

Merry Band of Vietnam War Era Retirees: Creation, Mission, Findings, and Continuing Research

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Abstract

This review examines the development and continuing scientific role of the Merry Band of Vietnam War Era Retirees, an independent research group created to investigate the environmental and human-health consequences of tactical herbicide use during the Vietnam War and the Second Indochina War. While the use and impacts of Agent Orange and dioxin TCDD have been extensively documented, the production, transport, application, and environmental fate of other tactical herbicides, including the arsenic-based Agent Blue, received much less attention for decades. The research portfolio discussed in this review includes 27 refereed journal articles and three books developed through collaboration among Vietnam veterans, Vietnam Era veterans, soil and agricultural scientists, medical experts, media specialists, and other contributors. The research examined chemical-warfare landscapes in Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, the Panama Canal Zone, the United States, and Canada, with particular attention to contaminated soils and sediments, freshwater systems, industrial production sites, military and civilian exposure, food production, and the long-term persistence of dioxin TCDD and arsenic. This article describes how the group was created, the challenges encountered in investigating politically sensitive and sometimes previously classified material, and the role of fact checking, interdisciplinary expertise, open-access publication, and independent funding. Although the first organizational phase of the Merry Band research program has been completed, the scientific network and many of its research questions remain active. Participation by researchers associated with this portfolio in the 2026 international conference War, Soil, and Freshwater Systems in Prague illustrates a transition from retrospective investigation toward a broader

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continuing research program concerned with prediction, prevention, restoration, and the environmental consequences of past, present, and future conflicts.

Keywords: Chemical warfare; Rainbow Agents; soils; Merry Band of Vietnam War Era Retirees; political ecology; war-related environmental contamination; continuing research network.

Key Points

1. The Merry Band of Vietnam War Era Retirees developed an unusual independent model of interdisciplinary research combining veterans' knowledge, soil and water science, archival evidence, medical expertise, fact checking, and open-access publication.
2. Its 27 refereed papers and three books broadened investigation of Vietnam-era tactical herbicides beyond Agent Orange to include Agent Blue, arsenic, industrial production sites, transportation pathways, military bases, freshwater systems, and civilian as well as military exposure.
3. Independence from conventional institutional and grant funding gave the group unusual freedom to investigate politically sensitive questions, while increasing the importance of rigorous fact checking and interdisciplinary review.
4. The first organizational phase of the Merry Band has been completed, but the research network, collaborations, and scientific questions developed through the project remain active.
5. Participation of researchers associated with this portfolio in the Prague 2026 conference demonstrates a transition from retrospective reconstruction of Vietnam-era contamination toward predictive environmental-health assessment, post-conflict restoration, prevention, and the study of environmental consequences of contemporary warfare

1.0 Introduction

I was invited by a Vietnam veteran to present my Cu Chi and Iron Triangle soil-tunnel research and co-authored publication (1) at the traveling Replica Vietnam War Wall of Healing event held October 25–28, 2018, in Paducah, Kentucky. After receiving a Department of Defense Vietnam War Commemoration, I met other recipients, including a former VA psychologist who was treating Vietnam veterans who had boots on the ground in South Vietnam for PTSD. He asked me to consider expanding my research to include Agent Orange and dioxin TCDD. In 2019, I expanded the research topic and published my first co-authored paper on the subject (2), Long-Term Fate of Agent Orange and dioxin TCDD Contaminated Soils and Sediments in Vietnam Hotspots, in the Open Journal of Soil Science. I then asked my former employer, the University of Illinois College of ACES, Department of NRES, to post a media news release, and it did. To my surprise, the ACES release was picked up by more than 200 media sites. According to OJSS and ResearchGate statistics, the 2019 article subsequently received more than 60,000 views, reads, or downloads and has been cited more than 60 times. The article also generated strong criticism from a former

Department of Defense Agent Orange spokesman and from anonymous sources, and the quality of my research was challenged. At that point I decided that future work needed a broader international group to strengthen credibility, fact check, edit, co-author, and review publications before release. This became the Merry Band of Vietnam War Era Retirees. The committee included Vietnam veterans, Vietnam Era veterans, US Army veterans, agricultural college professors, and, as needed, medical, media, and legal advisers.

Our team mission was to conduct scientific research on soils, water, agriculture, and natural-resource management; synthesize and analyze current and historical documents and scientific evidence relevant to the legacies of war, especially the Vietnam War and the Second Indochina War; and prepare peer-reviewed papers of value to military personnel, veterans, their families, affected civilians, scientists, and the general public. The environmental legacies of the war extended far beyond front-line veterans. They included civilian and military personnel who manufactured, transported, handled, or came into contact with tactical herbicides, contaminated aircraft, and other equipment, as well as people who continue to live and work on soils and around waters affected by residual dioxin TCDD and arsenic.

This research update focuses on two related dimensions. First, it reviews the 30 publications produced through the Merry Band research program on tactical herbicides, soils, freshwater systems, military landscapes, and human exposure during and after the Vietnam War and the Second Indochina War. Second, it examines the unusual collective process through which this body of work was developed by an unofficial committee of Vietnam War Era retirees and scientific collaborators. It is beyond the scope of this article to synthesize every paper into a comprehensive monograph; instead, the review provides a *précis* of the research portfolio and an account of the group's working model.

It is important to note that this portfolio consists not of one or two articles but of 27 refereed journal papers and three books, totaling more than 900 journal pages and more than 1,200 book pages. Taken together, the studies examined a political ecology of chemical warfare by re-evaluating impacts on soils and water, reconstructing the use and movement of tactical herbicides, and documenting continuing environmental and human-health concerns through maps, photographs, interviews, military records, archival materials, and scientific literature. The geographical coverage included Vietnam, the United States, Panama, Laos, Canada, Thailand, and Cambodia. The initiative was developed largely without funding from the US military, government agencies, nonprofit organizations, universities, or news organizations; most of the research and open-access publication costs were self-funded by members of the network. The portfolio traces tactical herbicides from scientific development and industrial production through military transport and application to long-term contamination and remediation. It also connects the Southeast Asian war landscapes to industrial production sites in the United States and Canada, emphasizing that the environmental history of tactical herbicides extends across both battlefields and civilian communities.

Given the scope of these publications, the first objective of this capstone article is to explain how the Merry Band research program was created, organized, fact checked, funded, and published. A second objective is to examine what happened after the original research program reached maturity. Although the group was created around the environmental legacies of the Vietnam War and the Second Indochina War, several of its researchers continue to apply the knowledge, methods, and questions developed through that work to current problems in military environmental science, including those being discussed at the 2026 Prague conference War, Soil, and Freshwater Systems.

2.0 Journey and Findings

I enlisted for three years in the US Army in November 1969. I wanted to become an officer, but after Basic and Advanced Individual Training I had to wait an additional six months for an Officer Candidate School opening at Fort Benning, Georgia. I completed basic training at Fort Dix, New Jersey, and AIT at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, where I was trained in artillery fire direction control. After I dropped my OCS candidacy, I remained an enlisted soldier and was assigned to Fort Knox as a clerk typist and requisition clerk in the Supply Section. As I recall, our unit could order supplies needed for Fort Knox, including ammunition used on the firing range and pesticides and herbicides used on base grounds and perimeters, including 2,4,5-T from the Federal Supply Catalog. At that time I supported the official US mission in Vietnam and would have gone to South Vietnam if ordered. Many soldiers in my unit had previously served there and had been shot, wounded, or sprayed while serving. Some believed the spray was malathion for mosquito control rather than herbicides later associated with dioxin TCDD and/or arsenic exposure.

I did not have boots on the ground in South Vietnam during the war. The only fox-hole digging I did was in the sandy soils at Fort Dix. Typing was the military skill most often used in my assignments; as a college graduate who could type on a typewriter, I was usually selected for office work rather than tank or artillery duties. Decades later, my Cu Chi and Iron Triangle soil-tunnel research (1) was of interest to colleagues and to my former institution, which issued an ACES news release about the work. During my 2016 visit to the Cu Chi area, however, I also became interested in why the trees in the former “Garden Spot of Vietnam” appeared so young and slender. That observation led me toward a different question: the long-term environmental effects of tactical herbicides used to defoliate vegetation and expose tunnel complexes.

My former institution did not continue to issue ACES news releases for the later warfare-soils work. After I retired in 2014, my 2016 trip to the Saigon and Mekong River landscapes was self-funded, and I did not receive institutional or grant support for this research. My former institution maintained major relationships with federal agencies and private-sector funders, while my own work increasingly moved into politically sensitive questions concerning war, soils, freshwater, and chemical contamination. Retirement changed the practical situation. Without a job or grants to lose, I could follow my findings wherever they took me. And I did.

After I completed my tour of duty (1969 to 1971) in the US Army I joined the US Army Reserves from 1971 to 1973. I became the Supply Sergeant at a Cleveland, Ohio Army Reserve unit and then we went to summer camp at Fort Knox in 1972. After I returned home to Ohio I worked for the State of Ohio, Department of Natural Resources as a soil scientist in the National Cooperative Soil Survey program and decided to obtain my MS in Agronomy (Soils). I was aware that the military was using harmless agricultural herbicides in Vietnam based on stories I heard from returning soldiers at Fort Knox. At that time, I viewed my activity duty military service as a civilian career “interrupter”. However, I did get GI bill funding for part of my master’s degree studies (from 1973 to 1976). My fields of study, Agronomy and Soil Science, remained the same.

After I published the Agent Orange paper (2) in 2019 as a retiree, the university news release and modified versions rewritten by others were picked up by numerous media sites and reached a large international readership. Because I was no longer employed as a university professor and had no active grants tied to the work, I had greater freedom to conduct and publish research on the environmental, soil, and freshwater impacts of the Vietnam War. I continued to provide my former employer with copies of the journal articles and books after publication as a professional courtesy. I also took seriously the advice to fact check the work carefully before publication and accepted personal responsibility for the conclusions and for the criticism they might generate. The 2019 article continues to receive substantial readership.

I became a member of ResearchGate, which helped make the Agent Orange paper (2) accessible to readers in many countries. It also became clear that I needed an independent media and communication network because my former institution was not funding or supporting the warfare-soils program. The Merry Band media effort was led for a time by Mike Tharp, an experienced war correspondent who had served as an embedded correspondent and had written for major international newspapers. Tharp later died. Members of the group had long been concerned about his reported wartime exposure history, including possible exposure to dioxin TCDD and arsenic near the Bien Hoa Air Base perimeter. Subsequent news releases helped bring the team’s publications to readers in Southeast Asia and Vietnam.

I eventually came to understand that Agent Orange and Agent Blue could not be treated simply as ordinary agricultural herbicides used in an unusual setting. Agent Orange contained 2,4,5-T contaminated with dioxin TCDD, while Agent Blue was based on cacodylic acid and arsenic. Their military use went beyond defoliation. Agent Blue was used to destroy rice and other food crops as part of food-denial programs. I wrote several papers on this subject, including publications (5, 7, 9, 17, 24, and 27) in the portfolio below.

After I retired in 2014, I increasingly chose journals that allowed enough space to present the full historical, environmental, and geographic record. Some society journals had strict feature-article limits; by contrast, the Open Journal of Soil Science (OJSS) allowed substantially longer articles with numerous maps and photographs. This mattered because the warfare-soils studies often required long chronological

reconstructions, multiple sites, and extensive visual documentation. The open-access publication charges were fixed rather than increasing with article length or color figures. Self-funding 27 open-access warfare-soils articles and three books, along with graphic work and field travel, represented a substantial investment. OJSS also had an international readership and an editorial board representing multiple countries. I later accepted editorial-board responsibilities with both OJSS and Pollution and Diseases and became an Associate Editor of Pollution and Diseases. The warfare-soils findings were published in 27 journal articles and three books (1–30). I reported the evidence my co-authors and I found, including findings that sometimes differed from official US government position statements, and left readers to evaluate the documented record.

In 2019, I received several anonymous emails criticizing the Agent Orange paper (2) shortly after publication. Some messages questioned the scholarship and warned that the research could generate strong responses from government agencies and individuals associated with earlier Agent Orange policy debates. I expected challenges to the research, including criticism during peer review, requests for correction or retraction, and questions about my motives. Because I had enlisted in the Army during the Vietnam War and supported the US military mission at the time, I was particularly concerned that criticism of government policy might be interpreted as a lack of patriotism. That concern became one reason to build a review group that included veterans as well as scientists.

I therefore created the Merry Band of Vietnam War Era Retirees to fact check and review work before publication. I needed knowledgeable members who could contribute to research, writing, historical interpretation, and dissemination. Veterans with boots-on-the-ground experience in South Vietnam were especially important because they could evaluate military details, terminology, and exposure circumstances that were outside my own direct experience. The group also provided a broader community in which difficult findings could be tested before publication. Its purpose was not to predetermine conclusions but to strengthen the factual basis of work that could support veterans, their families, and civilians adversely affected by dioxin TCDD or arsenic exposure.

I wrote an entire paper on how agricultural herbicides became chemical weapons. It is in the attached list (7). I wrote about it in my papers on the attached list (4 and 8). These chemical plants were used to create these herbicides after the end WWII.

I was later encouraged by contacts at Can Tho University in the Mekong Delta, who had read the Agent Orange and Agent Blue papers, to apply for a Fulbright Specialist grant. I was selected and spent five weeks in Vietnam during September and October 2022, giving lectures on Agent Orange and Agent Blue and conducting research related to natural and anthropic arsenic in Mekong Delta soils and groundwater (10, 12). The Fulbright Program covered the trip expenses. The visit also provided access to colleagues, students, field settings, and archival resources in Can Tho and Ho Chi Minh City. The program, funded by the US Department of State, formally approved the visit, which gave the research trip clear federal authorization.

After the initial criticism of the Agent Orange paper (2), the Merry Band developed into a committee that initially included four former agricultural-college professors, two Vietnam Era veterans, and six Vietnam veterans who had boots on the ground in South Vietnam. As needed, the group also drew on two medical doctors, a media specialist, and a former lawyer as ex officio advisers. The membership was intentionally interdisciplinary because no single professional background was sufficient for the historical, scientific, military, medical, legal, and communication questions raised by the research.

Across the 2018–2026 period, the network produced 27 refereed journal articles and three books and e-books (1–30). The Agent Blue research was also read and discussed outside the group, including by medical researchers concerned with veteran exposure. The significance of that external uptake is important, but formal claims about changes in clinical or VA policy should be supported by the relevant administrative documentation when such evidence is available.

The work generated criticism and sustained challenges over several years. As the group leader, I usually responded to questions and criticism directed at the publications. Vietnam Era veteran organizations and individual veterans also provided advice and support. I regularly sent publications to critics and former government specialists for review and comment, including individuals who strongly disagreed with our interpretations. At times they published alternative interpretations or posted critical comments. This was part of the contested environment in which the research developed, and it reinforced the need to separate personal disagreement from verifiable evidence.

The list of team publications and open-access links is provided below. The membership of the unofficial Merry Band has remained confidential. Over time, 16 active and ex officio members participated; several later died, resigned, or moved to inactive status. I decided to deactivate the formal committee structure after the first phase of the mission was completed at the end of 2025. This did not end the scientific network. In 2026, members and collaborators remain active in related research, publication, archival work, and conference preparation. The first phase produced 27 warfare-soils papers and was followed by books on soil tunnels (28), Agent Orange (29), and Agent Blue (30). I also wrote nearly 300 email newsletters over the life of the committee to keep members informed.

I published two papers (4, 8) on environmental and human-health impacts associated with Agent Orange manufacturing sites in the United States and Canada. I contacted local newspaper editors to share these findings, but the articles initially received little local media attention. Later, reporters followed up on some of the sites. This experience reinforced a recurring problem in the project: scientific publication and public recognition do not necessarily occur at the same time.

One of the most difficult publication episodes involved our paper on the Secret War in Laos (21). The paper was subjected to additional review after publication, and portions dealing with human-health impacts were removed from a revised version. I later returned to the health questions in a follow-up manuscript (22) on cluster bombs, unexploded ordnance, herbicide spraying, human health, and environmental effects,

using additional citation sources. Throughout the project, our working rule was to publish only information that could be supported by citable evidence in the public record.

After completing phase 1 (journal articles) and phase 2 (books) of the warfare-soils series, I expanded the Great Rivers of the World research to rivers affected by the Russia–Ukraine and Israel–Arab conflicts. This introduced a new set of practical and ethical problems. Potential co-authors in or near current war zones sometimes withdrew because of personal or family safety concerns, political sensitivities, or disagreement over the scope of the article. Work on the Tigris–Euphrates and Dnieper river systems showed how difficult it can be for international scientists to participate openly in research involving active conflicts. These experiences also helped shift the research program from a historical Vietnam-centered project toward broader questions of environmental science during and after war.

3.0 Results and Achievements

The following are some of the most important achievements of the Merry Band of Vietnam War Era Retirees research initiative to date (31).

(1) The team helped bring Agent Blue, cacodylic acid, and arsenic into wider discussion among Vietnam Era veteran families and into a larger scientific literature on tactical herbicides and long-term environmental exposure.

(2) The open-access Agent Blue papers were read by clinicians and medical researchers concerned with veteran exposure, including researchers associated with Walter Reed. Subsequent medical work used veteran case material to examine Agent Blue-related questions. According to communications received by the team, the research also contributed to discussion of testing Vietnam Era veterans for arsenic and dioxin exposure in VA settings. Any claim of a formal nationwide policy change should be documented with the relevant administrative directive in the final publication record.

(3) Contacts at Can Tho University encouraged me to apply for a Fulbright Specialist grant to lecture and conduct research in Vietnam. I was selected and spent five weeks in Can Tho and Ho Chi Minh City during September and October 2022, working on Agent Orange, Agent Blue, and natural and anthropic arsenic in Mekong Delta soils and groundwater (12). The Fulbright Program funded the visit, which expanded the research network and strengthened direct scientific exchange with Vietnamese colleagues and students.

(4) Team papers were presented in connection with Vietnam War archival and anniversary activities at the Vietnam Center and Sam Johnson Vietnam Archive at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. Signed copies of the publications were deposited and scanned for long-term use by future historians and researchers.

(5) After the initial research in Vietnam, the project expanded to Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, including the environmental consequences of secret and less-documented components of the Second Indochina War. Four papers in the portfolio (18, 19, 21, 22) address these broader regional questions.

(6) The group also worked with Panama veteran communities and published three papers (6, 15, 16) examining pesticide and herbicide use in the Panama Canal Zone, including questions involving 2,4,5-T, dioxin TCDD, and arsenic on former military grounds and perimeter areas.

3.1 Merry Band of Vietnam War Era Retirees Research Portfolio (2017–2026)

(1) Olson, K.R. and L. W. Morton. 2017. Why were the soil tunnels of Cu Chi and Iron Triangle in Vietnam so resilient? Open Journal of Soil Science 7: 34-51.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2017.72003>

(2) Olson, K.R. and Morton, L.W. (2019) Long-Term Fate of Agent Orange and dioxin TCDD Contaminated Soils and Sediments in Vietnam Hotspots. Open Journal of Soil Science, 9, 1-34. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2019.91001>

(3) Olson, K.R. and Speidel, D.R. (2020) Review and Analysis: Successful Use of Soil Tunnels in Medieval and Modern Warfare and Smuggling. Open Journal of Soil Science, 10(5): 194-215. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2020.105010>

(4) Olson, K.R. and Tharp, M. (2020) How Did the Passaic River, a Superfund Site near Newark, New Jersey, Become an Agent Orange dioxin TCDD Hotspot? The Journal of Soil and Water Conservation, 75, 33A-37A.

<https://doi.org/10.2489/jswc.75.2.33A>

(5) Olson KR, Cihacek L. (2020) The fate of Agent Blue, the arsenic-based rice killer used in South Vietnam before and during the Vietnam War. Open Journal of Soil Science. 2020;10:518–577. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2020.1011027>

(6) Olson, K.R. and D. Tornoe. 2021. Long-Term Environmental Impacts of Pesticide and Herbicide Use in Panama Canal Zone. Open Journal of Soil Science 11(9): 403-434. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2021.119021>

(7) Olson, K.R. and Cihacek, L. (2022) How United States Agricultural Herbicides Became Military and Environmental Chemical Weapons: Historical and Residual Effects. Open Journal of Soil Science 12(1): 13-81.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2022.122002>

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<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2022.128016>

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<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2022.127012>

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<https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2022.125007>

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(12) Olson, K.R. and Chau, K.M. (2022) Natural and Anthropic Sources of Arsenic in the Groundwater and Soils of the Mekong Delta. *Open Journal of Soil Science*, 12, 541-570. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2022.1211023>

(13) Giang, H., Hai, T.T., Nguyen, H., Vuong, T.K., Morton, L.W. and Culbertson, C.B. (2022) Elevated congenital heart disease birth prevalence rates found in Central Vietnam and dioxin TCDD residuals from the use of 2,4,5-T herbicides (Agent Orange) in the Da Nang region <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pgph.0001050>

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(15) Olson, K.R. (2023) Review and Analysis: Did the United States Transport, Off-Load and Use Commercial 2,4,5-T Herbicides with Unknown Amounts of dioxin TCDD on Military Base Grounds in Panama Canal Zone between 1948 and 1999? *Open Journal of Soil Science*, 13, 490-515. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2023.1311023>

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(18) Olson, K.R. and Cihacek, L. (2023) Use of Agent Purple, Agent Orange, and Agent Blue on Royal Thai Air Force Base Perimeters in Thailand during the Vietnam War. *Open Journal of Soil Science*, 13, 233-261. <https://doi.org/10.4236/ojss.2023.135010>

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3.2 Selected Continuing Work by Members and Collaborators: Prague 2026

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(37) *Pollution and Diseases. War, Soil, and Freshwater Systems – 2026: Conference Overview*. Prague, Czech Republic, October 15–17, 2026. <https://pollution-diseases-ojs.org/index.php/pd/prague-2026>

4.0 From a Retiree Committee to a Continuing Research Network

The first organizational phase of the Merry Band of Vietnam War Era Retirees was largely completed with publication of the warfare-soils journal series and three books on soil tunnels, Agent Orange, and Agent Blue. The committee structure created to support, fact check, review, and disseminate this work was therefore no longer required in exactly the same form. However, completion of this first phase did not end the research questions or the scientific relationships developed through the project.

Several members and collaborators associated with the Merry Band research portfolio continue to work on war-related environmental problems, including soil and freshwater contamination, long-term human-health consequences, environmental remediation, veteran exposure, agricultural recovery, and the prevention of similar environmental damage in future conflicts. The network has become less a formal committee and more a continuing set of scientific relationships.

This continuing role is especially visible in the international conference *War, Soil, and Freshwater Systems*, scheduled for Prague, Czech Republic, on October 15–17, 2026 (37). Several researchers associated with the Merry Band portfolio are contributing conference papers and participating in the scientific discussion.

David R. Speidel has extended lessons from historical military contamination toward predictive environmental-health risk assessment for future military operations (32). His current work asks whether knowledge from environmental toxicology,

exposure pathways, and long-term health effects can be incorporated into military planning before environmental and human-health consequences become irreversible.

Lois Wright Morton has moved the discussion from documentation of wartime damage toward post-conflict reclamation and reconstruction (33). Her current work addresses contaminated soils, degraded water resources, farmer livelihoods, food and nutrition security, and the role of farmers as active partners in rebuilding war-damaged agricultural landscapes.

Donna Tornoe continues work on herbicide exposure and the recognition of war-related health harm in the Panama Canal Zone, including the important distinction between tactical and commercial 2,4,5-T and associated TCDD exposure (34). My own 2026 conference work continues to examine the industrial and river-system dimensions of Agent Orange manufacturing and contamination in the United States and the longer history of engineered waterways as pathways of industrial pollution (35, 36).

These projects differ from the original Merry Band studies in an important way. Much of our earlier work reconstructed what happened during and after the Vietnam War and the Second Indochina War. The current research increasingly asks what can be learned from that history for present and future environmental science. The transition is from documentation toward prediction, prevention, restoration, and improved scientific recognition of war-related environmental damage.

In this sense, the Merry Band did not simply disappear when its first organizational phase was completed. The committee evolved into a wider research network. The Vietnam War remains an important historical case, but it is no longer the only object of study. Knowledge accumulated through work on Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, Thailand, Panama, the United States, and Canada is now being brought into discussion with researchers studying contemporary conflicts, post-conflict agricultural recovery, new forms of military pollution, freshwater degradation, environmental-health risk, and long-term remediation.

The original Merry Band was created to help a small group investigate difficult questions that did not fit comfortably within existing institutional structures. The next phase is different. Those questions are now becoming part of a broader international scientific discussion.

5.0 Discussion: Emerging Themes

Reflecting on this research initiative and on Higgins' analysis (31), several themes emerge. First, the chemical-warfare research often involved records that had once been classified, fragmented government documentation, and evidence dispersed across agencies and countries. The committee therefore needed people who could evaluate scientific details, military records, institutional procedures, ethics, law, and publication strategy. Its internal review was not a substitute for journal peer review, but it provided an additional layer of fact checking and interdisciplinary scrutiny before manuscripts entered the formal publication process.

The work also required connections to disciplinary scientists, regional specialists, veterans, and military experts. These relationships helped with field collaboration, interpretation of historical documents, logistics, local dissemination, and the practical limits of research in politically sensitive settings. The value of the network was therefore not simply the number of people involved, but the combination of different kinds of experience brought to the same environmental questions.

A further theme is the effort to connect environmental research with veteran and public-health concerns. The Agent Blue papers attracted attention from clinicians and medical researchers, including researchers associated with Walter Reed, and contributed to broader discussion of arsenic and dioxin exposure among Vietnam Era veterans. The precise relationship between the Merry Band publications and any formal VA testing or benefits policy should be documented through administrative records rather than inferred from sequence alone. Even with that qualification, the group's sustained effort to make exposure questions visible demonstrates its commitment to veterans, civilians, and other populations affected by wartime chemicals.

The use of Agent Blue to destroy rice and other food crops in South Vietnam also raises continuing legal, historical, ethical, and environmental questions (30). The Merry Band research does not by itself settle those debates. It does, however, add scientific evidence about the long-term behavior of arsenic, the environmental consequences of crop-destruction programs, and the importance of reconstructing what decision-makers knew and how military objectives were documented and communicated. A consistent principle of the group was that people exposed to these chemicals deserved scientific attention regardless of nationality. That principle remains relevant as research moves from historical reconstruction toward contemporary and future conflicts. The story may ultimately warrant broader documentary treatment, but its first obligation remains a verifiable scientific record.

6.0 Conclusion: The Work Continues

The longer-term significance of the Merry Band may lie not only in the 30 publications reviewed in this article. The group also created a practical model for independent interdisciplinary research on politically and scientifically difficult environmental questions. Veterans, soil scientists, agricultural researchers, medical specialists, media professionals, and other experts contributed different forms of knowledge to a common problem.

That model remains relevant. War-related environmental research is now expanding beyond historical reconstruction of Vietnam-era contamination toward analysis of ongoing conflicts, post-conflict recovery, predictive environmental-health assessment, and prevention of future environmental damage. The Prague 2026 conference provides an opportunity to connect experience accumulated through the Merry Band with a broader international community working on these problems.

The history described in this article is therefore unfinished. The original committee completed the first phase of its mission, but the scientific questions that created it

remain active. In that sense, the next phase is not an epilogue to the Merry Band. It is the beginning of a wider research program at a new level.

Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Data Availability Statement

No new datasets were generated for this review. The publications discussed in the research portfolio are identified in Sections 3.1 and 3.2 and are available through the listed journal, DOI, and book links.