

Mamae **An affliction of the spirit**

Veterans,

You're all wondering why I'm hammering away at the Agent Orange belief. Here's why.

What have we bequeathed to our children and grandchildren? The memory of a generation of their soldier ancestors who went to war, bravely and honourably, in the service of their country. Or the totally wrong and enduring belief that they themselves are the victims of that war.

My series of papers about Agent Orange (in the NZ Vietnam Veterans & Families Facebook group) chronicles a long research journey through the history, science, law, politics and sociology of Agent Orange and other issues, and the factors that have led, in my opinion, to the wounding of the collective psyche of our Vietnam veteran community, and to a damaging affliction of the collective spirit; our collective spirit. *Mamae*. Represented by the orange ribbons and by the orange scarves. Badges of victimhood. Symbols of *mamae*.

I'm not a victim. I'm still a soldier. I'm fighting to cast off this dreadful *mamae*.

The research chronicles my own anger that we have allowed this to happen, that in many ways we have done it to ourselves, and to our children and grandchildren. We have damaged the wellbeing of our future generations by inflicting upon them our own totally unfounded belief in the Agent Orange mythology, and with it the anger, fear and despair it engenders.

We didn't deliberately do it. But we were led there willingly by the prophets of the Agent Orange mythology, in the USA, in Australia and in New Zealand. They didn't deliberately set out to create this truly terrible inter-generational *mamae*. They truly believed the Agent Orange mythology themselves and spread the word far and wide. We believed it too. No-one thought to question it. To ask if it was true. To ask where it might be leading us, and our children and grandchildren. The Agent Orange prophets are not entirely to blame, for we conspired with them to create this monster. We went along with it.

I would describe that wounding or affliction as a conviction, based in mythology, that contains within itself, and nurtures and sustains, a cruel and psychologically damaging *mamae*; the intergenerational belief that almost every disease, disorder, disability, defect and death can be attributed to Agent Orange and other chemicals. It is not true. Passing it down through the generations is cruelty. We must stop it.

That affliction manifests in many ways; in a culture of blame, and in anger, guilt, fear, despair, and a sense of helplessness, perhaps even hopelessness. And in an inability to see, accept and acknowledge that the many diseases, disorders, disabilities, defects and death that afflict veterans and their whanau, also afflict the rest of the New Zealand general population, and the Maori population, at much the same rate, or even higher for Maori.

Unfortunately we in the Vietnam veteran cohort, and our whanau, are living (and dying) through an unprecedented epidemic of diseases of the modern affluent society; obesity, diabetes, allergies, heart disease, respiratory disease, stroke, cancers, and neurological and psychological disorders. That epidemic began at about the same time as we came out of Vietnam and it may have something to do with our perceptions of our own health disadvantage, compounding the *mamae*.

For how long will the generations deny that reality? When will we accept that disease, disorder, disability, defect and death are normal. At least that's what I learnt growing up in my hapu/tribe. I discovered later that not all of it is inevitable, that we can take charge of our own health and prevent some of it, but not all of it. Some of it strikes by pure chance. We find it difficult to accept random and unexplained causes.

We can't prevent Death of course. That old man strikes when he's least expected. That's been his way forever. We cheated him in Vietnam, all but 37 of us. We could count every day since as a reprieve, as a blessing even.

We Vietnam veterans are ageing and dying off with more than a third of us gone already, perhaps more. When we have all faded away, what will be our legacy? The remembrance of honourable service to the nation? Or will it be an affliction of the spirit, a wounding that we have bequeathed to our children and grandchildren? And to their children and grandchildren? For how many generations might that *mamae* persist unless we do something to stop it dead in its tracks.

That *mamae* generates disunity in the Vietnam veterans' community between those who believe and those who don't. The disunity is often expressed in an abusive and offensive manner. Which is why many remain on the sidelines, declining to engage in the dispute. Not me. Not any more. I think that it is time we did unite around an urgent and common cause. Not to prolong the victimhood as many would have us do. But to stop the Agent Orange *mamae* dead in its tracks. To heal the collective psyche. To heal the collective spirit.

It's not the families that will take up this challenge. Only the veterans can do it. It's time for us to lead the way out of the *mamae*. To repair our bequest to the future generations.