



As part of the American government's strategy, in the Vietnam War, planes—like the Douglas A-1E Skyraider—dropped white-phosphorus (tetraphosphorus, or P₄) bombs over suspected Viet Cong positions in South Vietnam.

In Vietnam, white phosphorus was dubbed "Willie Pete." It is extremely nasty, ignites spontaneously (at around 30 degrees C) and causes very painful injuries (which can sometimes be fatal).

This chemical can adhere to clothing, or skin, and keeps burning until it is deprived of atmospheric oxygen. The burns can be horrendous.

White phosphorus was once used in matches. People working with the substance could develop a terrible condition known as "phossy jaw."

Not only are white-phosphorus injuries to the jaw slow-to-heal, they can result in the virtual disintegration of a victim's jawbone. Charles Dickens wrote about such cases in an 1852 issue of *Household Words*, his periodical.

His article, entitled "One of the Evils of Match-making"—which appears in the May issue, at pages 152-155—tells of a 21-year-old match worker:

He has now no teeth in his lower jaw, of which a great part is destroyed.

White phosphorus is no-longer used in matches.

This image depicts a white-phosphorus bomb run, over South Vietnam, during 1966.

Click on the image for a full-page view.

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