

# Vietnam Agent Orange widow knows dioxin's dangers firsthand



Gazette photo by F. BRIAN FERGUSON

Although he didn't die on the battlefield, Janet Oxley believes her husband's death earlier this month can be traced to his service in the Vietnam War.

By Ken Ward Jr.  
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Janet Oxley keeps the American flag that draped her husband's coffin on a shelf in the living room of her Nitro home.

Bob Oxley died Jan. 9 of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. He was 47.

Janet Oxley believes the disease was caused by dioxin in the Agent Orange her husband was exposed to during his time as a sergeant in the U.S. Army Special Forces in Vietnam.

The United States sprayed 12 million gallons of Agent Orange containing 375 pounds of dioxin between 1965 and 1971 to remove the dense jungle cover that protected the North Vietnamese army.

"Bob said they'd go to sleep at night and wake up covered with wet stuff and the next day the leaves were gone," Mrs. Oxley said.

"They said it was just a chemical to remove the leaves so they could see the enemy," Mrs. Oxley said. "They were told it wasn't harmful to them."

Twenty-four years after the spraying of Agent Orange was halted, the federal government now admits the herbicide was harmful.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs agreed in late 1993 to pay Oxley about \$2,000 a month under a program that compensates Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange.

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## Agent Orange

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In May 1989, a federal judge in California ordered VA to pay benefits to veterans for any disease for which the scientific evidence shows there is a "significant statistical association" with exposure to dioxin.

As of Jan. 13 of this year, 2,653 Americans were receiving government payments for health problems the VA blames on their exposure to Agent Orange and other Vietnam-era herbicides that contained dioxin.

The VA provides benefits to veterans who are diagnosed as having non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, soft-tissue sarcoma, Hodgkin's disease, a liver disorder called porphyria cutanea tarda and the chloracne, a skin disease.

In June 1994, VA Secretary Jesse Brown added multiple myeloma and respiratory cancers to

the list of diseases for which veterans must receive compensation.

Mrs. Oxley, several veterans and veterans advocates called The Charleston Gazette last week to complain after Gov. Gaston Caperton was quoted as saying no one had ever been made sick or killed by dioxin.

"Caperton doesn't know what kind of horrible deaths these [Vietnam veterans] are going through," Mrs. Oxley said. "It's not like they were shot on the battlefield. It's a slow death."

Gloria Nichols, a veterans affairs officer with the state Division of Veterans Affairs, said her office has been swamped with veterans who are upset with Caperton's comments.

"This man is crazy," Nichols said. "I have several clients who are really irate."

Government officials say no concrete state-by-state statistics are available, but Nichols believes Agent Orange-related health problems are a major concern among the Mountain State's Vietnam veterans.

Caperton's comments came in response to continued questions about possible health problems from dioxin that would be released into the Ohio River by the proposed Mason County pulp mill. It has been estimated that the plant would release an ounce of dioxin over a 10-year period.

During a public appearance in December, the governor repeated his stance that the mill will meet all state and federal environmental standards.

Caperton then added that,

"There is no recorded death or sickness I am aware of or anybody has ever been able to show me from dioxin," according to The Associated Press.

The Affiliated Construction Trades Foundation has begun running television spots that feature Adm. Elmo Zumwalt Jr., former commander of U.S. naval forces in Vietnam, discussing his own son's 1988 cancer death blamed on Agent Orange exposure.

Jill Wilson, Caperton's press secretary, said the governor made his comments only in the context of dioxin emissions from the proposed \$1.1 billion Parsons & Whittemore Inc. pulp mill.

On Friday, Caperton told the Charleston Rotary Club that the hundreds of pounds of dioxin dumped on Vietnam and the amount that would be produced by the plant "are as different as night and day."

"That plant is as technically advanced as a plant can be," the governor said. "There's no detectable dioxin that leaves that plant. It's totally untrue what they're saying in those ads."

Dioxin, one of a family of highly toxic chemicals known as organochlorines, would be formed by the chlorine dioxide pulp bleaching process Parsons & Whittemore proposes to use.

A draft of a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency reassessment of dioxin released last year concluded that most Americans may already be exposed to levels of dioxin that could cause cancer, reproductive disorders and birth defects.