Rediscovering Vietnam: Agent Orange's effects

The Vietnam War was the undeclared war, the television war, a controversial war in which 2.5 million Americans fought and 58,000 died during battles that pitted the U.S.-backed South against the Communist North. On April 30, 1975, the South surrendered, and the war was over. Every year, numerous Vietnamese are maimed or killed by unexploded American ordinance - bombs, mines and other ammunition from the war that are still embedded in the earth, according to the Vietnamese and others.

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Thirty years later, Post-Dispatch reporter Ron Harris and photographer Andrew Cutraro are visiting Vietnam, a nation that has changed dramatically since the departure of American troops.

Tuesday: The view from St. Louis. Vietnam veterans and Vietnamese who fled the war talk about its impact on them.

Thirty years after the fall of Saigon, the Vietnam War is a distant - though painful - memory for most people here, just as it is for tens of thousands of American families.

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"It's a very big problem here," said Dr. Ross Bernays, an Australian who moved to Vietnam two years ago to practice medicine. "It seems like every month you're reading about someone who has been hurt by a bomb.

"It's mostly children who find them and don't know what they have and start playing with it and get hurt. Either that or it's farmers who find them, and then try to defuse it so they can sell the metal. They think they know what they're doing, but they don't."

To halt the continued casualties of a war that ended three decades ago, the Vietnamese government and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund have partnered for a program called Project Renew. The purpose of the 4-year-old project is to educate Vietnamese about the bombs and mines while also trying to recover as many as possible.

Chuck Searcy, a Vietnam veteran, is the organization's representative in Vietnam.

This month, Project Renew concluded an effort in the Quang Tri province. In just six months, the Vietnamese recovered 2,300 bombs, mines and other explosives, Searcy said. Recently, while building a fish pond, villagers came across a cache of 674 rounds of 37mm ammunition.

Agent Orange's effects

The most contentious of the war's remnants are the former Vietnamese soldiers and civilians affected by the chemical Agent Orange and other toxins that the United States sprayed across the southern half of the country to kill the foliage that the enemy used for cover. They say that not only have their lives been affected, but their wounds have been passed on to their offspring in deformed, broken children.

At Friendship Village, a school, treatment and training center about 30 miles south of Hanoi established by a U.S. veteran of the war, 110 children and grandchildren of veterans are being treated for a variety of ailments.

There are 23-year-old men the size of toddlers, scores of severely brain-damaged children and others with debilitating deformities: gnarled limbs, bulbous eyes, legs that were attached at birth and were later surgically separated.

Last week, Do Duc Duu, 58, cradled the misshapen head of his paralyzed daughter as he helped attendants move her body. Because of water on the brain, she cannot move half her body. She was scheduled for her third operation for the condition the next day to relieve the pressure.

Do knew the American planes had dropped a chemical, but he had no idea of the effects. It wasn't until after the war when 12 pregnancies ended in either miscarriages or deaths of the children shortly after birth that he began to realize the damage. He has one healthy daughter, 30, who was born before he enlisted, and two deformed children. The other child, at home, can't speak or hear.

Nong Van Thuong is one of the 40 veterans being treated at the Friendship Village. Every four months, the facility rotates 40 different veterans through treatment and observation. Nong was in Quang Tri, he said, when the plane flew overhead and dropped a chemical.

"I remember there were two smells," said Nong, 57. "The first one went right to the top of my brain, and the other was a good smell."

After the war, he got married. All four of his children were stillborn.

"The first baby had no head," he said. "The second baby had no hands. The third baby had no legs. The fourth had no head, no hands, no legs."

At one point, he thought the fault lay with his wife and considered divorcing her because he wanted to have children, he said. Ultimately, he realized that he was the problem.

Ly Duc Minh, 56, said he was also at Quang Tri. He was driving a truck carrying food when the aircraft flew overhead and dropped the chemical on him.

He has four children. Three of them, he said, went to school for four years, but for some reason, they couldn't learn anything. The fourth one is brain-damaged, and his muscles won't develop properly. Like the other veterans, he said he suffers skin lesions and once he began bleeding from his eyes, ears and nose.

"What can I do?"

Nguyen Van Thuong, a 56-year-old farmer from Quang Tri Province, says he was at the scene when an American plane dropped a chemical on his home. He said he was also driving a truck carrying food when the aircraft flew overhead and dropped the chemical on him.

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With so much suffering visited upon them and their families, one would expect Ly, Nong and Do to harbor an intense bitterness toward Americans, but they don’t.

"I’m not angry at Americans, but I’m mad at the American government and the company that made Agent Orange," Do said. "Now I know I can’t have any children. What can I do?"

Nong said as he has grown older, he has accepted the fact that he can’t have children.

"But even now I get angry because this not only affected me, but generation after generation of families," he said. "I was a soldier. I was prepared to die or be injured. But why must my wife and my (unborn) children suffer all these years after the war is over?"

"The (U.S.) government must be responsible. It should come back to clear the land and give the veterans some help."

Some Vietnamese are seeking redress. They filed a lawsuit in U.S. courts against the makers of Agent Orange, but a judge in New York threw it out last month, saying the plaintiffs didn’t have a valid claim.

Dr. Phan Thi Phi, a professor of medicine at Hanoi Medical University, is part of the lawsuit.

"Unfortunately, I don’t think the United States will ever accept the relationship between Agent Orange and the effects on the Vietnamese people," Phan, 70, said while sitting in a hotel lobby in Hanoi with American friends.

"And that’s ironic because the Veterans Affairs has already compensated the U.S. veterans for Agent Orange and they were only exposed for one year. These people lived there for five years, six years, 10 years."

"They know there is a link, but they just won’t accept it."

In 1991, President George Bush signed a bill calling for compensation for American veterans exposed to Agent Orange.

Phan said from 1966 to 1971 she was the director of a hospital in South Vietnam near the Ho Chi Minh Trail, a route used by North Vietnamese forces to infiltrate the South and move supplies.

"At that time, we didn’t know anything about the impact," said Phan, who has been studying the effects of Agent Orange for 18 years. "So, we ate the cassava and other vegetables and drank the water and washed in the stream."

Before the war, Phan had a daughter, a doctor who is currently on a three-month medical exchange program in Colorado. After the war, Phan had four miscarriages, she said. The fourth was so severe, she said, that she and her husband decided to stop trying to have children.

"And there were a lot of women like me," she said.

President's on Vietnam:

So, when the United States votes $400 million to help that war, we're not voting for a giveaway program. We're voting for the cheapest way that we can prevent the occurrence of something that would be the most terrible significance to the United States of America.
- President Dwight Eisenhower, Aug. 4, 1953

These people who say we ought to withdraw from Vietnam are wholly wrong, because if we withdrew from Vietnam, the communists would control Vietnam, pretty soon Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, Malaysia, would go, and all of Southeast Asia would be under control of the communists and the domination of the Chinese.
- President John Kennedy, Sept. 2, 1963

If this little nation goes down the drain and can’t maintain its independence, ask yourself what's going to happen to all the other little nations?
- President Lyndon Johnson, Aug. 2, 1965

If the United States now were to throw in the towel and come home, and the communists took over South Vietnam, then all over Southeast Asia, all over the Pacific, in the Mideast, in Europe, in the world, the United States would suffer a blow, and peace, because we are the great peacekeeping nation in the world because of our power, would suffer a blow from which it would not recover.