

Suffer the Little Children

WHEN YOU look at her baby pictures, it looks as if a small landslide had crossed Brandie Schieb's tiny face.

She was born without eyelids or cheekbones, with a high palate and a damaged jaw. She is also partially deaf, but normal in every other way.

Her dad, Hank, was a Navy door gunner in the Mekong Delta in Vietnam. He didn't pay much attention to the orange powder. Mix it with water, he was told. Spread it around.

For more than a decade, the government has argued that no one can prove conclusively that Agent Orange, a deadly herbicide used as a defoliant in Vietnam, caused birth defects in veterans' kids and disease and death in vets themselves.

That's true. There is no absolute proof. But, did the soldiers ask for proof positive that the war was right or winnable before they fought it? Will history forgive us if we err on the side of compassion?

This week was a landmark one in the long and intricate Agent Orange case, often as controversial as the war itself. The last hurdle was dissolved and final arrangements are being made to start issuing checks to vets and their families from the \$240 million settlement. A portion of that fund will be doled out to kids like Brandie. There are 64,000 of them.

In a few weeks, Brandie will be 9 years old. Unlike so many others, she has a lot to celebrate with her family in Winstead, Conn. A medical Michelangelo has completed the first of several operations to rebuild her face. He made cheekbones from her ribs and gave her artificial eyelids. She can blink with the best of them, and with her hearing aid, she doesn't miss a beat. Her parents and her kid brother adore her.



Her intelligence sparkles. She says she wants to be a ballerina or an acrobat.

Brandie has been lucky. Medical miracles aren't cheap. Brandie's dad says, "If it weren't for people like Frank McCarthy, I would be in jail because I would have robbed a bank. She was going to have her operations, one way or another."

For a decade, Frank McCarthy, a Vietnam vet, has been fighting for kids like Brandie and their fathers, who were exposed to Agent Orange.

He is president of Vietnam Veterans Agent Orange Victims, Inc., in Stamford, Conn. His organization will administer the slice of the \$240 million settlement pie these kids will share with other social welfare programs for vets—at most \$32 million. A judge will decide the amount.

SO, THE GOOD NEWS IS THE KIDS are finally going to get some money. The bad news is it won't be nearly enough. Brandie's surgeries alone have cost hundreds of thousands of dollars.

I'd like to say that without the help of America, these kids are doomed," says McCarthy. "You saw Brandie, one child, today. There are 64,000 others. We need help from corporate America. We need help from everybody."

Incredibly, corporate America has yet to donate anything to Frank McCarthy's organization. It is not a glamor issue, only a moral one. Checks, wheelchairs, prosthetic devices, these kids can use it all. Frank raises money in Brandie's name to help all children. Sometimes it is a lonely and overwhelming struggle. But the thought of Brandie's progress keeps him going.

"She never smiled before," he says. "She smiles now. It runs a chill up my back." To help, contact "Brandie Schieb Children's Fund," Vietnam Veterans Agent Orange Victims, Inc., 205 Main St., Stamford, Conn. 06901. Call 1-800-521-0198. (In Conn., 1-800-228-5840).

Next Sunday: What vets can expect.

Welcome Home is a weekly column about coming to terms with the Vietnam War. Send questions to Laura Palmer, Daily News, 220 E. 43rd St., N.Y., N.Y. 10017.