias Leupold, a German photographer and professor living in Berlin, the film profiles Vietnamese veterans who continue to suffer from their exposure to the toxic herbicide that the U.S. military sprayed across their land. Many of these men and women also have children who were born with serious birth defects caused by the poison.

One Vietnamese veteran featured in the film, Do Duc Diu has lost 12 children, all at very young ages. "They lived one or two years, then died," he explains. Despite his misfortune, he continued to have children because as the oldest son in his family, he was supposed to have a male descendent. "I still didn't know I was a victim of Agent Orange. Even though so many children had died, we didn't know anything," said Do Duc Diu. Each March, as is the custom in Vietnam, Do Duc Diu visits the shrine where all his children are buried together, and he tends to the tiny graves.

When his daughter, Do Thi Nga, became paralyzed on one side of her body when she was 8 months old, she was examined. "They told us she was an Agent Orange victim. Only then we realized it had to do with Agent Orange," he said. He holds her in his lap as he explains her pain and illnesses. "We are trying to live and take care of her," he says. At that moment she begins to hit herself in the head with her fist while his wife looks away from the camera.

"The 12 veterans who are being examined here stand in for the 4 million

Full Disclosure Film Festival

Fifth Avenue
Cinema
510 SW Hall Street

Saturday, May 17
2 p.m. "Another
Brother"
3:30 p.m. "Hearts
and Minds"

Sunday, May 18
2:30 p.m. "Sir! No
Sir!"
4:15 p.m. "Lighter
Than Orange"

This event is free
*Please note that these films contain scenes that organizers warn may trigger post-traumatic stress in some individuals.