



INSIDE THIS PEACE EXPOSES AN AGENT ORANGE VICTIM'S MOVING STORY

MATT COKER | FEBRUARY 14, 2019 | [f](#) [t](#) [v](#) [p](#)



Thoa as a child. Photo courtesy 9669 Films

For the most part, Thoa Nguyen is a typical woman in her mid-thirties. She is slender, wears her long black hair in a ponytail and has a pleasant demeanor.

Before we see the subject of Lina Linh Nga's sobering new documentary *Inside This Peace*, we are treated to street scenes in Thoa's bustling Vietnamese town. The camera then glides into Thoa's flat, where the only light comes through a floor-to-ceiling opening facing the roadway. Thoa sits in the shadows with her back to the camera as we hear faint street noises, a chirping gecko and the sewing machine she is working.

When the camera turns to face Thoa, light catches her cheek, which has black spots and random scars similar to those of a measles patient. As she dutifully presses fabric toward the sewing machine needle, we see her hand and arm are covered in large dark patches. Life in the city and her flat are going on as she begins to narrate her own moving life story.

Before Thoa was born in 1985, black patches covering her while she was in the womb were detected by doctors, who recommended her financially poor parents terminate the pregnancy or give her up for adoption. They did neither. Newborn Thoa had not only the patches, but also lumps and prickly hairs all over her. The lumps were filled with fluid that could not be drained. Her parents later had a second child, a boy, who suffered serious heart disease from day one. He passed away at age 7.

The family blames the siblings' conditions on the father's exposure to Agent Orange while drinking rainwater as he served as a soldier deployed to Cambodia. During the Vietnam War, as part of Operation Ranch Hand from 1962-71, the U.S. dumped millions of gallons of herbicides—including the defoliant dioxin (a.k.a. Agent Orange)—across Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The herbicidal warfare was aimed at killing trees and crops that provided forest cover and food sources to Viet Cong soldiers.

An unintended consequence was that 4 million Vietnamese people were exposed to a chemical no one fully understood at the time. We understand now. Agent Orange exposure has been linked to rashes, cancer, birth defects, and severe psychological and neurological problems not only among the Vietnamese, but also U.S. servicemen and the offspring of both.

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam provides benefits to its citizens suffering from medical issues related to Agent Orange, but Thoa's family have been denied such assistance for decades because their patriarch served in 1978—three years after the last U.S. chopper departed Saigon.

It's not part of the film, but Thoa's family is in good company. Some Vietnam War-era American military veterans have also been denied benefits tied to Agent Orange exposure. For instance, those who served in Vietnam's inland waterways—whom some call Brown Water veterans—are presumed to have been exposed to Agent Orange, which helps fast-track their benefit claims. Advocates have been fighting for years to extend the same presumption to those known as Blue Water veterans, those who served on ships off Vietnam's coast.

Blue Water veterans were covered under the Agent Orange Act of 1991, but the Veterans Administration later stipulated that serving off the coast did not, by itself, make one eligible for benefits. Just before Democrats recently took control of the U.S. House of Representatives, Congress sought to finally rectify that by unanimously passing the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act, but Senate Republicans Mike Lee of Utah and Mike Enzi of Wyoming blocked the legislation from advancing to a vote in December.

Lee said he was concerned about the science regarding exposure to Blue Water veterans, a notion that was backed by President Donald Trump's appointed VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, who argued it would be unfair to use inconclusive science as a basis to treat 90,000 Blue Water veterans when other veterans are held to a higher standard of evidence to justify medical coverage.

Enzi cited a Congressional Budget Office conclusion that the bill would cost at least \$1.3 billion more than the price tag House members were told it would. The government has already paid benefits to nearly 370,000 veterans and 200,000 survivors for Agent Orange-related illnesses and is spending hundreds of millions of dollars more to clean up herbicide contamination around the world, including Vietnam. Meanwhile, the Blue Water Navy bill could open the door to U.S. veterans of other wars, including combatants who link their cancers and respiratory problems to toxic exposure in Iraq and Afghanistan.

By the way during the government shutdown, Lee and Enzi expressed support for funding Trump's border wall, although the Utah senator did go on to cast one of two lone Republican votes in his chamber opposing a bill that included funding for it.

Until the 1990s, the VA recognized only one ailment as being linked to Agent Orange: chloracne. The skin condition, which is associated with overexposure to dioxins, produces acne-like eruptions of cysts, pustules and blackheads, which is what you find all over Thoa. *Inside This Peace* includes a Vietnamese magazine's photo of her as a child, with protrusions visible on her coal-black back. That has not altered, as we see when the adult Thoa changes her top.

In January, Nga's enlightening film won an Impact DOCS award and was named the Best Feature Documentary at the California Women's Film Festival. A trailer will be out later this month, and the filmmaker promises an upcoming free screening somewhere in Orange County, where \$2 donations will be collected to support Agent Orange victims. She also plans to release the film on DVD and via streaming in May and to publish a companion book next year.

In an email, Nga says her aim is "to raise the voice for the forgotten victims of Agent Orange, the invisible and voiceless, and to raise awareness about Agent Orange, to address the consequences of war. We cannot ignore the desperate cries of help from our brothers, sisters, friends, from brave men and women who have willingly given their lives selflessly for freedom's cause."

Track the progress of *Inside This Peace* at [InsideThisPeaceMovie.com](#) and the [Blue Water veterans movement](#) at [DenyDenyUntilTheyDie.com](#).

MATT COKER
OC Weekly Editor-in-Chief Matt Coker has been engaging, enraging and entertaining readers of newspapers, magazines and websites for decades. He spent the first 15 years of his career in journalism at daily newspapers before "graduating" to *OC Weekly* in 1995 as the alternative newsweekly's first calendar editor.

8 REPLIES TO "INSIDE THIS PEACE EXPOSES AN AGENT ORANGE VICTIM'S MOVING STORY"

Lil
FEBRUARY 14, 2019 AT 8:04 PM
Don't forget the allies affected! Australia New Zealand. Our children are also suffering. 'Dow chemicals' wanted to off-load agent orange to the US military. They know the side effects. It's all about money!

Sean
FEBRUARY 18, 2019 AT 8:47 AM
And over time we've learned that Agent Orange was not only just used in Vietnam, but it was also used in other locations. There was a lot of controversy as to the diseases associated with Agent Orange, where it was used, how it was used, and a lot of that has now been ironed out in statutes, laws, and regulations and policies.

John D.
FEBRUARY 18, 2019 AT 8:55 AM
Touching story. I served in a Jungle Clearing Company in Vietnam, and it is well documented as to our exposure to Agent Orange and to combat explosions and severely loud noise we encountered.

Jane
FEBRUARY 18, 2019 AT 9:37 AM
Just think how sad it is, the chemical induced adverse health issues for both U.S. troops and Vietnamese people on both sides of the war until today.

Rebecca Blackford
FEBRUARY 20, 2019 AT 11:11 AM
I will help fight against Monsanto and other biotech industries my grandpa is a Vietnam veteran exposed to agent orange as well as I

Roque B. Bamba Sr.
FEBRUARY 20, 2019 AT 11:19 AM
I worked at the shop where the 50 gallon barrels of Agent Orange was stored and prepared for spray used to eradicate weeds throughout the Base. Feb 1969 - March 1970.

Kayla
MARCH 4, 2019 AT 8:16 PM
Sometimes I wish that America didn't get involved into the Vietnam War because it's such a disgrace that we used a deadly chemical weapon that left many families with children who have severe physical and intellectual disabilities.

June S Sale
AUGUST 12, 2019 AT 11:14 AM
This piece of history we cannot change...other than to feel ashamed and degraded by its horrible actions against the "others". We must mobilize to change the hate sowed by the Trumpeters by mobilizing to vote against those who deny, lie, destroy and hate. It will not change the past; it will make the future a place where we can forgive...but never forget.

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