

# RETURN TO

THROUGH A PROJECT ON THE LEGACY OF AGENT ORANGE, THE AUTHOR FINDS UNEXPECTED COMMON GROUND.

By Bill Mayer



Author Bill Mayer and Vietnamese Communist Party official Bui The Giang were on opposite sides of the Vietnam War.

In the 1960s, I flew in the Air Force out of Dover Air Force Base in Delaware as a first lieutenant. I was part of a cargo squadron flying C-124s, which came into service in the Korean War. The planes had four piston-driven engines, and we flew at 220 knots between 10,000 and 12,000 feet. Although they were slow and low, C-124s were very safe and never crashed (unless you hit something, like a mountain, or got shot down). Since these planes were not pressurized, they were hard to shoot down by any form of bullet. The worst ground fire we had was an occasional bullet when we were landing and taking off.

# D VIETNAM

Young patients at the Thai Binh Rehabilitation Center, southeast of Hanoi



It would take us six days to get to Vietnam. Most of the flight segments were ten to twelve hours, so we were required to rest after each one. The planes kept going with a rested crew, and we would fly the next available plane after our crew rested. One of my conclusions was that the Pacific Ocean was a really big ocean. The first time I went to Saigon was November 1962; the last was June 1967.

I lost a roommate from my days at Dover in Vietnam, and either one or two of the ushers in my wedding (we could never verify what happened to the second usher). Dover became the mortuary for military personnel killed in Vietnam around 1964. After that time, all our

trips were to take cargo to Vietnam and bring bodies back to Dover. I must have made that trip a dozen times. There were always about 200 coffins in the cargo bay on the way back, and none of us ever looked at the names on the manifest. Frankly, we did not want to know who was there. I never planned on going back to Vietnam and had pushed a lot of stuff associated with the war to the back of my mind — the very back of my mind.

The way I went back to Vietnam was quite unexpected. Vietnam and the US resumed diplomatic relations in 1995. Since then, the countries have had an increasingly good relationship. The Vietnamese government has been cooperating for years on issues related to

US soldiers missing in action. President Bush visited Vietnam in November 2006, and in the joint statement released at the end of his visit, a reference to the residual impact from the dioxins in Agent Orange was made for the first time. This is the last big unresolved issue between the two nations. Through the offices of the Ford Foundation, which has had an office in Hanoi for ten years, a meeting was arranged between a small group of Americans and Vietnamese to discuss the residual dioxin impact. Both the Vietnamese and US governments approved of the meeting, and Walter Isaacson invited me to go.

The group also included former Governor and EPA head Christine Todd Whitman (whose husband served a year in Vietnam); Ford Foundation CEO Susan Berresford; Charles Bailey, who runs the Ford Foundation's Vietnam operation; Catharine Dalpino, a former deputy assistant secretary of State for human rights; my wife, Kathy; and Walter's wife, Cathy.

We met with three Vietnamese. Madame Ton Nu Thi Ninh is a member of the Vietnam National Assembly, vice chair of its Foreign Affairs Committee, and former ambassador to Belgium. Professor Vo Quy has a Ph.D. in biology and was the first person to realize that Agent Orange was causing damage. (In 1972, he was doing research in the forests on birds and animals and noticed the scarcity of both.) He lost a brother in a B-52 raid during the war. And Bui The Giang, the director-general of the External Relations Commission of Vietnam, has a master's degree from the Paul H. Nitze School at Johns Hopkins. During the war, he served in an anti-aircraft battalion, trying to shoot down our planes. Each spoke excellent English, had a very

good sense of humor, and was a delight to be with.

Landing at Tan Son Nhat Airport, the former US air base in Ho Chi Minh City, was indeed a very strange feeling. The airport still uses SGN as its code, and the terminal is the same one that was there in the 1960s. While I do not remember a whole lot of downtown Ho Chi Minh City, the main square has not changed much, except for some new hotels, and the main boulevard does not look all that different. About 60 percent of Vietnam's 85 million people are age 30 or younger, so the majority of the population has no direct memory of the war. The people seem very friendly and happy, perhaps a reflection of the Buddhist religion, which is dominant in Vietnam.

Vietnam, in my opinion, is following China's economic playbook. It started 10 to 12 years after China, around 1990. The Vietnamese have made a lot of progress, but have a long way to go. Importantly, they seem to understand the process of economic development. As in China, the state tightly controls the press, and there are no privately owned mass media outlets in Vietnam, so freedom of personal expression can be an issue. Hanoi reminded me of Beijing, and Ho Chi Minh City reminded me of Shanghai. Ho Chi Minh City in particular had a lot of signage in English. I had forgotten that the Vietnamese adopted the Roman alphabet for their written language during the French occupation. The letters caused a sense of familiarity that was curious. I still did not understand much, but it made me feel more comfortable. Overall, Vietnam was considerably more friendly and interesting to visit than I expected.

Madame Ninh put our schedule together with Charles Bailey, and it worked brilliantly. We spent two days touring Vietnam together. This gave us a chance to talk informally and get to know each other. We traveled from Ho Chi Minh City to Da Nang, where we visited a dioxin hot spot at the airport and a rehabilitation center. We went to Hue City, to Hanoi, and to Thai Binh Province, where we visited another rehabilitation center and the home of a

family affected by dioxins. We returned to Hanoi for formal meetings and then went back to Ho Chi Minh City. While it was a rigorous schedule, we did become very familiar with the residual problems caused by dioxins.

Before we started our trip, I thought that after 32 years, the impact on the land from the dioxins in Agent Orange would be minimal or nonexistent. I did not understand that dioxins do not degrade and are as toxic today as they

were when they were first sprayed. Over the years the dioxins have dispersed, and 28 "hot spots" of dioxin have been identified in the country. Ten of these are very "hot" and near populated areas. One of the worst sites is at the Da Nang Airport, where Agent Orange was stored during the war. Some dioxins are still leaching into a small lake on the airport grounds. During the monsoon season, the dioxins get carried from the lake into a stream that goes through a populated town.



Professor Vo Quy (center), part of the delegation, was one of the first to notice the effects of dioxins.



Delegation member Madame Ton Nu Thi Ninh, a member of the Vietnamese National Assembly, is vice chair of its Foreign Affairs Committee.



Madame Ton Nu Thi Ninh, Institute President and CEO Walter Isaacson, and former US EPA chief Gov. Christine Todd Whitman at the Thai Binh rehabilitation center

It was a creepy feeling standing on that site, where very little was growing, and knowing that the ground was poisonous. It seems obvious that ultimately the land where the ten worst hot spots are will have to be remediated. Until that happens, something should and can be done to prevent the further spread of the dioxins through the use of barriers. The good news is that the hot spots have been identified, and preventing the further spread of dioxins is achievable.

The residual effect of dioxins on people directly exposed to Agent Orange is still being debated, and there is no agreement on this subject. In the US, a lawsuit by veterans who were exposed to dioxins and have contracted various diseases, including cancer, was settled for \$180 million. To date, there has been no scientific evidence linking dioxins with cancer. The Veterans Administration has, however, acknowledged 12 diseases associated with dioxins, but not cancer. There is also a lawsuit by private Vietnamese citizens in the federal court in New York alleging damages from

Agent Orange. That suit is currently on appeal. How all of this will play out is not clear, but it is certain that it will not be resolved for years.

There is another residual impact of dioxins on people — it has to do with children born to a parent exposed to Agent Orange during the war. Almost all the Agent Orange was sprayed in what was then South Vietnam, south of the 17th parallel. Almost all the soldiers came from the north. Thai Binh Province is about a three-hour drive southeast of Hanoi. It was never sprayed with Agent Orange, but many people from that area were sent off to fight in the war. There have been 27,000 deformed children born to Vietnamese war veterans in that province. That is an extraordinary number.

Worse, there are 3,000 second-generation deformed children born to the children of veterans of the war. Apparently, this is what happened: A soldier went off to fight in the south, got exposed to Agent Orange, and came home without any visible effects from

the dioxins. He got married and had a child who looked normal; he had another child who was deformed. The deformed child did not get married and have children. But when the normal-looking child got married, he or she could have been a carrier of the dioxins and had a deformed child.

It is not known how many normal-looking children of war veterans there are and how many of them are carrying dioxins. A blood test can detect whether someone is a carrier, but it requires a highly specialized machine that Vietnam does not have at this time. Currently blood samples are sent to a laboratory in Canada at a cost of \$800 each.

When our groups met to discuss our thoughts and next steps, there were no recriminations about who was responsible for what. There were no speeches, no positioning, just straightforward, practical discussion. It was actually quite refreshing and very efficient. We left science and politics behind and quickly agreed that whatever we recommended would be done in the name of humanitarian aid.



Madame Ton Nu Thi Ninh (second from left), Gov. Christine Todd Whitman, and Ford Foundation CEO Susan Berresford ask questions at the Da Nang Air Base, a dioxin "hot spot" where Agent Orange was stored during the war.

We came up with five areas we hope to work on in the future. The first is to build a laboratory so the critical blood sampling can be done in Vietnam, which would cost less than \$10 million; second, to contain the ten "very hot" dioxin sites; third, consider doing a comparative incidence study to determine how unusual the number of deformed children in Vietnam is

**We left science and politics behind and quickly agreed that whatever we recommended would be done in the name of humanitarian aid.**



A map of the Da Nang Air Base grounds, a dioxin "hot spot" where Agent Orange was once stored

compared to an area that was never exposed to dioxins; fourth, to establish programs locally and nationally to train people to deal with both the environmental and human effects of dioxins; and fifth, try to raise the visibility of the dioxin issue in the US through media exposure.

The president of Vietnam is scheduled to come to the United States in June and meet with President Bush. We hope that a couple of our initiatives can be announced at that time.

It looks like I might be going back to Vietnam. Maybe it will be to work on the dioxin issue, maybe something else, or maybe just to visit my new friends and colleagues. Life is indeed strange but wonderful. ♣

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