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At War

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One of the Last and Best-Kept Secrets of the Vietnam War

By **George Black**

Dear reader,

Anyone writing about conflict knows that no war ever truly ends; each of them casts a long shadow. Lives are changed forever, and the secrets of wartime can stay hidden for decades.

In March 2019, I was invited to a symposium in Washington, D.C., that brought together senior officials from both sides of the American war in Vietnam to discuss the aftermath: the massive amount of unexploded ordnance that remains in the rural areas, the impact on human health of the toxic defoliant known as Agent Orange, the fighters still missing in action.



A bomb crater near Phonhai, a village in Savannakhet Province. These craters are everywhere in Laos, and this one most likely came from a B-52 bombing mission. Christopher Anderson/Magnum, for The New York Times

Most of the talk was about Agent Orange, and how the willingness of the United States finally to deal with this most bitter of all the legacies of the war had transformed the former enemies into close allies. “The worst thing in our past is now the best thing for our future,” said Senior Lt. Gen. Nguyen Chi Vinh, Vietnam’s top official on war legacy issues and the son of the celebrated architect of military strategy on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, the vital supply artery that infiltrated fighters and war matériel through neighboring Laos into South Vietnam.

There were also several private citizens in the room that day who had devoted decades to lightening the shadow of the war. Some I knew of only by reputation, such as Susan Hammond, the founder of a small organization called the War Legacies Project. Others I’d met before, like Charles Bailey, head of the Ford

Foundation's Hanoi office from 1997 to 2007, who had financed much of the pioneering research into Agent Orange by a team of Canadian scientists from a group called Hatfield Consultants.

I knew that the critical step that opened the door to a change was Hatfield's study in the late 1990s of a remote area on Vietnam's border with Laos that had been heavily sprayed with herbicides. In the A Luoi Valley, a North Vietnamese stronghold known during wartime as the A Shau, the Canadians had found high levels of dioxin, a toxic byproduct of Agent Orange. It was in the soil, the food supply and human blood and breast milk, and there were unusual numbers of birth defects in those living in the most heavily contaminated locations. Since there were no industrial sources of contamination in the area, the only possible culprit was Agent Orange. After a quarter-century of denial, the U.S. government was finally forced to take responsibility for the human consequences of its defoliation campaign, Operation Ranch Hand.

A month after that meeting in Washington, I joined Bailey and Hammond at the Bien Hoa air base, the main hub of the campaign and the busiest airport in the world during the war, for the beginning of a dioxin cleanup project in which the United States is now investing hundreds of millions of dollars. When the ceremony was over, Senator Patrick Leahy of Vermont announced an increased five-year commitment of humanitarian aid to people with severe disabilities in the worst affected areas of Vietnam.



Jacquelyn Chagnon, left, and Susan Hammond measuring the head of a 2-year-old boy in Laos. They strongly suspect that he has hydrocephalus, associated with exposure to dioxin. Christopher Anderson/Magnum, for The New York Times

Afterward, Hammond and I fell into conversation with Leahy's veteran aide Tim Rieser, who had worked closely with Charles Bailey to push this aid program through Congress. It was a great thing, Hammond said, but what about Laos? Rieser's answer was simple: We've seen no hard data to suggest there's a problem there. Hammond said she was doing her best to assemble the evidence, and I decided to join her on a trip to Laos later that year to see what she'd found.

Before we left, I read as much as I could about the war in Laos. But nearly all of it was about the C.I.A.'s secret support for Hmong rebels in the north of the country, a conflict that was almost entirely separate from events in Laos's southern panhandle, where Hammond said most of the toxic chemicals had been used. The worst of the spraying, in fact, had targeted the area right across the border from the A Luoi Valley, where the Ho Chi Minh Trail passed from Laos into Vietnam.

As I dug into old military records, it became clear that this was one of the last and best-kept secrets of the war in Southeast Asia. As military strategists on both sides had clearly understood, although Laos was officially neutral, the border was not much more than a legal inconvenience; the two countries formed a single integrated battlefield.

In Vietnam, I'd spent a good deal of time in places like the A Luoi Valley, where the legacies of the war still visibly affect everyday life. But nothing prepared me for what I would see in a nine-day trip down the Ho Chi Minh Trail in Laos with Hammond and two of her colleagues. The extreme poverty, the hillsides still scarred by the defoliation, the multitude of children with untreated birth defects — this, I imagined, was what conditions must have been like in the backcountry of Vietnam during the hardest years of postwar austerity.

Yet no one seemed to know about it, not even the officials at that meeting in Washington who had done so much to alleviate the humanitarian disaster just a few miles away, on the other side of the Annamite Mountains.

I felt the time was long overdue to write about the disaster that befell Laos — while knowing that other untold stories may still lie buried away in the official archives, records of a lost war that most Americans prefer to forget.

READ GEORGE BLACK'S FEATURE ON LAOS.



Feature

The Victims of Agent Orange the U.S. Has Never Acknowledged

America has never taken responsibility for spraying the herbicide over Laos during the Vietnam War. But generations of ethnic minorities have endured the consequences.

By George Black and Christopher Anderson