

Vietnam: Agent Orange Is A Silent Killer

LENO continued from front page

from the orange bands that marked the fifty-five gallon drums it was stored in.

The idea was that the V.C. wouldn't be so hard to kill if they could see them better by killing the jungle canopy that protected them.

"It made everything dead and dry," said Leno. "You could see the heat waves coming up off the defoliated areas. It was like a logging clear cut on a hot summer day, with the waves just coming up."

Leno, a Tribal Elder, still vividly remembers his year-long tour in Vietnam.

The first time he ever came under fire was during a routine drop off at a jungle LZ (landing zone.)

"We were coming in on an LZ behind the first lift of choppers," Leno recalled. "Each lift had 5 choppers. Our lift came down and the V.C. opened fire. An R.P.G. (rocket propelled grenade) round went right in front of our helicopter. We were still about six feet in the air and I just jumped out. I didn't want to be in that big of a target."

The shooting was coming from a bunker behind a tree line. Leno and his unit took cover and popped colored smoke on their position. Then Cobra attack helicopters came in, two at a time and opened up with mini guns and M79 grenade launchers, blasting the bunker to pieces.

Afterwards, the soldiers went to search, but the bunker, and it's occupants, were blown to bits.

"It was the first time anyone had ever shot at me," said Leno.

It would not be the last.

A few months later, as the platoon was getting ready to be flown out, the VC fired a harassment grenade launcher round into the base.

Harassment rounds are fired at random, to unnerve the enemy and keep his head down. Only this one landed right in front of where Leno was standing.

"I had just walked up to answer this guy's question..." Leno said.

"...And kaboom!... if you've ever had a camera flash go off in your eyes, it was like that, just a bright, bright, white light. I woke up and saw a puddle of blood and thought: somebody's been hit. It was me."

After coming to, Leno discovered he had shrapnel in his chest, stomach, legs and one splinter in his right eye, 9 pieces in all. The medics came and hauled him away. Later, his buddies from the company came and saw him at Cam Rahn Bay hospital; wounds healing and his head covered in bandages.

They told him he looked "like hell." Undaunted, Leno recovered from his wounds and immediately rejoined his unit.

During his tour in Vietnam, Leno was in several firefights and ambushes, earning him his Combat Infantryman's Badge, which is awarded for spending at least sixty days under fire, and his Air Medal, for participating in more than 25 aerial missions over hostile territory.

He received two commendation

medals for Distinguished Service and a Purple Heart, for wounds suffered during the grenade attack. He served his country dutifully, never thinking that the Army would do anything to knowingly harm him.

Which is why he felt betrayed when he began to learn, years later, about the grim facts surrounding the Army's use of Agent Orange.

Agent Orange was created in a laboratory at the University of Chicago during WWII. Working on experimental plant growth, Professor E.J. Kraus, chairman of the schools botany department, discovered that causing the plants to experience sudden uncontrolled growth could kill certain broadleaf vegetation. It was similar to giving the plants cancer. Thinking that this discovery might be of some use to the war effort, Kraus contacted the War Department. Army scientists tested the plant hormones but found no use for them before the war ended.

After minimal experimentation in 1961, a variety of chemical agents were shipped to Vietnam to aid in anti-guerilla efforts. The chemicals were to be used to destroy food sources and eliminate foliage that concealed enemy troop movements.

The military, however, sprayed herbicides at six to 25 times the strength suggested by the manufacturer, Dow Chemicals.

Leno and the troops on the ground lived in a chemical mist of herbicides. They slept with it, drank it in their water, ate it in their food and breathed it when it dropped out of the air in a fine, white mist.

"They sprayed it everywhere," said Leno. "It was everywhere — in the air, in the water. If you were in-country, you were exposed to it."

The spraying continued unabated for most of the war, even though, according to military records, it was having minimal effect on the enemy. A series of memorandums uncovered in the National Archives and now declassified indicate that defoliation killed a lot of plants, but had little real effect on military operations.

As soldiers who had served in Vietnam attempted to settle back into civilian life following their tours, some of them began to develop unusual health problems. There were skin and liver diseases and an abnormal number of cancers to soft tissue organs such as the lungs and stomach.

And in a recently released report, the National Academy of Sciences' Institute of Medicine found "suggestive" evidence of a link between Type-2 diabetes and Agent Orange

and other herbicides used in Vietnam. There also seemed to be an unusually high number of birth defects and learning disorders among children born to Vietnam Veterans who had been exposed to Agent Orange.

Some Veterans developed a painful skin rash know as chloracne.

Similarly, Leno has had an unexplained rash on his hands and forearms for years.

Leno has also experienced the wild mood swings that are symptomatic of exposure. "As anyone can tell you, I was pretty crazy," he said. "I had a terrible temper. I used to drink and get into fights, and I wasn't out to just hurt the other guy;

Leno knows that he can expect his life to be shortened by diabetes.

He lives with the daily insulin injections and poor health from having high blood sugar.

He has been diagnosed with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), which he says has been getting worse since the Iraq war began.

This is a common occurrence among Veterans, said Mike Maxwell, Coordinator for the Portland Veterans Administration Medical Center's PTSD Program. Many Veterans find that they can't stop watching the war coverage on TV and watch constantly. Others find themselves more nervous, anxious and agitated. Many have trouble sleeping.

"We see a lot more of this whenever there's more than a few days of conflict on TV. A lot of Vets have been coming in this last year, since the start of the Iraq war," said Maxwell. "We've been seeing a steady stream of Vets seeking treatment for PTSD since the war broke out."

Leno has had difficulty sleeping soundly since the start of the war.

"I have nightmares, and whenever I hear a loud noise, like a car backfiring, I jump, like I did when I first got back."

Leno's 16-year-old daughter, Lisa, has also noticed changes in her father since the Iraq war began.

"He used to not jump when he wakes up. Now when he wakes up he's all shaky... it's not right," she said. "He served his country and he has a lot of medals. I'm really proud of him. But I think they (the

Army) should have known the effects," she said.

Leno has also noted the numbers of Veterans returning home from today's conflicts with Gulf War Syndrome and other illnesses. He encourages them to seek help as soon as possible.

"Veteran's who are returning should try to go get checked out. If not for themselves, then for their kids," said Leno.

What Leno would really like to see is closure. Every day he lives with the uncertainty of the unknown side effects of Agent Orange.

It is closure he knows he may never see. Despite this, Leno remains dedicated to his homeland.

"I believe that this is the greatest country in the world," he said. "I'm still very proud of the job we did."



Yesterday And Today — Tribal Elder Tom Leno holds a photo of himself taken on his graduation from Advanced Infantry Training in 1968. Leno has been diagnosed with Type-2 Adult Onset Diabetes, which he believes is linked to his exposure to the defoliant Agent Orange during his tour in Vietnam. **Photo by Peta Tinda**

you know, a couple punches and he's had enough. I wanted to destroy him... and it didn't take much to set me off."

Many of these Veterans were found to have high levels of dioxins in their blood, but scientists and the U.S. government insisted that there was no link between their illnesses and Agent Orange.

Even though the VA now acknowledges the effects of Agent Orange on soldiers and families, and treats Vets like Leno, more Veterans and their children continue to suffer from the effects.

One of Leno's daughters has dyslexia and he fears there may be more unidentified, long-term effects.

"I don't really care about me, but knowing that it could affect my kids — it ain't right," he said.

Note: Tom Leno urges fellow Veterans to contact the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

- VA Benefits: 1-800-827-1000
- Health Benefits: 1-887-222-8387
- Education Benefits: 1-888-442-4551
- Life Insurance: 1-800-669-8477
- Gulf War and Agent Orange: 1-800-749-8387
- Headstones and Markers: 1-800-697-6947