

Narratives of war and Agent Orange spraying

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*When they saw green leaves, the sprayed again to destroy the greenness and turn the areas into bare land...
They sprayed so that we had to follow them as we had nothing to eat.*

This chapter is based on interviews with people who were exposed to Agent Orange during the war, either directly or indirectly through contaminated food and water. Their memories of war seemed to be sharp and clear: battles fought and bombs, other explosives and chemicals deployed by the enemy to kill and destroy were described in great detail. From the war narratives we include here mainly the parts describing the context in which the spraying took place and how it was experienced by the soldiers, guerrilla fighters and volunteers¹ as well as by civilians. Some are told by men now living in Nam Dinh Province in the north of the country, who were soldiers in the South during the war. Others are told by volunteers and civilians who during the war lived in and are still living in Quang Nam Province in the centre where spraying was extremely intense over several years.

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed soon after by the researcher who did

the interview and then translated into English by a professional translator. The quotations in the text are taken *verbatim* from the translated transcriptions. They are shortened and sometimes the order between sentences has been changed in order to make the reading easier, without changing the interviewee's meaning. Explanations of special events, expressions and persons referred to in the interviews are given in footnotes.

Narratives of former soldiers living in Y Yen District, Nam Dinh Province

Mr Tam

I went to the war zone B2², in Tay Ninh in the south. In 1968 the enemy was trying to capture us, our military command and the guards...The enemy sprayed toxic chemicals in Tay Ninh, making all the leaves fall down from the trees. It was the period when they launched the Operation Junction City³ and I was there. But

¹ 'Soldier' here is understood as a person enrolled in the regular army (men from all over Vietnam enrolled in the North Vietnamese army as well as in the Southern Liberation troops; few women took part), a person who took part as a guerrilla soldier (both women and men; often local people) and a person who was a volunteer (most of them young women from North Vietnam).

² War zone B2 was the military denomination for an area north and northwest of Saigon.

³ Operation Junction City was a US led attempt to search out and destroy the National Liberation Front (NLF) headquarters, which the Americans thought were in Tay Ninh province and near the Cambodian border. The operation which was the largest during the war, involved four US division plus Saigon forces. It began on 22 February 1967 and lasted until 14 May 1967. The US and Saigon forces

they failed to capture Viet Cong⁴, they failed to capture madam Dinh⁵. They withdrew and our liberation troops returned and stayed there... The area was covered by Le tree forests that were all defoliated. The greenery almost disappeared, except the Tung quan and Toi troi trees. The Toi troi was the tree that could stand up against the toxic chemical; all the rests, big and small died... In 1969 when Uncle Ho⁶ died, I was still there. Five Dakota⁷ planes were spraying chemicals. They enemy used loudspeakers to make the communist forces surrender. They said 'your president has died, your leader is no more. Come quickly to the Le Xuan road and surrender. There is a station there to welcome you'. Then the five Dakota planes came back again spraying toxic chemicals. The whole forest went black. We could hardly breath. We soaked towels into soap water and our own urine to cover our mouth and nose. Our eyes were stung by the smoke. We ate and drank of the polluted food and water during the 8 years

in the area. Everything was imbued with the toxic chemicals...

After the spraying the enemy troops put on gas masks and then they attacked us. This was a good time for them to make the attack and prevent us from going underground. We were provided with gas masks for our march from the north to the south. But the masks were made of nylon cloth and not so useful. We had to throw them away after one year, so in the end we did not have any gas masks. They sprayed the chemicals directly over our heads. The planes were flying very low as our unit were marching on the side of Dong Nai river. The whole unit was affected, and within one year many soldiers from this unit had died. Only a few like me survived.

Four other survivors had gathered in the house of Mr Huynh when we visited him and his family in Y Yen district. When we entered his home, Huyen himself was lying in bed, motionless and receiving an intravenous liquid. Half sitting, half lying on a mattress on the floor was a totally atrophied boy of around fifteen, keeping his big, intense eyes on us but without saying a word. This boy turned out to be Huyen's son. The situation seemed very sad and we felt uncertain whether to stay or leave the house but Huyen's friends assured that he would soon be all right. While waiting, they suggested that we interview them too, as they had been comrades in arms and had similar experiences that they wanted to share. So we spent the whole morning listening to the four men's highly emotional and detailed narratives of the war and what had happened to them afterwards. These are selected parts from two of the interviews, describing the chemical spraying in the war zone

engaged in three battles but did not find or destroy the NFL/North Vietnamese Army base. (Annotation by Lady Borton in *Le Cao Dai*, 2004)

⁴ The expression 'Viet Cong' meaning Vietnamese Communist was an American name for any Vietnamese regarded as their enemy.

⁵ Madam Dinh; Nguyen Thi Dinh (1920-1992) was born in Ben Tre province in the South of Vietnam. Fighting against the French as well as the American occupation, she was one of the NLF founders. She formulated the expression 'long haired army' describing the women's presence and contributions in the liberation struggle.

⁶ 'Uncle Ho' (Bac Ho) or Ho Chi Minh was the president of Vietnam 1945-1969 and chairman of the Vietnam Communist Party (1930-1969). 'Bac' is used to address an elderly (and/or respected) person in family and society.

⁷ This is most likely not the correct name of the plane. In most cases the type of plane used by the US to spray the herbicides was the C-123. (Annotations by Lady Borton in *Le Cao Dai*, 2004). The Dakota planes (or C-47) were mainly used for transports but served also for 'flying ground attack, reconnaissance and psychological warfare missions' (website: www.wpafb.mil/modern_flight US Air Force Museum).

in Central Vietnam, including the battle of Hue and the dramatic Têt offensive in 1968:

Mr Huynh

I belonged to group of combatants directly facing the enemy for many years, from 1968 until the withdrawal of the US from Vietnam... My army unit stayed in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Hue. At that time I was in a main force unit. So wherever the enemy was, we went too. I took part in all major campaigns in Quang Tri and Thua Thien Hue. We were fighting face to face with enemy without giving up. After the general offensive and occupation of many cities and towns⁸, the enemy resorted to chemical weapons to kill everything... They used poisonous shells and bullets to fire onto our positions, and war planes sprayed chemical on us. Some times we overran enemy positions, but sometimes our men in position were all killed. It was not only our men who got affected but also the soil and water...The water resources were heavily polluted. After losing the battle in the city of Hue, the enemy mobilized all their troops, American and puppet⁹ troops to try to retake the city. They also used chemical weapons of different types including many types generating smoke. Because our positions were on the heights with fog all year round, we did not know when the enemy dropped chemical. We only knew that enemy planes were flying over and threw out a white substance. After that, the big trees died, and so did small trees. The whole battlefield was bald. Such places were A Luoi, Phong Dien, Phu Loc, Rice Delivery hill, Coc Bai area, Binh Dien, Ta Luong¹⁰. Many hills

⁸ Mr. Huynh is referring to the Tet Offensive 1968.

⁹ Expression used by the political leadership in the North and the NLF/PRG to illustrate the dependency of the Saigon troops on the US military and economic support.

¹⁰ All places named by Mr. Huynh are in the area of Quang Tri and Thua Thien Hue provinces.

in A Luoi were full of the chemicals. We had tried to go to some hills but it was impossible. I very often saw planes spraying chemicals that came out from the sides of the wings with white substance mingled in the cloud...

Mr Vui

After three months of training, I went to the battlefield in Binh Tri Thien¹¹, and areas around Hue city. On the marching to the south, we were confronted with lots of Agent Orange sprayed by US war planes. We got gas masks. But at that time the gas masks were very clumsy with a very long trunk, like the trunk of elephant, hanging behind. At first we were unaware of the danger and did not put on the gas masks. We all had our eyes filled with tears. Those who were heavily affected were coughing blood. At that time we did not know it was poisonous Agent Orange. We only knew they were spraying chemicals.... We fought fierce battles defeating many US and Pak Chung Hy¹² troops. They started to destroy our positions and used planes and helicopters to spray chemicals to kill our troops. We fought the battles in Hue city during the Tet Mau Than¹³. That was the heaviest battles in the south at the time. After the US setback in 1968, they concentrated their forces to make counter attacks. They used up to 500 helicopters, flying in large formations, using flares to light up in

¹¹ In 2005 Binh Tri Thien province is the three provinces of Quang Binh, Quang Tri and Thua Thien Hue all situated just north and south of the 17th parallel.

¹² The name of the former Prime Minister of South Korea.

¹³ Tet Mau Than was the New Year (Tet) in February 1968 when battles took place all over South Vietnam including Saigon, also called the 'Tet Offensive'. It was the first major direct confrontation between the US troops and their allies and the liberation forces. Human losses were large on both sides and the offensive laid the ground for an agreement on peace negotiations starting in Paris the same year

search for our troops. If any of our units failed to make good camouflages we were found. Then they poured bombs and shells over us. Red rays of bullets were killing many of the liberation troops...

The chemical they sprayed looked like the morning mist in the North during cold season...and all the trees died along the Truong Son Trail. After the spraying the enemy dropped napalm bombs all days and nights to burn down the rest of the trees...I thought in my mind that death was certain. Few returned back alive...Now we are back...but our life is very miserable

(Mr Vuu cried and kept silent for a while). We realize that the US poisonous agent is very cunning. At first, when we gave birth to our children, they looked very good and handsome like little cherubs. But later they turn into this...*(pointing at Mr Huynh's sick child)*. Few babies are born with disabilities, the disease develops after a certain time.

Mr Phong, also living in Y Yen district, joined the army some years later than the men above. He came to the same area that they had been to in Quang Nam – DaNang, now completely devastated by the chemical spraying and with containers with residues of some chemical substances scattered all over the place:

Mr Phong

I joined the army in 1972. I fought in Quang Nam-DaNang battlefield. When we arrived, all trees and forest were burned down. We found containers of toxic chemicals lying scattered. When the enemy's artillery shot at the containers or bombs hit the containers, they exploded and a substance flew all over...it was yellowish. No-one knew what substance it was. The containers lay scattered ... When I moved to the Central Highlands, the situation was the same. The forest

was all burned down. The containers were broken emitting that kind of substance. We soldiers hit the containers by accident and the containers broke. We breathed that substance and tears came into our eyes and our noses were running. At that time we soldiers did not know anything about that chemical. Later, we were told that they contained toxic chemicals. We drunk water which ran through those containers. I was injured in 1974 and I stayed in the forest until 1975. Then I moved down to the plain. When we stayed in the jungle, all trees and vegetable were destroyed. They sprayed chemicals and gasoline to burn down forest.

We were given a small box which contained a syringe and a cloth. They told us to use them whenever we faced toxic chemical. But they were not effective. Before going to the battlefield, we soldiers were given two ampoules as big as our finger and a cloth. If we were in a polluted environment, we had to use the cloth soaked with the liquid from the two ampoules and breath through it. This was the only preventive measure. But the substance was already in the air and we could not use it [the soaked cloth] all the time, we had to breath in the toxic air.

These three narrations of ex-combatants depict battles, weapons used, strategies deployed and the soldiers' attempts to protect themselves against the chemical spraying. After the war these men returned to their native land in the north. The narratives from people living in Hiep Duc district in Central Vietnam were very different. This area was heavily sprayed over several years, with the aim not only to defoliate the forest but to destroy crops for the civilian, thus forcing them to surrender to the enemy who were all around them. They still live in the same area where they were born and experienced the war. Some were children at that time and their

memories from the war are shrouded in feelings of fear and constant hunger:

Narratives of civilians living Hiep Duc District, Quang Nam Province

Ms. Tien

The American troops arrived when I was small. We had to stay in the underground shelter. The Americans concentrated all the villagers in one house. Girls had to stain their faces with yellow saffron to avoid being raped. Women and girls sat in the middle surrounded by old women. We were small and had to follow our mother and had to stay in the underground shelter all the time. My grand-parents also had to hide in the shelter. Others followed the enemy. At that time, it was very difficult for us to care for our sick mother. During the night we were sent out to seek medicines for her as we did not dare to go out during daytime... Liberation fighters told us to enter the underground shelters whenever they saw the enemy aircraft coming to drop bombs....

The enemy aircraft dropped many bombs. They dropped cannon bombs. People who were in the underground shelters only saw smoke and smelt the explosives. At that time, it was very hard to find food. For the whole month we only had some bags of rice, no salt. The liberation soldiers gave us some salt. The enemy aircraft also dropped chemicals. The colour was rosy... When I saw the spraying, I rushed out to look at it. My mother cried out for me. I saw the pink colour of the spraying. Then I did not know what it was. The plants and trees died. Later on, people re-planted trees in the village.

Mr Hoang

During the war I lived here, I was a child at that time, and I also joined the artistic group. I remember the years of 1967-1969 when the US

landed here from the other side of the mountain. I followed all of them... and asked for their food, and asked them whether they would go to our area. So if I knew that they would go somewhere, I informed the people there....They sprayed on the edge of the hill. First, two jet fighters came and then they sprayed. It was like fog and drizzle in the air, it was white and it was light pink in the tuber. They flew very low, if we came close, we were all wet. They sprayed a lot of toxic chemical here. Many trees died, such as the cassava in the hills. Therefore, the people here were hungry. The US bombed during the day time, so that people couldn't go to the field. We didn't have cassava to eat, the cassava died very soon after the toxic chemical was sprayed on them. We couldn't eat the cassava nor the sweet potatoes as the smell was so bad... They sprayed so that we had to follow them, as we had nothing to eat...

All trees that have latex died. Jackfruit trees, cassava, all died, and we were hungry. All the trees were defoliated... We ate everything that we found, for example tau bay plant. Tau bay plant doesn't have latex, so we boiled and ate with salt. All the trees with latex were affected, like human blood. Latex is similar to blood.

Interviewer: Did you worry when you had to eat those plants?

Mr. Hoang: I was small at that time, so I was not worried and ate all I could. I was hungry, so I ate everything... All other areas were the same, so we still had to eat and drink those plants and water. The water had no odour, but we couldn't eat the cassava or sweet potato, even if we were hungry... At that time, we didn't know what it was, we just called it the tree destroyer... [Now we know] that the Agent Orange ... affect the human body. And it gradually destroys our life. I

am also affected by it, my limbs are numbed and I cannot move the wrists. The doctors at the hospital said I was affected by Agent Orange.

While Ms Tien and Mr Hoang were too young to take active part in the war, Mr Lam and Mr Huu were a bit older when the war came to their native land. They choose different paths, one as guerrilla fighter, the other joining the 'puppet army':

Mr Lam

Before the war, in 1965, we were living here in this area...In 1966 and 1967 when the US troops mopped up this area, we had to seek refuge in the mountains. Otherwise we were here all the time, during the US bombing and fighting. It happened that we were hungry for months without any rice. We only lived from wild tree leaves...Later, in 1969, I joined the local guerrilla force to work as a nurse...The most fierce period was 1969-1970. The US bombing in this area was unbearable. The soil was all red earth because of bombs that ploughed it all up. It was hard to say which were the US dead bodies and which were the Vietnamese one...

During that time, we were living in the open air; the sky was our roof and the earth our sleeping mat. The local people here were in great difficulties. The poison was spread continuously, sometimes 3 days non-stop, sometimes 7 days non-stop. ...It was spread so much that the vegetables died and fell down and the pigs also died because they had nothing to eat. We were growing cassava for the pigs... We dug wells, but the US came and destroyed the wells. They even dropped bombs, tear gas and poison [on the water sources] on top of the mountain, we had no other way than to drink the water.

Mr Huu

In the past, during the wartime, I joined the 'puppet army'... At that time this area was a white belt region and was sprayed by toxic chemicals by the US army. Dakota aircrafts flew over the area and sprayed, the banana trees and cassava plants were all destroyed. The aircraft sprayed a grey, water-like substance from its two wings. Two days later all the plants and trees withered and became yellow... They sprayed once every two or three months. When they saw green leaves, they sprayed again to destroy the greenness and turn the areas into bare land...They also dropped phosphorous bombs; I myself was burnt by these bombs (*showed his burnt skin*).

Interviewer: Did the Saigon army know that these chemicals were poisonous?

Mr. Huu: Sure they did. Because before they sprayed, an aircraft went on an advance mission with an announcement saying that there were Cong San (communist soldiers) in the area and the allied forces would spray chemicals. When the chemicals were sprayed, cassava should not be eaten and had to be thrown away, they said. People had to evacuate to the mountains.

Interviewer: When the chemicals were sprayed, did you take any preventive measures?

Mr. Huu: No, I did not ...They sprayed and dropped napalm and phosphorous bombs first and then we had to go to the area after the bombing...I was worried [to go there], but I could not do anything. I was forced to go to the area as it was during the war and we did not dare to refuse the order ... We had to be very careful when we went to the area. They gave us a muffler made of cloth. But we could not stand it as it was filled with charcoal. We could only

stand it for a second or a minute but could not wear it the whole day...At that time, I did not know the effects [of the chemicals], only that they were toxic. When peace was restored, I came to know that our people and our country were affected by Agent Orange...I learnt that the residue of those toxic chemicals remain in our food and will remain for a long time...

The spraying took place in the midst of a fierce, generalized warfare and was but one of a multitude of aggressions and extreme hardships inflicted upon people. The airplanes spreading their soft mist over a distant, beautiful landscape have been shown in innumerable documentaries - 'it looked like the morning mist in the North during the cold season' one of the men said in a poetical metaphor. But when it reached its

An area of A Luoi district- where was sprayed Agent Orange/Dioxin

Photo: Source of CGFED



Interviewer: Are they still existing now?

Mr. Huu: Yes, on the other side of the mountain there is still a smell. If we dig for banana roots, we can still feel the smell as in the past.

Epilogue

The ten years of massive US spraying with Agent Orange and other chemicals over Vietnam represent one of the largest ecological disasters in history but there was no-one there to record and document what actually happened to people.

targets - people, trees, crops, animals, water sources - the effects were far from poetic.

The spraying missions constituted a massive, repeated onslaught on the environment and on all living beings over several years. Not only was the chemical spraying extremely effective in defoliating and destroying trees, it was equally effective in destroying crops and polluting water sources. Some of the crops simply died, like the cassava, depriving people and animals from important food sources. But most of the contaminated crops had to be used for

consumption as there was nothing else to eat. Had people known about the extreme toxicity of the chemical that imbued their environment, they would certainly have been extremely worried, but they still had to eat what they produced on the sprayed fields. The alternative was starvation.

The soldiers tried to protect themselves against the chemical spraying but their equipments were primitive: cloths soaked with urine or other liquid, 'gas masks' looking like elephant trunks which made noise and fell off. The civilians in Hiep Duc didn't have access even to these simple things. They hid in shelters during the bombings and parents tried to keep the children from running out to watch the spectacular sprayings. People inhaled the chemicals, got it directly on the skin, coughed, got blinded, and ate and drank the polluted foods and water, not once but over several years. As we have heard from the narratives, during the war there was little awareness of the potential harm of the chemicals. Had the leaders been aware of the risks, the protective equipment for both soldiers and civilians might have been more effective, but at that time few people had this knowledge.

Many people we talked to in Hiep Duc feared that there are still remainders of Agent Orange in containers scattered around in the mountains, containers that may be leaking but that no-one dares to or can afford to search for and remove. 'If we dig for banana roots, we can still feel the smell as in the past' as one man in Hiep Duc said. They worry that residues of dioxin are still in the soil and water, affecting their own health and that of their children.

Over thirty years have passed since the sprayings ended. Today we know that the quantities of dioxin, one of the most toxic chemical ever known, was perhaps four times higher than previously thought and enough to

kill the population of New York many times if put in their drinking water. Many of the Vietnamese on both sides, soldiers as well as civilians, who were directly or indirectly exposed to the chemical spraying during the war, are no longer alive. We will never know exactly how many have died or become sick due to the dioxin exposure, nor how many have been born with birth defects or other serious diseases caused by the sprayings. Failing large scale epidemiological studies in Vietnam that could shed light on some of these questions, the worries and rumours about the potential health effects of Agent Orange continue to spread. The people we have met, who already have a very hard life, have an added burden of feeling guilt that the poison that made them sick has also afflicted their children, and that the third and fourth generation also may also be affected.

Our research, as this Conference, are carried out in tribute of all those who have lost their lives as a consequence of the chemical warfare, and as an obligation towards the survivors. Let us make sure that this atrocious chemical warfare and the ecological and human disaster that followed is not forgotten. It should be meticulously documented and the information spread, so that people of all countries will know that this once happened and will stop it from happening again.

I want to add something more, I want to stress that we who are still alive do not want any more war in any place. Because wars are very barbarous, costing unthinkable losses of life and properties.

We are proud of our participation in the fight for the liberation of the country. But it is sad that many of our fellow soldiers have laid down their life in the war. And those who returned home brought along the consequences of the war...