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Agent Orange — One Veteran's Story

By Carolyn Ballou, California Department of Veterans Affairs January 13, 2013

U.S. Air Force veteran, Cleveland, Ohio native, and Folsom, California resident George Chappell loved classic cars. In fact, he owned a '36 Olds and '67 Chevy, which he occasionally entered into competition. As a surprise for his 59th birthday in 2006, his wife, Sue, gave him a beautiful, new, last-year-of-production GTO. George and Sue loved going to classic car shows together—especially Hot August Nights in Reno—in their limited-edition desert orange corvette, another car he occasionally showed. They also shared a love of George's children, his grandchildren, their three rescued dogs, '50s and '60s music, and art. George was quite an accomplished artist! He also belonged to a model car club and built models with his sons. His perfectly-crafted models won many awards through the years and were sometimes featured in model car magazines.

Life was good for George and Sue, and they were looking forward to traveling together during their quickly approaching retirements.

George was just 19 when he enlisted in the Air Force. He began basic training in 1966 and became a Fuels Specialist who could work on nearly any kind of aircraft. Deployed to Phu Cat, Vietnam, George loved working on and flying the C7A Caribous the best. They were large, lumbering transport planes that had excellent maneuverability at low altitude and slow airspeed and could make accurate drops into small places. He worked on other planes as well—many of which were used to drop millions of gallons of Agent Orange, the toxic herbicide mixture used to defoliate the jungles and expose enemy hiding places between 1962 and 1971. George had heard about the dangers of Agent Orange expo-

sure but, like so many his age, he felt immune and immortal. In 1970, for having distinguished himself "by meritorious achievement and service," George was awarded the Air Force Commendation Medal and the Air Medal. Unfortunately, the Air Force failed to list his medals on his discharge papers. Years later, George filed the necessary paperwork to ensure the honors of which he was so proud were appropriately documented.

According to Sue, and according to most anyone who knew or worked with George, he was very patriotic and incredibly proud of his country. He had little patience for those who were not. He talked frequently and nostal-



Photo Courtesy of the U.S.A.F.

gically about his time in the Air Force with anyone who would listen. "A lot of pilots couldn't hold a candle to the Air Force guys who had to land their planes near the unlit rice paddies of Vietnam," George would often boast.

Once, George had to repair a plane that had crashed and then fly it back to the base at Phu Cat. He was very proud of that. "I'd go back into the Air Force right now if I could," he frequently told Sue over the years.

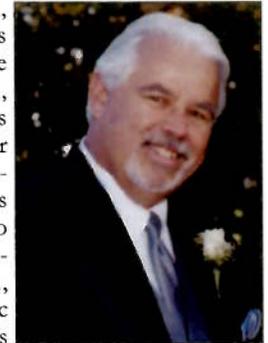
At age 60, George began to suffer from recurrent high fevers. Sometimes he complained of feeling hot even though his body temperature read as normal. His doctors would tell him they couldn't find anything wrong or would tell him he likely had a pass-

ing virus. At one point, George complained that his arms and legs hurt and he found himself unable to walk. "Paramedics who were called to our home were unable to get an accurate temperature reading on him because their thermometer didn't go that high," Sue said. Emergency room doctors who examined George said he had the flu. They ordered fluids and antibiotics. Further testing, including multiple blood samples, a spinal tap and an MRI, revealed that all the lymph nodes in George's body from his neck to his knees were swollen. He was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma—a cancer of the immune system. Later, more extensive testing revealed that George was suffering from Stage 4 mantle cell lymphoma, a cancer so rare that it had been diagnosed in only about 1,400 people worldwide. George got his diagnosis 60 years to the month after he entered basic training. After some time, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (USDVA) doctors conceded that George's cancer was associated with his exposure to Agent Orange while he was in Vietnam decades before.

The majority of George's care was handled by two top-notch female research doctors at Stanford to whom George was referred by his local Oncologist/Hematologist. His care was supervised by his no nonsense, get-him-what-he-needs-NOW wife. George was shuttled back and forth between Stanford Hospital in Palo Alto, local Mercy Hospitals, and home while he endured countless lab tests, 15 blood transfusions, and months of chemotherapy and radiation treatments. At first, George tolerated and responded well to treatment. As time went on, that changed. Sue organized multiple bone marrow drives on George's behalf but, because of his rare A-Negative blood type, finding a match proved difficult. Sadly, treatment was successful in George's cancer remission for only very short periods of time, never long enough to take advantage of a bone marrow transplant.

After a valiant fight on every-

one's part, George Donald Chappell, 63, succumbed to his disease fewer than 18 months after he was first diagnosed. He left behind his loving wife and best friend, Sue, his three children, his brother and sister, his two grandchildren, his classic cars, his beautiful art work, his three rescue dogs, and a legacy of proud and honorable service, unmitigated sacrifice, and unyielding pride in his country. "George's DD214 was corrected to include his Air Force Commendation Medal, but he became too ill to respond to the Air Force's request for additional documentation, and he died before getting his Air Medal listed," Sue said.



The USDVA presumes that 14 different diseases and disorders are related to Agent Orange exposure when diagnosed in "boots-on-the-ground" veterans and certain other veterans groups. Unlike George, who suffered from a very rare form of cancer, other Agent Orange-related diseases and disorders can be cured or successfully managed if diagnosed and treated early.

If you are a Vietnam veteran who served between 1962 and 1971, go to www.va.gov (<http://www.va.gov>) to learn more about your Agent Orange risk and about the diseases associated with exposure. You owe it to yourself and to your family to find out as much as you can.

For answers to benefits or other veteran-related questions, visit the CalVet web site at www.calvet.ca.gov or call 1-877-741-8532.

<http://www.usveteransmagazine.com/article/agent-orange-one-veteran%20%80%99s-story>

(See link at <http://www.c-7acaribou.com/>)



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