

# LIGHTER THAN ORANGE

THE LEGACY OF  
DIOXIN IN VIETNAM



A DOCUMENTARY FILM BY  
MATTHIAS LEUPOLD





**“WE COULD NOT YET  
UNDERSTAND THE  
AFFECT THIS POISON  
WOULD HAVE ON THE  
PEOPLE, THEIR LIVES  
AND THE FUTURE.”**

Hung, Phú Thọ Province

# WHAT ARE THE CONSEQUENCES OF AGENT ORANGE?

“It was only when we got home and our children were born, that the distortion of limbs started to show.”

The Vietnam War lasted from the middle of the 1950s until 1975. It became a symbolic battlefield on which the world's super powers, USA, China and USSR, indirectly fought their ideological Cold War.

US President, John F. Kennedy, personally ordered the use of US-researched herbicides for the war effort. This was a war tactic called “Operation Ranch Hand”. It was meant to both defoliate trees under which Vietnamese soldiers took cover and to disrupt Ho Chi Minh's path, along which the North Vietnamese people and materials were being brought to the southern warzone. So, between 1961 and 1971, the U.S. Air Force sprayed more than 80 million liters of dioxin-based herbicides, including Agent Orange, Agent Blue and Agent Purple, over Vietnamese forests, jungles and agricultural fields.

It has since been understood that these dioxin-based defoliants altered the soldiers' DNA, enormously increasing their probability of cellular breakdown leading to cancer, neurological disorders, skin diseases, organ and limb damage, and/or total loss of voice, hearing and sight. They were not the only ones affected. This cellular breakdown and the resulting maladies were genetically passed on to their offspring. Until now, at least four million cases of dioxin-caused illnesses have been documented.



- 1 Assembly room in a community in Phú Thọ Province on the right, Phạm
- 2 Daughter Phạm Thị Nức
- 3 Airplanes during the operation “Ranch Hand” in Vietnam





## THE FRIENDSHIP VILLAGE

Lighter Than Orange was primarily shot on site at the “Friendship Village”, an international reconciliation project located just outside Hanoi, Vietnam. It provides 3 to 5 years of housing and services to children, youth and young adults with mental and physical disabilities caused by dioxin. The village was the brainchild of US Vietnam veteran, George Mizo and is run by the Vietnamese veterans association. In

March 2012, a new home for Veteran’s was completed and inaugurated. So, along with the 100 young people that live there, it now houses and provides rehabilitative services for around 60 veterans at any given time. The German film crew visited the “village” and interviewed veterans about their memories and personal stories of the Vietnam War and its toxic aftermath.

# THE DOCUMENTARY

“It smelled sweet,” one woman remembered, “like ripe guavas.” Others remember it hanging in the air like a thick fog. Some say when aircrafts sprayed, it looked like stripes of powder decorating the sky. Yet their poetic observations are in stark contrast to the devastating power of Agent Orange and the painful consequences the Vietnamese people would soon experience.

In *Lighter Than Orange* North Vietnamese veterans tell about their memories of the war and Agent Orange as well as the struggles they have faced as a consequence of both. There are an estimated 4 million victims of Agent Orange living today.

Phuc and his wife lived in the province Phú Thọ after returning from the war. Thereafter they had a child who was deformed at birth and died soon after. The same happened with their second child. So, together they made the most difficult decision of their lives: to remain childless.

Another couple gave birth fifteen times, and only three of their children survived past infancy. They say years passed before they had any idea that what they were experiencing was the consequence of their exposure to the defoliants sprayed during the war. They say they never imagined it could affect humans in this way.



**BÙI PHÚC HƯNG**



**BÙI BÁ KHANG**



**ĐẶNG THẮNG LỢI**



**ĐỖ ĐỨC ĐỊU**



**DƯƠNG VĂN BẠCH**



**HÀ NGỌC PHÚC**



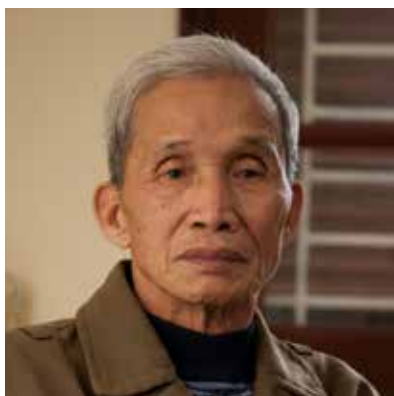
**NGUYỄN VĂN PHẨM**



**NGUYỄN TRUNG HIẾU**



**ĐỖ ĐÌNH NGANG**



**NGUYỄN QUỐC ĐẠT**



**HOÀNG THỊ MÍCH**



**PHẠM VĂN HÓA**





Ricefield, km 275, Quảng Ngãi, Vietnam







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- 1 Phuc, n the Village of Friendship, Hanoi
- 2 Veterans on a balcony in the Village of Friendship, Hanoi
- 3 Nguyễn Văn Phẩm and his wife, Province Phú Thọ







**OS\*: DIU, QUANG BINH**

“Even though so many children  
had died, we did not know  
anything.”

“I wanted to defend my country.  
If it had not happened to me,  
it would have been someone  
else.”



- 1 Hang, daughter of Diu in „The Friendship Village”
- 2 The graves of the twelve deceased Do children,  
Province Quang Binh, 2012
- 3 Family Do: Diu, his wife Nuc with their daughter Nga 2012
- 4 Men
- 5 Family Bui with their daughter Men

\*OS - Short for original sound



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**OS: HUNG, PHÚ THỌ**

“They looked like two gasoline drums.  
That’s how big they were. Then they  
broke and this white powder came out.”



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# DIRECTOR'S COMMENTS

“Lighter than Orange” intends to document the stories of those who experienced the most brutal aspects of the Cold War with intimacy and humanity. The featured veterans and their families still suffer from the effects of a war that ended a half a century ago. This film hopes to inspire an international effort to address the enormous environmental damage and personal injury the Vietnam War caused. To take a step in the direction of reconciliation and reparations, all of the film’s revenue will go directly to supporting two of the families featured in it.

This film does not end with the credits. It is part of a multi-media approach to the subject matter, including a book which investigates Agent Orange through photography, science, history and social science, as well as a conference to be held 2015 (organised by Evangelische Akademie Tutzing and Rachel-Carson Center, Munich-Germany and US foundations) to raise enough funds to pay for the cleaning of the Vietnamese landscape, and the necessary medical care for those who have already been exposed.

Toxic remnants of “Operation Ranch Hand” and other military actions are still present in high concentrations in rivers, sediment and agricultural soil and continue to spread through the groundwater. No one can say exactly which groups have been, are being, or will be affected by these toxins. There are still rates of illness and birth defects in Vietnam far beyond the world average. Considering that as of 2012, Vietnam is the world’s second largest coffee and third largest rice exporter, the effects of land contamination may very well spread beyond the country’s borders.



Hung, Matthias, Khang, Phú Thọ Province

## ABOUT THE DIRECTOR

Matthias Leupold, was born in East Berlin in 1959. Since the 1980s he has been creating a parallel world through his staged photography. Scenes from this world have been exhibited in over 50 exhibitions in Europe, Asia and the USA, and are published in several books, as well as archived in international collections. Leupold is a professor of Photography at an art and design university in Berlin. It was during a trip with his photography students to Vietnam in 2011, that Leupold first came in personal contact with victims of Agent Orange, and it was out of these encounters that he developed the material for this documentary.



# AUDIENCE RESPONSES

Although there are quite a few outstanding documentaries pertaining to the Vietnam War, Matthias Leupold's *Lighter than Orange* manages to rise above the rest. There is something about Leupold's documentary that feels unbelievably personal. The film provides people who were and still are affected by Agent Orange with the opportunity to speak out. Leupold captures these individual stories with such a delicate intimacy that truly exposes the horrifying reality of the situation.

The men and women who share their stories in *Lighter than Orange* are exceptionally strong and valiant, but above all they are survivors. Yet these heroic men and women survived a long and brutal war only to be hit with even more devastation as they ultimately discovered that the dioxin-infested war fields severely altered their DNA. Four decades have passed since the end of the Vietnam War, but the detrimental effects of dioxin-based herbicides are still a problem today. Rivers and soil are still contaminated by these toxins, which will continue to spread unless other nations band together to help. Thus, *Lighter than Orange* deals with a subject that is relevant to Vietnam as well as the rest of the world.

Not only have these courageous soldiers dealt with changes to their DNA that have made them more susceptible to severe illnesses, but these genetic mutations have been passed on to their offspring as well. Leupold's film portrays the children born after the damage caused by Agent Orange, and it is undeniably painful to see a woman who inherited genetic mutations that resulted in half of her body being paralyzed. Not only is it heartbreaking to see children born with genetic mutations, but the film also depicts parents who have had multiple children die shortly after being born.

Yet the disturbing nature of *Lighter than Orange* is exactly what makes this documentary so powerful and historically significant. Leupold's film makes these horrifying stories feel terrifyingly real, which is absolutely crucial when making this type of documentary. Leupold does not allow viewers to distance themselves from the film's subject and he does not attempt to sugarcoat or dilute the perturbing veracity of the matter. The film's poignant authenticity is what makes *Lighter than Orange* a must-see documentary. Nevertheless, *Lighter than Orange* is more than just a documentary about a pertinent and important topic; it is also an incredibly well made and beautiful film. Leupold's

documentary is expertly edited and the cinematography is utterly breathtaking. *Lighter than Orange* is unlike any other documentary about the Vietnam War and should be considered mandatory viewing when learning about this subject. Moreover, *Lighter than Orange* is an extraordinarily genuine and enlightening work of art.

*Lighter than Orange* is an official selection of the New York City Independent Film Festival and will be screened at the festival October 2015.

Review: *Lighter than Orange* By Alexia Amoriello.

<https://www.nycindieff.com/blog/review-lighter-than-orange>

"I was very much impressed by the soft styling of the film which somehow cushions the intensity of the veterans' stories. I am so grateful that you followed through on your idea and made this film a reality!"

Becky Luening, Portland, Oregon,

Board President of the Vietnam Friendship Village Project

"Great project, more than a film, so support this!"

Lukasz Kus, Germany

"You and your friends have done something good for our country and the world. The people should learn through this, to live peaceful with each other."

Tran Van Ly, Hanoi

## FILMCREW

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Cinematography	Armin Dierolf · <a href="http://www.armindierolf.de">www.armindierolf.de</a>
Sound	Manja Ebert · <a href="http://www.manja-ebert.de">www.manja-ebert.de</a>
Editing	Felix Klickermann · Mirjam Braßler · Nadjah Mahler · Marie-Luise Leupold
Editor	Nina Mühlenkamp · Thomas Rimbot
Sound Design	Martin Steyer
Translations	Nguyen Thanh Binh · Tran Van Ly Luong Tuyet Nhung · Aymi Tran Dominique de Rivaz · Jean-Pierre Knecht Julia Metzger-Traber · Jennifer Nguyễn Mai Ngô · Lilian Leupold
Motion Design	Damian Perez · Yves Jates
Vocal	Trương Thị Hạnh
Musical Arrangement	Marie Séférian
Recording Mixer	Dominik Schleier
Art Direction	Volker Pook · monospace Daniel Albert
Director/Production	Matthias Leupold

## DCP, BLURAY, DVD

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Language	VN, EN
German title	Lighter Than Orange – The Legacy of Dioxin in Vietnam
Vietnamese title	Điểm lặng
English title	Lighter Than Orange – The Legacy of Dioxin in Vietnam
French title	Plus léger qu'Orange
Subtitles	EN, FR, DE, VN
Runtime	72 min
DCP	EN, DE
BlueRay	EN, DE
DVD	EN, FR, DE, VN
Website	<a href="http://www.lighterthanorange.com">www.lighterthanorange.com</a>

## CONTACT

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## SUPPORT

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Village of Friendship e.V.  
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Berliner Technische Kunsthochschule  
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