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Remembering Victims of Agent Orange in the Shadow of 9/11

By Roger Pulvers

Introduction by John Junkerman

As the drum rolls sound once again for those who died in the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Roger Pulvers has provided a poignant reminder of those other, far more numerous, victims the United States has left in the wake of its wars overseas. In particular, the victims of the dioxin-contaminated herbicide Agent Orange, whose suffering continues decades after the Vietnam War ended.

August 2011 was the 50th anniversary of the beginning of the American herbicide-spraying campaign in Vietnam, and the anniversary was well marked. An international conference of Agent Orange victims was held in Hanoi (link) with participants from more than 20 countries, it reflected the wide geographical and generational scope of the contamination. As Jon Mitchell's reporting on Agent Orange in Okinawa demonstrates, we still do not know the full extent of the environmental damage. The 50th anniversary also saw the introduction of new legislation in the US Congress to provide much-delayed relief to victims of Agent Orange in the US and Vietnam. (Link. An expanded version of Mitchell's research is forthcoming at The Asia-Pacific Journal.)

I worked as the editor of the film, *Living the Silent Spring,* which Pulvers discusses in his essay. The film's director, Masako Sakata, had been struck by the fact that Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* appeared at virtually the same time that the US military began spraying Agent Orange in Vietnam. Though Carson died soon after her book came out, her outrage at the irresponsible use of potent chemicals and her pleas for environmental and biological wisdom seemed to be a warning that went unheeded about the dangers of Agent Orange.

We were in the studio editing the film on March 11, when the massive earthquake and tsunami struck Japan. As the extent of the Fukushima nuclear disaster became known, and it became clear that the area around the plant would be contaminated with radiation for many decades to come, Carson's description of chemicals as the "sinister partners of radiation"—and the film we were working on—took on a new resonance.

The Japanese trailer for the film (mostly in English) can be seen here. The film will screen with English and Japanese titles for the 6:50 pm screening on Saturdays during the run at Iwanami Hall, Tokyo. Plans for distribution of the English version are yet to be determined.

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In the lead-up this week to the 10th anniversary of the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, it is important to keep in mind this: dates take on a mythical significance that may mask reality.

Sept. 11, Dec. 7, July 4 ... celebration of sacrifice adopts a spiritual and patriotic voice, while the tragedies engendered by the loss of life persist in the bodies and memories of others for decades to come. On this coming 9/11 anniversary, what came to mind was not a legacy of terror at the hands of fanatics, but that of sustained war and its aftermath. That is why a single date masks the true tragedies of loss.

A new documentary comes as a reminder of such tragedies. Titled *Living the Silent Spring,* the film made by Masako Sakata opens on Sept. 24 at Tokyo's Iwanami Hall for a four-week run.

Prior to the release of Sakata's earlier documentary *Agent Orange — a personal requiem,* I wrote about that powerful work in a December 2006 *Japan Times* essay headlined "Ongoing Vietnam tragedy revives ghosts of a Christmas past" (link).

Now, with *Living the Silent Spring,* Sakata has returned to the subject of that deadly defoliant sprayed over the land of Vietnam for a decade from 1961 to strip its forests so that they couldn't provide cover from the air for enemy troop movements.

The toxic chemicals in Agent Orange, which included dioxin, were 25 times more potent than those used in herbicides employed in the United States. Dioxin accumulates in the body and remains in nature for years. It is responsible for an estimated 3 million victims in Vietnam — some of them third-generation sufferers of birth defects and a variety of chronic health problems.

The U.S. has consistently turned its back on the Vietnamese victims its criminal war in that country created. It was only in 1991, 16 years after hostilities ended, that Congress authorized assistance to U.S. veterans exposed to Agent Orange.

Significantly, however, the legislation specified that conclusive links between exposure to Agent Orange and subsequent illness and death were "presumptive." This insipidly coy use of words allowed Americans to legally avoid responsibility for the fate of the Vietnamese.

How would Americans react were a foreign government to proclaim the perpetration of 9/11 by radical Islamists "presumptive"?

Living the Silent Spring takes up the Agent Orange story from both sides. Sakata returns to some of the villages she visited for her earlier film so that we may see how the children genetically maimed by their parents' exposure to Agent Orange have fared. But this time she also introduces us to a number of Americans who have equally suffered — bringing home the message that, in war, we are all victims.

The story of Heather Bowser begins not in Canfield, Ohio, where she lives with her husband and two children, but with her father, who was stationed in Vietnam in 1968–69. He returned to the U.S. with post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and struggled for the rest of his life with alcoholism and persistent thoughts of suicide. Heather was born in 1972 missing a leg, a toe and several fingers. Her

Heather Bowser visits Tudu Hospital in Ho Chi Minh City

father said, "I didn't realize I was taking my children to war."

In October 2010, Heather traveled to Vietnam, visiting young people who have suffered the most awful physical pain and deformity as a result of their parents' contact with Agent Orange. She is seen in the film appearing on Vietnamese television, telling the people of that country that there were Americans who were victimized by their own military.

The film also takes up the story of Sharity Keith from Florida. She was born without body hair and with no uterus, and has had to come to terms with the fact that she will be childless. Yet, in her testimony, she tells us that there are so many others worse off than she is.

Sharon Perry of Maine started a group she named Agent Orange Legacy after her husband died at age 56 from cancer traced to exposure to the defoliant. She networks victims around the U.S., striving to raise awareness of their plight. However, her struggle against apathy and feigned concern has evidently left her less than optimistic about American officialdom helping to pick up the pieces of lives shattered by that war.

"America has left us ... stuck in time," she says in the film.

The story of Mona Edwards from Dallas, Texas, is particularly moving. Her husband, Kenny, was an Agent Orange veteran. Their daughter, Gina, was born with severe congenital defects. All her internal organs were in a sac outside her torso; her hips and ribs were splayed. Gina fought to have a normal life, and her mother sacrificed her every moment to give one to her. But Gina finally succumbed to cancer at age 38 ... the lives of mother and daughter turned into a tragedy that no single anniversary can mark.

One victim of Agent Orange who does not appear in Sakata's film is her husband, Greg Davis, who was a brilliant photojournalist. He contracted liver cancer that he believed was caused by exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam, where he was stationed with the US military during the war.

Truong Thi Thuy and her daughter Kieu

Le Thi Mit and her son Chuoi

It was after his death in 2003 that Sakata resolved to make a film about those victims — a resolve that turned into *Agent Orange — a personal requiem.* Now she is back with *Living the Silent Spring,* which links the aftermath of war with the chemical pollution of our planet.

"Chemicals are the sinister ... partners of radiation in changing the very nature of (the world's) life," said Rachel Carson in an interview about her epochal book, *The Silent Spring,* published in 1962. "We have put poisonous and biologically potent chemicals, indiscriminately, into the hands of persons largely or wholly ignorant of their potentials for harm."

It is the "silent spring" of that book (which is often credited with launching the contemporary environmental movement) that Sakata has borrowed for the title of her film. The victims of America's war on the environment in Vietnam are destined to live in it.

To date, the U.S. government has only taken a very small step on what will be a long journey to redress its crimes in Vietnam.

In 2003, a grant of $400,000 from the State Department and the Environmental Protection Agency was earmarked to fund research into "dioxin mitigation planning assistance" in Da Nang. Such a pittance can hardly come under the heading of "conscience money." As a token, it is an insult to history.

Then, in 2007, funds began to be awarded to a joint U.S.-Vietnam team to decontaminate land in the vicinity of Da Nang Airport, which was once a U.S. military air base where Agent Orange was stored. The team has so far received $32 million. It is estimated the clean-up will take 20 years.

But why bring this all up on the anniversary of such a monumental historical event as the attacks on American soil in 2001? The reason is that coming to terms with your own atrocities is integral to any genuine morality.

"Let's put it all behind us," or "let's move on" — if Americans do not accept this for evil acts against them, then they shouldn't accept it for their own similar acts against others.

If there is a legacy to 9/11, it is this.

This essay first appeared in the *Japan Times* on September 4, 2011.

Roger Pulvers is an American-born Australian author, playwright, theatre director and translator living in Japan. An Asia-Pacific Journal associate, he has published 40 books in Japanese and English and, in 2008, was the recipient of the Miyazawa Kenji Prize. In 2009 he was awarded Best Script Prize at the Teheran International Film Festival for "Ashita e no Yuigon." He is the translator of Kenji Miyazawa, Strong in the Rain: Selected Poems. The Dream of Lafcadio Hearn *is his most recent book. He will talk, sponsored by The Japan Society, London, on October 24 on "The Dream of Lafcadio Hearn: How did this Greek-Irishman conquer Japan?"*

John Junkerman is an American documentary filmmaker and Asia-Pacific Journal associate living in Tokyo. His film, "Japan's Peace Constitution" (2005), won the Kinema Jumpo and Japan PEN Club best documentary awards. It is available in North America from Icarus Films.

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