

The Invisible War
By Maggie McGwin
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It is a particularly dry, hot June day in my father's vegetable garden when he hobbles over and leans into my shoulder.

"I'm having some trouble right now," he mumbles into my ear.

My 72-year-old father has been struggling with his breathing for several weeks now. A month ago, he found himself isolated in a hospital after two negative COVID-19 tests and a pneumonia diagnosis, bitterly complaining over the bland food and lack of entertaining television programs.

"I refuse to go back there. I hate that place. Man, oh, *man*, do I hate that place."

I can understand the fear of staying still. On days I'm stuck inside with never-ending emails, conference calls, and papers, I imagine a physical pain in my body aching to feel the sun. I can understand this because I am my father's daughter. [Ken McGwin](#), a man of the earth from generations of farmers, who feels closest to pure happiness when he is working the land he's cared for his entire life. And a man who, at age 19, was drafted into the Navy to fight in Vietnam.

When people hear the word "veteran," a mix of images come to mind. Some think of sharp uniforms and decorated medals. Others imagine elderly men in nursing home wheelchairs, mostly quiet and occasionally visited by quieter family members. Still others recall passing homeless individuals on city sidewalks holding cardboard signs reading "Veteran. Will work for food." Our country is notorious for its horrific treatment of veterans. We spent so much of our history drafting young men into our militaries and



sending them to their potential deaths, only to drop them back home with no means of dealing with the catastrophic mental and physical health effects of their experiences. When returning to the United States, Vietnam soldiers faced [harsh treatment](#) from civilians, many who protested the war from the beginning. There was no “Welcome Home” parade. They were verbally insulted or spit on. Because the Vietnam War was a loss, a failure, a disappointment. And the soldiers were the ugly face of the losing side.

I’ve rarely seen my father cry. If I thought hard enough, the occurrences would likely not get beyond single digits. This usually only happens when he talks about his late parents. Other times, his shoulders tense slightly, and his head dips as he speaks about his time on Navy ships in Vietnam. And recently, and for the first time in my life, his glistening eyes turn away from mine, and his voice shakes as he tells me about Agent Orange. He is afraid that the effects are finally surfacing, and he is terrified that my brother, niece, and I will bear the hereditary brunt.

I vaguely knew about Agent Orange. It was mentioned occasionally in high school history classes, in that brief period spent learning about the Vietnam War and its global controversy. And of course, I knew my father was a Navy veteran. But for some reason, I never put the pieces together that my father, with his thinning white hair and memorable mustache, may be affected by this invisible threat now, so many years later.

First used in 1961, military agents sprayed [Agent Orange](#) over Vietnam, Cambodia, and Laos as part of a chemical warfare strategy to destroy crops and forests. Over a decade, the United States sprayed more than 20 million gallons of destructive herbicides over the region. Agent Orange, containing deadly dioxin, was used the most. Though authorities knew the dangers of the chemicals, the consensus, as stated in a 1988 letter by Dr. James Clary to Senator Tom Daschle, was that “because the material was used on the enemy, none of us were overly concerned. We never considered a scenario in which our own personnel would become contaminated with the herbicide.” Years later, it’s understood that the [chemicals](#) in Agent Orange can lead to cancer, neurological issues, and congenital disabilities. An estimated 2.8 million veterans who survived the war but were exposed to the poison later died from it. In their efforts to smother the enemy people and land, they never knew that they were launching an attack on their own soldiers.



<https://www.historynet.com/my-war-ken-mcgwin.htm>

Ken did not want to go to Vietnam. But he went anyway because he was called in the draft. He has fond memories of the flavorful spice of foods in Hong Kong, the crystal sheen of the waters of the South China Sea, and the drunken nights he spent with his shipmates at port. But mostly, he remembers hair-raising screams, bombs, and the gut-wrenching fear of death at every moment. My mother once told me that my father often wakes up in a cold sweat, yelling through his nightmares of the November night when he earned a Bronze Star during an attack by the Vietcong. He has insomnia, becomes listless and quiet for long periods, and talks to himself when he thinks no one is listening.

A [federal study](#) found that, more than 40 years later, about 300,000 veterans still struggle with physical and mental health caused by their time in the Vietnam War. My father never sought help for the mental health consequences of his military time. It is difficult enough to convince him to see a doctor for his ongoing knee and hip issues. A long-time therapy attendee, I've often floated the idea of talking to someone about his PTSD. Every time, he shrugs it off, assuring me that "it's not so bad, really." But it is. I see it in his eyes every November 1st, and I feel it in the fingers that squeeze my shoulder every time I hug him on Memorial Day. He refuses to let himself be so vulnerable. Forever a soldier, he protects himself and his loved ones from all weaknesses and threats. We are his reward, his Bronze Star. And he will never stop fighting.

There is no doubt in my mind that I'm one of the lucky ones. Despite the tragedies of war that my father faced and the shadows of those years in Vietnam that continue to cloud his eyes and his memories, Ken McGwin remains a kind, compassionate, and profoundly devoted man. I've never doubted his love for our family. He is proud of the farm and land he cares for. Dressed in Walmart jeans and sweatshirts, he drinks Diet Pepsi all day—his only vice. A certified Master Gardener, he spends retirement caring for his beehives, flowers, and vegetable plants, preferring the outdoors to stuffy rooms. He is the best man I know.

When I was a little girl, I'd crawl into my father's lap while he watched the evening news and ate fresh stove-popped popcorn with a side of cheddar cheese slices. I stole bites from his snacks and sips from his Diet Pepsi as he held me close to my heart, protecting me from whatever new horrors plagued the television that night. He always holds me close to his heart, even now. He is there for me through every heartbreak, every disappointment, every challenge I face in my career.

My father leans his weight into my shoulder as we shuffle past nettles and potato plants and rusty fences. I silently promise him that I will always hold him close to my heart. And I wonder why America—the country he fought for, nearly died for, and continues to suffer for—could not do the same.