

Veterans returned to the U.S. after fighting in the jungles of Vietnam a half century ago, but hundreds of them may be dying from a silent bullet — a slow-killing parasite living in the men decades after the war, a new study revealed.

Liver flukes, parasites that infect a human when raw or undercooked fish is eaten, are being investigated as the cause of a rare bile duct cancer among veterans who served in the Vietnam War. It could take years for symptoms to show up, but when they do, the host is left with tremendous pain and given just a few months to live.

The Department of Veterans Affairs this spring commissioned a small pilot study to look into the link between liver flukes and the cancer. More than 20 percent of the 50 blood samples submitted to the study came back positive or bordering positive for liver fluke antibodies, said Sung-Tae Hong, the tropical medicine specialist who carried out the tests at Seoul National University in South Korea.

Gerry Wiggins, who served in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969, agreed to take part in the study even though he didn't have any symptoms. The 69-year-old said he has already lost friends to the disease. To his surprise, liver fluke antibodies were detected in him.

"I was in a state of shock," he said. "I didn't think it would be me."

Further tests showed two cysts on his bile duct what could develop into cancer known as cholangiocarcinoma. They were removed and Wiggins is doing well.

Everyone who tested positive for the antibodies was notified, Northport VA Medical Center spokesman Christopher Goodman told the Associated Press. Goodman would not comment on the findings. The parasites infect about 25 million people worldwide, mostly in Asia. It's very uncommon among Americans.

The parasites can be killed in infected humans through drugs during the early stages. But they can also live in humans without treatment for decades because no symptoms show up — much like veterans who fought in the jungles of Vietnam during the war. Over time, swelling and inflammation of the bile duct can lead to cancer. Jaundice, itchy skin, weight loss and other symptoms appear only when the disease is in its final stages.

Mike Baughman, 65, who has bile duct cancer that his doctor said was "more likely than not" caused by liver flukes, was granted a claim for service-related benefits early this year after being denied three times. Baughman was probably infected when his unit ate uncooked fish in the Vietnam jungle after they ran out of rations. He gets about \$3,100 a month and said he's relieved to know his wife will continue to receive benefits after he dies. But he remains angry that other veterans' last days are consumed by fighting the same government they went to war for as young men.

"In the best of all worlds, if you came down with cholangiocarcinoma, just like Agent Orange, you automatically were in," he said, referring to benefits granted to veterans exposed to the toxic defoliant sprayed in Vietnam. "You didn't have to go fighting."

"Personally, I got what I needed, but if you look at the bigger picture with all these other veterans, they don't know what necessarily to do," he said. "None of them have even heard of it before. A lot of them give me that blank stare like, 'You've got what?'"