



Faces of AGENT ORANGE

New York



James May

By Jim Belshaw

The May's story is brought to you by the Vietnam Veterans of Michigan.

Jim May sends four photographs of his infant grandson, Isaiah. The baby is blessed with large brown eyes and a face given to smiles — until the fourth photo appears, and one of those beautiful brown eyes disappears. In its place is an emptiness, a discolored pinkish tissue where the eye once was. In the other three photos, it is impossible to tell that the right eye is a prosthetic. The baby's real eye is gone.

“At nine months of age, he was diagnosed with retinoblastoma, cancer of the eye,” Jim said. “I happen to know that there are several people in this area (Buffalo, N.Y.) who are Vietnam vets whose grandchildren have had similar problems. He had the eye removed and now he has a prosthetic. He constantly has to be checked, every four months, to make sure it hasn't spread to the other eye. He also has asthma, which requires him to take medicine every day. We have no family history of anything like this before Isaiah. I haven't talked to the VA at all about him because they haven't done anything.”

He said he was going to try to get his grandson's doctor to post a note in his office saying anyone who is a Vietnam veteran with grandchildren suffering from problems similar to Isaiah's should contact Vietnam Veterans of America.

He has had other conversations with the VA, all of them concerning Agent Orange, which he is positive lies at the heart of Isaiah's cancer.

But before trying to get the VA to consider Isaiah, he had to get the VA to consider himself.

He served in the Navy and was classed as “blue water,” serving on a hospital ship off the coast of Danang. He says a good deal of his time was spent off the ship and either on the ground in Danang or in its harbor, which he says is polluted with dioxin even more heavily than the nearby shore.

“We were constantly up in Danang harbor and the Danang military zone where they were doing a lot of heavy spraying of Agent Orange,” he said. “They were even doing it in the harbor area. You'd be up on deck, and you could feel the stuff coming down. Helicopters would fly over and, all of a sudden, we'd get orders for a wash down. Nobody ever explained what it was.”

In 1969, shortly after he returned to civilian life, he experienced a rash breaking out on both legs. His legs became swollen and he had difficulty walking. He was driving a truck at the time and said that the difficulty he had with swollen legs caused him to use his



James May on the fantail of the USS Sanctuary AH-17, waiting for the helicopters to come in with the wounded.





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James May's Story Continued...

hands to move a leg from the accelerator to the truck's brake. He went to a civilian hospital to have his legs checked.

"I was in the hospital for like three months," he said. "They didn't really know what it was. They were doing all kinds of blood tests on me, but no one said anything about Agent Orange, and even I didn't make the connection at the time. But I've made the Agent Orange connection now because I proved that I was onshore. So they've sent the paperwork for Agent Orange testing, plus they asked for evidence of my having a rash within two years of being discharged."

Prior to this recent change in his situation, the VA wouldn't consider any connection to Agent Orange at all because he was classified as a "blue water" sailor and was not eligible for Agent Orange consideration. But he managed to find all of his medical and other Navy records from his time in Vietnam, and it was enough to persuade the VA to re-evaluate his case.

"I was a 'bosun's mate' too," he said. "I proved that I took the captain to and from the shore. The bosun's mate maintains and runs the shuttle craft to and from shore. When I was there, I'd help load supplies from a truck to the boat. For all intents and purposes, I was on the ground in Danang."

He said that, because he also has submitted a PTSD claim to the VA, the Agent Orange claim may take up to 18 months to resolve. He's 63 years old.

He believes the rash on his legs is only the beginning of his Agent Orange problems. In addition to his grandson's cancer of the eye, each of his two daughters have had problems with what doctors called "suspicious cells" in their uterus.

"They don't say it's cancer," he said.

"They just say 'suspicious' cells. This has been going on with both of my daughters. The same exact thing."

At the Louisville VVA convention, he addressed the gathering and made his argument about the distinction between "blue water" and other types of Naval service. ("I've never stood up and talked to 10 people, let alone almost 800, he said.")

As far as distinctions go, he sees none.

"If I had the chance, I'd tell the VA that blue water, brown water, blue air — it's all a crock. Anyone who was over there should be included in this Agent Orange fight, because it's carried by air, carried by water, and basically all of that stuff rolls downhill. All that contamination during the monsoon season would get washed right down to the harbors. We polluted the oceans over there. We polluted the harbors, the rivers, and the shore by spraying all that stuff. It's not just an in-country thing. They poisoned everybody."

He doesn't think he won the day with his argument, but he did return home with one particularly vivid memory. A VVA member running for office called to apologize because he wouldn't be able to attend the convention.

"He couldn't attend the convention because he was attending his grandson's surgery for retinoblastoma," Jim May said.

Significant numbers of Vietnam veterans have children and grandchildren with birth defects related to exposure to Agent Orange. To alert legislators and the media to this ongoing legacy of the war, we are seeking real stories about real people. If you wish to share your family's health struggles that you believe are due to Agent Orange/dioxin, send an email to mporter@vva.org or call 301-585-4000, Ext. 146.

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