

Agent Orange by Deana Feist

Encyclopedia Britannica defines Agent Orange as a defoliant, a mixture of herbicides that U.S. military forces sprayed in the Vietnam War from the years of 1962- 1971. This was done for two reasons. The first was to defoliate the forests in order for enemy troops to be more easily seen. Secondly, to destroy the crops that fed the enemy.

Approximately 18 million gallons of Agent Orange (AO) which contained dioxin, a substance known to cause cancer were dumped. This powerful defoliating dioxin was manufactured by Dow Chemicals. The term Agent Orange is also used to describe a large number of illnesses caused by the dioxin. Throughout the course of my research I found a shocking range of illnesses ranging from: Chloracne, Hodgkins disease, non-Hodgkins lymphoma, soft tissue sarcoma, acute subacute peripheral neuropathy, multiple myeloma (cancer of the immune system), prostate cancer, Porphyria cutanea tarda, respiratory cancers, spina bifida, diabetes, high rates of miscarriages, sever learning disabilities in children, several skin disorders, and the list goes on (Richard Tucker).

At the onset of my research I hypothesized that veterans and their families effected by AO would report their feelings toward their disease and the government. Furthermore, that the veterans and their families would not be satisfied with what the government has done in terms of compensation, information, and responsibility. I more than proved this hypothesis to be true as I surveyed thirty AO vets and their families. The method I used involved signing up for an AO Vets List, a web ring of AO vets and their families. This web ring consisted of Veterans suffering from AO illnesses and people just wanting to know more about AO. Through this vets list I networked my way into many AO Vets and their families and became aware of the frustrations these veterans have faced both in battling their illnesses and battling the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA), the agency responsible for treatment and compensation of the Veterans.

My research is centered around Karl Marx' conflict theory focusing on the theory of collective action in bringing about change. Those in power according to Marx use the system to their interest and profit and in turn exploit the workers, in this case the soldiers. In the case of the veterans, the Veterans Administration is the main power structure they deal with. Within the bureaucratic structure of the Veterans Administration are the people that have the power to diagnose, treat, and grant the veteran compensation for their illnesses. According to the conflict theory there are continuous dynamic forces that result in balance or imbalance in society. The power structure extends beyond the VA into the government bureaucracy which includes lawmakers, various other agencies, and the court system. The veterans and their families must meander through these various power structures in order to gain treatment and compensation.

It can be looked at at a very basic level, which is, the individual against the larger entity, which has experience in paper shuffling and large case loads. Within the bureaucracy the veteran can be reduced to only a number and therefore has a less human quality to him making it easier to dehumanize and deny claims. According to Marx the only way to break the power hold of the ruling class is through collective action. If AO vets and their families can rally the public and awareness and support there could be policy changes in favor of the veterans. Throughout this essay I will explain why it is in the power structures best interests not to take responsibility for AO related illnesses and what this means for the veteran and their families.

In my research I have had many direct correspondences with AO Veterans and had the opportunity to be an outside observer of the flow of emails I followed on a daily basis via the web ring. I designed a survey and distributed it to the web ring and to individuals I met through the web ring. The survey I used consisted of thirteen questions designed to show the veterans illness, the compensation (if any) they received, and their level of satisfaction with the Veterans Administration. Of the aforementioned diseases, various cancers and Peripheral Neuropathy seemed to be the most frequently occurring illnesses of the AO Vets. Peripheral Neuropathy is a severe problem for many of the veterans. This is a disease in which the veterans in the body die one by one leaving the veteran with numb limbs, extreme difficulty in daily life and eventually killing them. The information I was most surprised to learn was the high occurrence of birth defects in the children of the veterans. These defects ranged from learning disorders, spina bifida, high rates of miscarriage, and abnormal physical deformities. I learned of children developing tumors at

young ages, not being able to have children themselves, and having severe skin diseases, allergies, and asthma. Combine the problems of the children with the problems of the vets and one can only imagine the difficulty faced. Many veterans and their families fall into these disease categories but it does not mean that they will be compensated by the Veterans Administration. Once a veteran discovers a disease the process of filing paper work begins. For many veterans this process can lag on for years. Often a veteran dies before the Veterans Administration approves any compensation at which point the family is left with nothing. One veteran states "Its like there are two parts to the Veterans Administration. One is the medical branch, the other is the administration. The doctors WILL diagnose and give you treatment: BUT getting the administration to approve any compensation is the hard part, even when the doctors are sitting there and telling them your disabled." This is much too common a scenario expressed by the veterans I surveyed. The VA has a list of diseases deemed coverable or uncoverable by compensation. On this list there are seven types of cancer that fall under Title 28, the law under which the VA operates (Margowski). One of those cancers, Soft- Tissue Sarcoma includes twenty three sub types of cancer. The problem is that there are new diseases showing up in Vietnam Veterans everyday that are unrecognized by the VA as caused by AO. One example of this would be diabetes which the VA does not recognize. For many veterans there is no other explanation for their illness than dioxin exposure.

They have no family history of cancer, birth defects, nerve disease, respiratory, or skin problems yet they have these diseases at young ages. An example of how the VA has denied compensation for veterans is in the case of Peripheral Neuropath. This illness was not added to the list of diseases to be compensated until 1995. In order for a claim to be approved the veteran had to file within one year of contact, one year of discharge, or one year on retirement. It is not uncommon for the veteran and doctors to miss the small window in which victim must be diagnosed. By missing the proper time structure the vet ultimately is not compensated yet the disease manifests. Many illnesses caused by AO do not show up until thirty years after exposure.

A serious problem for veterans and their families is facing the AO illnesses which often involve painful treatments such as chemotherapy, bone marrow transplants, radiation, transfusions, surgery, infection, combined with trying to get their paperwork settled with the VA. According to one veteran "If a vet does not obtain 100% disability rating for AO related cancer before he dies his family gets nothing. So many guys die and don't have the foggiest idea that

their cancer is AO related... There is no treatment provided for AO until you get cancer." This veteran also went on to say there should be preventative maintenance programs for veterans to help prolong life instead of waiting for illness to begin. The number of death from AO has surpassed the number of deaths in the Vietnam War.

To me that number is overwhelmingly high and makes a clear statement as to the incredibly large number of men and women dying from AO related illnesses. I am sad to say that two days ago a highly respected veteran and member of the web wing passed away. He was informed six months earlier he had leukemia. His cancer could only be explained by his exposure to AO and he was not compensated. The number of veterans dying from dioxin poisoning is relatively unknown to the average American which is how the VA and the government would like it to stay. If more veterans and their families knew of the magnitude of illnesses linked to AO, the more claims would be filed, and subsequently the more law suits for lack of compensation would be filed. The act of endangering U.S. soldiers is a war crime in which the government is trying very hard to ignore yet the AO Veterans and their families are sick and dying nonetheless.

I would now like to discuss the way in which the government has researched AO. The primary study conducted by the government in determining the effects of AO on veterans is called the Ranch Hand Study. This study has come under heavy criticism for its methods and content. The San Diego Tribune conducted a six month study of the Ranch Hand Study and in an article published on November 1, 1998 stated the U.S. military's \$200 million dollar study is so flawed it is useless. There are a number of reasons the study is flawed. The first reason is that the study is based on members of the Airforce whom dropped the dioxin AO. These people were not in direct contact with the dioxin the way ground troops were. Secondly the Airforce is conducting a study in which they are the ones they are investigating despite recommendations by the National Institute of Health to have an outside agency conduct the study. Any good researcher knows there is a breach of ethics and a conflict of interest when the organization under investigation is the same organization conducting the investigation. It has surface that several of the reports have been doctored and patently altered so as to be deemed useless. Records which have been used in AO litigation by the Airforce were fraudulent and deceptive (Levin). Information on birth defects was altered as well as the rate of the incidence of cancer among veterans. The Airforce also resisted attempts by lawmakers to get the data fully disclosed. Despite these flaws the Ranch Hand Study has been the

key element in denying health benefits to veterans. On February 11, 1999 U.S. District Judge Thelton E. Henderson ruled "that the VA demanded an illegally high standard of scientific proof in reaching the conclusion that there is no link between AO exposure and all diseases other than minor skin condition" (Special Report: Fatal flaws...). The court directed the VA to reevaluate their scientific standard of proof and awarded the 6,000 VA claimants compensation or death benefits. This ruling is a step in the right direction but is a far cry from fully recognizing and addressing many diseases.

If you ask one of the bureaucrats working for the VA whether or not a sick veteran was exposed to AO you may get mixed answers and many questions as to whether the veteran was exposed to the dioxin. The veteran would be expected to come up with proof of locations in which they served and the VA would try to determine if the veteran had any contact with the dioxin. If you ask a sick veteran whether or not they were exposed to the AO dioxin you would get a definitive answer: Yes, all who were there were exposed. The dioxin found its way into the rivers the soldiers crossed, the water they drank, the food they ingested and into the soil they walked on. Walking through the jungle the soldier could become completely soaking wet on a day it wasn't raining. This of course was caused by the millions of gallons of dioxin being dumped into the jungle. Animals could be seen falling out of trees dead from their inability to cope with the dioxin. In humans the effects were not as instant and for many have taken thirty years to manifest. In my survey of thirty AO Veterans: I found that 100% of them believed their illness is caused by AO. Some of the veterans were receiving compensation for their illnesses. On average I found that veterans were receiving 24% disability or compensation for their illness. It is extremely difficult to come up with an average disability pay because they range from nothing at all to 100% disabled. This also does not take into account the number of veterans that have passed away without receiving payment. No amount of money can replace a life but for many wives and children of veterans this money is all they have. Further, when you consider that many of the children of AO Veterans have disabilities themselves that may require extra finances to treat, the amount of compensation in dollar amounts is even lower.

I also wanted to look at the level of satisfaction the >veterans had with the Veterans Administration. I wanted to determine if problems in getting compensation for illnesses were common or rare. To learn whether the veterans had problems filing paper work, coming up with records, and getting results in a timely fashion. Each veteran, that is 100% of those surveyed said they were

dissatisfied with the service they received from the VA. According to most it was extremely difficult to get the paper work filed and the length of time waiting for a claim to process was excessive. In one case, a veterans wife was trying to get her husbands Soft Tissue Sarcoma compensated.

The cancer was diagnosed by a M.D. as an AO related disease. After months of waiting for a response on her claim she finally spoke with a VA employee. She explained her husband only had a few months to live and what would happen if the claim didn't get processed by then. The employee told her the VA would then pay for the funeral. This would mean the family would be left with nothing. This kind of stalling was consistent with most veterans I spoke with. If a legitimate claim is denied, sometimes, the veteran will appeal. This is another lengthy process which can even go into civil court. Keeping in mind this is all happening to a person in poor physical condition with high stress and anxiety over his and their families well being. In the situation that many of these veterans are in there should be an organization handling their claims in a prompt manner and like Judge Henderson stated the level of proof in order to be awarded compensation should be reasonable. The current structure of the VA does not provide this to our veterans. The current structure of the VA does however serve to the favor of the government because many veterans die before the paper work is complete leaving families without benefits. This is to the financial gain of the power structure.

Throughout the course of my research I came across the problem of objectivity. I spent months getting to know the individuals active in the web ring and came across many amazing individuals fighting the hardest fight of their life. It is very difficult to hear the stories of our countries heros and keep an objective viewpoint. I became very emotional at times such as when a well respected veteran passed away. In all I remained objective with moments of subjective emotion. Listening to the pain so many families are facing in dealing with their illnesses does make it difficult to understand as a researcher why there is not more help available for these veterans. Many feel the government is simply waiting for them to die so this problem goes away. For far too many families this is happening. Another dilemma I had in putting my research together is trying to quantify data that is really difficult to quantify. It is difficult to come up with a round number for the benefits being collected or not collected. For many there is no compensation and for some it is for an illness not related to AO such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, yet the veteran suffers from AO as well. That became extremely difficult to sort through.

In my evaluation of my study I feel it is an extremely important and timely topic in which I received sad results. Agent Orange was something that I knew about, but just barely. After all my interviews, surveys, and research I learned this country has a huge problem that is quite unknown to many Americans. The rate of incidence of cancer and other diseases among Vietnam Veterans is at least five times greater than the average person. There are strong correlations between the veterans' diseases and their exposure to AO.

The Airforce thus far has concluded that veterans have higher incidence of cancer and birth defects among their children but it is not due to Agent Orange. In my opinion there is no other explanation. When such high numbers of men and women are sick and dying of similar illnesses and the only commonality among them is their service in Vietnam the explanation of dioxin exposure cannot be overlooked as the cause. There simply has not been responsibility taken for the act of endangering the lives of U.S. soldiers. Dow Chemicals wants to blame the government because they dropped the dioxin. The government simply does not want to admit that yes they used dioxin, a cancer causing substance on soldiers, and yes it is causing cancer. It was not properly researched in the first place and now veterans are paying for that with their lives. I don't know how many lives must be lost before changes are made. Changes must come in the VA. One internal problem in the VA is the obvious understaffing. When claims take literally six months or more to be decided it is not hard to see there is obviously not enough staff on hand to deal with the growing number of sick veterans. I have mentioned that the court ruled the VA demands an unreasonable amount of proof in granting benefits to the veteran. This must be legally changed. The very foundation in which the VA bases their decision to compensate veterans is the Ranch Hand Study. I have shown that study to be extremely flawed yet this is the determinant for so many veterans. The courts should step in since our lawmakers aren't and give the veterans the necessary relief they deserve. As a member of the AO Vets web ring I learned the very definition of patriotic Americans. The men and women members were extremely active on diverse issues in this country. Often I would learn the daily news on my email before I had a chance to read it in the paper. The theory of collective action is widely used by the veterans. They are uniting together and trying to inform anyone who will listen to help change current policy. These men and women have been hurt badly by the lawmakers and the VA yet they push for change democratically. They have the name and phone number of their senator and congressman and correspond on a regular basis lobbying for change and recognition in AO related issues and a great deal of other issues Americans should care about. Unfortunately change is coming too slow for too

many veterans and their families. They are having to fight tooth and nail to be heard from their state and federal representatives. They don't give up even on days they are sick. I learned what it is to be an American by listening to our veterans. I only hope I can use this study to open the eyes of those who are in the dark about the pain our Vietnam Vets and their families are facing. That would make it a valuable study.