

# The Dilution of Dioxin

by John Freiberger III

Like most of you, my foremost experience with dioxin is connected to the herbicide sprayings used during the Vietnam War. An original encounter with that defoliation program began as a naive question. The response was enlightening. But, afterwards there was a gut wrenching feeling deep inside my brooding, introspective psyche. It played itself out as an intuitive warning being broadcast as a storm alert for approaching danger. My conscience told me that if something bad hadn't happened, it was about to.

I landed at Ton Son Nhut in the wee hours of 1966. After stepping off a commercial airliner, an official Air Force vehicle transported me to Camp Alpha. During the ride through the Saigon base, we passed a secured area. Inside the fence stood three green C-123's parked on a tarmac island. One caught my attention for it looked as though the aircraft was suffering with a bad case of measles, as marked by the sudden and violent eruption of distinct red squares appearing all over its body. The unusual sight prompted me to ask for an explanation. My airman escort replied that I had just seen "Patches", the most shot at aircraft belonging to the organization responsible for the defoliation operation of South Vietnam. The red spots, he continued, were actually raw chromated bullet hole patches applied by airframe mechanics who had little time to match color schemes between air time missions. Hence, the blank sheet metal squares became an accumulative set of war time decorations commemorating both the nickname and endurance of the airplane.

The information about a new form of counter insurgency stayed with me during my movements throughout the Central Highlands. In the ensuing year, I was agonized by horrible headaches and witnessed the mysterious manifestations of giant puss infected pimples overtaking the backs of some of my peers. No one connected the maladies to the dispensing of Agent Orange from overhead. Even if there had been a rational complaint, the allegation would probably have been dismissed as inconclusive when compared to the brute force disclosure by the commanding officer of Operation Ranch Hand.

A special feature publication, on the air war in Vietnam, mistakenly squelched any safety issues concerning Agent Orange. For a short article describing Ranch Hand, which appeared in the November 1966 issue of *Flying* magazine, Major Ralph Dresser told the writer that; "The VC tell the peasants that our spray is a deadly poison. But I'm going to show you that it isn't." He stuck his finger under one of the spigots on a dispenser drum and licked off the oily stuff. It tastes like kerosene with chemical overtones - not

good, but hardly a deadly poison unless you drink it, which nobody is likely to do."

My tenure with the American armed services dissipated after a single tour in Vietnam. I closed out the decade of the sixties as a brand new, happily married civilian. During the seventies, my wife and I decided to raise a family. Our first child was dead on arrival. The pediatrician officially classified the infant as a still birth. A few years later, my wife miscarried a pregnancy during the intervening period separating the births of our first two sons. By the time the early eighties rolled around, we were mutually overwrought with anxiety after notification that two out of our three sons would require extra help to overcome their learning deficiencies. Hindsight and suspicion soon convinced me that an earlier exposure to Agent Orange was indeed affecting my entire family. However, there was no way to confirm the fear for genetic and family counseling services were not available to former service persons and spouses who felt as though their lives had been interrupted by dioxin.

Surprisingly enough, tens of thousands of other Vietnam era veterans and family members shared the same feeling. They banded together in 1979 to commence a class action suit charging the United States government and a major portion of the chemical industry with the deaths and dreadful injuries inflicted on those individuals who came in contact with the herbicides used during the war in Southeast Asia. After five years of numerous motions and extensive discovery a voluntary settlement was reached on the eve of the trial. In retrospect, this product liability case was one of the most complex litigations ever brought before the courts.

Grumblings of disappointment still linger with many of the plaintiffs. They were never really able to establish the required proof of causality between the illnesses and the corresponding dosage of dioxin received in an exposure to Agent Orange. Supposedly, there never existed a sufficient knowledge base for the biological, chemical, medical, epidemiological, and genetic sciences to establish a cause and effect relationship between the disease, disability, and death of a veteran much less the catastrophic poly genetic birth defects afflicting their children. Moreover, they were told that the diseases referred to may result from causes other than dioxin poisoning.

As to the poisonous nature of dioxin and its ability to cause harm to mammals, including homo sapiens, there was no doubt. Over and over, the court iterated that the form of dioxin implicated in Agent Orange is a dangerous, stable, and long lasting chemical.

Over the last few years there have been several attempts, by U.S. government agencies and scientists working for industry, to downplay the significance of dioxin as a threat to human health. The most recent attempt was announced in May of 1991 by the Environmental Protection Agency wherein it was stated that the EPA was beginning a year long review to develop "a new formal opinion on the risks of dioxin." By mid August of 1991, EPA administrator William Reilly not only informed the *New York Times* about the study, but also suggested how it would turn out: "I don't want to prejudge the issue, but we are seeing new information on dioxin that suggests a lower risk assessment for dioxin should be applied."

The next day the *Times* ran an editorial praising federal officials for "sensibly considering new evidence that could lead to the relaxation of the current standards." And three days later the newspaper published a second story that began, "Dioxin, once thought of as the most toxic chemical known, does not deserve that reputation, according to many scientists." The article never mentioned any of the "many scientists" by name.

Some individuals and groups monitoring the situation therefore have stated that the issue has been obscured and that the corresponding science has been manipulated. In his seething response to the August 16<sup>th</sup>, 1991 *New York Times* editorial entitled "Downgrading Dioxin", Congressman Ted Weiss charged: "Readers should know that the paper mill industry, which manufactures dioxin as an unwanted by product of chlorination, is engaged in a campaign to weaken state and Federal dioxin regulations, and much of the misinformation being spread about the so-called safety of dioxin comes from industry."

This controversy has two simple elements. On one side, opponents to any new regulations argue that there is a posed threat of cancer to people who eat a great deal of fish caught downstream from the mills. They also contend that the sludge from the mills presents a significant cancer risk when used as a compost on crop lands. They have found detectable levels of dioxin in milk cartons and other bleached paper products that come in contact with food. Overall, they are calling for the complete elimination of dioxin from the pulp and paper making process.

Proponents for the reassessment, on the other hand, claim that all government estimates covering the risks of dioxin are much stricter than those of any other industrialized country in the world. According to estimates published by the Food and Drug Administration, the risks of cancer to Americans from all foods consumed from bleached paper containers over a lifetime is about 2.4 per million. The cancer risk from dioxin in milk cartons ranges from 0.22 to 0.55 per million. But the current standard of the EPA's assessment includes a safety factor. Its calculations increase the estimates of the cancer causing potential of dioxin by a factor of 10.

The completion date for the EPA study is almost at hand. If the dilution of dioxin is successful, it may well diminish the demand for fair compensation to the Vietnam era veterans and others exposed to high levels of dioxin and related chemical compounds.

It is important that the public including Vietnam era veterans continue to pursue this issue. While it is important that experts study the dioxin issue, it is the citizens who have to live with the consequences. Exactly how dioxin behaves in a living cell, test tube or incinerator are scientific questions. What level of dioxin is acceptable in herbicide sprayings or from a smokestack, or allowable in the food chain, are societal questions that should ultimately be determined by the public.

Elsewhere in this newsletter is a blank petition disseminated by VVA's own point man on Agent Orange. The supplication is a request for an oversight hearing on the EPA's reassessment of dioxin toxicity.

Readers are encouraged to remove the form and solicit supportive signatures. Completed petitions must be received, as soon as possible, by the respective governmental leaders. Ideally, the petitions should be mailed before May 15<sup>th</sup>. Realistically, the imposed deadline can be extended through August 14<sup>th</sup>, 1992.

Somebody once told Mother Theresa that her work was just a mere drop in the ocean. She quipped responsively in a philosophical demeanor; "Without that drop the ocean would not be full." Add to this perspective the statement made by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. that; "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere," and you have the set of beliefs that are part of the driving force behind this writer's purpose. He senses the Vietnam era experience with Agent Orange to be a flagship concern for all environmental issues.

Certainly Vietnam era veterans and their families are the largest, single most segment of American society ever exposed to a toxic substance. They have suffered, from health related injuries caused by dioxin exposure, in far greater numbers than those accounted for in any current standards. If their experience is eliminated as case studies in a statistical population or if the exposure experience, of any nonmilitary entity that may serve as a control comparison, is abolished then the toxic threat of dioxin will merely float away in a backwash of history.

WE, THE UNDERSIGNED VIETNAM VETERANS, THEIR SUPPORTERS, AND HONEST AMERICANS, WHOM HAVE BEEN POISONED BY DIOXIN OR COULD BE POISONED BY DIOXIN REQUEST A FULL AND FAIR OVERSIGHT HEARING ON THE DIOXIN REASSESSMENT OF EPA. WE BELIEVE OUR LIVES AND PARTICULARLY THE LIVES OF OUR CHILDREN DEPEND ON THIS HONEST OVERSIGHT OF DIOXIN. WE REQUEST THAT THESE PETITIONS BE SENT TO THE FOLLOWING ADDRESSES:

*Representative Ted Weiss  
House Government Operations  
Subcommittee on Human Resources  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Room B - 372  
Rayburn House Office Bldg.  
Washington, D.C. 20515*

*President of the United States  
The White House  
Washington, D.C. 20500*

NAME

ADDRESS

1.	_____	_____
2.	_____	_____
3.	_____	_____
4.	_____	_____
5.	_____	_____
6.	_____	_____
7.	_____	_____
8.	_____	_____
9.	_____	_____
10.	_____	_____
11.	_____	_____
12.	_____	_____
13.	_____	_____
14.	_____	_____
15.	_____	_____