Linking Past and Present Activity 23



The Curious Legacy of Agent Orange

THEN

In 1962, the U.S. Air Force launched a series of unusual bombing raids against South Vietnam and Laos. Low-flying planes sprayed streams of a liquid that drenched jungle foliage along roadsides and riverbanks. That liquid was Agent Orange, a chemical herbicide designed to end the successful guerrilla war being waged by the Viet Cong. Agent Orange was used to kill jungle vegetation so that North Vietnamese soldiers would have fewer places to hide from our troops. It was also used to destroy crops and food so that the guerrillas could not live off the land.

Throughout the 1960s and early 1970s, thousands of Americans were exposed to the chemical during its manufacture, its shipment overseas, and the time it was loaded aboard the planes for the spraying. Others served in ground areas that had been sprayed with the herbicide. Also exposed were thousands of Vietnamese troops and civilians.

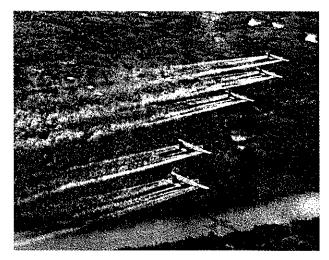
Agent Orange got its name from the bright orange stripes painted on the steel drums in which it was shipped to Vietnam. When it was first used, the U.S. military did not believe it posed a threat to animals or humans. The herbicide belongs to a chemical family known as organo-halogen compounds. In the manufacturing process, by-products called dioxins are produced. These are among the most toxic synthetic substances on earth. Dioxins produce severe skin rashes, headaches, and intestinal disorders. They are also believed to cause cancer and birth defects. The U.S. government destroyed its remaining stocks of Agent Orange in 1977.

NOW

In recent years, American veterans exposed to Agent Orange while serving in Vietnam claim to have developed skin rashes, nerve disorders, cancer, and other long-term health disorders. A particularly poignant story concerns Elmo Zumwalt II, the commander-in-chief of naval forces in Vietnam. Zumwalt commanded a patrol boat in a region that had been treated with Agent Orange. Zumwalt developed two types of cancer and his son suffered from a birth defect that is believed to have resulted from his father's exposure to the herbicide.

A number of medical studies have investigated the connection between veterans' health disorders and exposure to Agent Orange. The results of these studies remain inconclusive. Although researchers have reported increased incidence of certain cancers and birth defects, they have failed to find a definite link between the herbicide and the illnesses. Some class action suits filed against the chemical companies that manufactured Agent Orange have resulted in cash settlements to people who claimed to be victims. Veterans' groups have urged further investigations into the effects of Agent Orange on ground troops and civilian personnel. In the meantime, these disorders remain part of the tragic and mysterious legacy of the Vietnam War.

Vietnamese troops and civilians have also developed similar maladies believed to be caused by Agent Orange. The vegetation in the country may take up to a century to fully recover from the use of this herbicide.



SPRAYING DEFOLIANTS IN SOUTH VIETNAM

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EX/	AMINING THE PAST
DIR	RECTIONS: Recalling Information In the space provided, answer the questions below.
1.	Why did the Air Force spray Agent Orange on Vietnam?
2.	In what ways were Americans exposed to the herbicide?
3.	What chemical by-products are associated with the manufacture of Agent Orange?
4.	What kinds of health problems have Americans experienced as a result of their exposure to Age Orange?
5.	What actions have some victims pursued in order to deal with problems resulting from exposure the chemicals?
CR	ITICAL THINKING: CONNECTIONS WITH THE PAST
6.	What is especially tragic about the story of Elmo Zumwalt II?
7.	What long-range impact might the use of Agent Orange have upon Vietnam?

ACTIVITY: Draw a Political Cartoon

Review the facts about Agent Orange presented in this article. Use library resources to find out more about the legacy this herbicide left on the Vietnamese countryside and upon people's lives. Draw a political cartoon that illustrates the long-term effects of this warfare practice. Give your cartoon a title that reflects your point of view.

American History: The Modern Era Since 1865