

'We've Been Fighting This for 55 Years'

A Vietnam veteran and VFW member from Connecticut continues to advocate and honor veterans who suffer from or who succumbed to illnesses caused by Agent Orange exposure

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When Army veteran Gerry Wright returned from the Vietnam War in December 1970, he would carry the burden of Agent Orange with him.

Joining thousands of fellow veterans who had fallen victim to the herbicide, Wright brought his battle stateside, where he continues to spend each day raising awareness and honoring those who were, in his words, “sprayed and betrayed” in the war zone.

“We were told it was harmless for humans,” said Wright, who served with the 19th Combat Engineers in Vietnam between May 1969 and December 1970. “I spent a lot of time on the back of a five-ton tanker truck spraying roadside foliage — no hat, no shirt, no gloves.”

The New York native, whose unit was tasked with building roads and spraying herbicide along the roadway to kill thick foliage the enemy could use for cover, grew conscious of the underlying problem.

“When the wind would blow back on us, my nose would burn,” recalled Wright, a Life member of VFW Post 8776 in Hebron, Connecticut. “It was also being dropped from planes over the jungles, sometimes landing in bodies of water and washing into rivers and basins when it rained. We were scooping this water up, taking it back to our compounds, drinking it, showering in it the whole time.”

From severe rashes to sores and blisters, the effects of Agent Orange began revealing themselves over the course of Wright’s 18 months in Vietnam. But it wasn’t until he returned to the U.S. that those side effects grew worse.

Just three years removed from his service in Vietnam, Wright went into cardiac arrest in

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1973 before finding out he had heart disease and other ailments as a result of the chemical exposure.

17 DISEASES LINKED TO AGENT ORANGE

VA now recognizes 17 diseases that it deems were caused by the herbicide, including cancers and severe psychological and neurological illnesses. In 2020, Congress also added three new conditions linked to Agent Orange exposure to the list of presumptive conditions. Tragically, though, many veterans have since died waiting for their approval and related benefits.

“We’ve been fighting this for 55 years,” said Wright, who also served in the Connecticut National Guard from 1982-1999 and retired as a first sergeant. “I’ve personally dealt with muscle loss, neuropathy and atrial fibrillation. Others who served with me in Vietnam have had it worse, having died of heart disease, cancer and other illnesses.”

But Wright is not one to sit by and quietly lose his battle against Agent Orange. He has joined other VFW members calling for better VA medical coverage at rallies and hearings in Connecticut and Washington, D.C.

His knowledge and activism for veterans earned him an induction into the Connecticut Veterans Hall of Fame in 2014, as well as a platform to speak for veterans exposed to Agent Orange as a guest of Sen. Richard Blumenthal (D-Conn.) at the 2018 State of the Union address.

In 2018, Wright also sold his lucrative RV storage and towing business in Bolton, Connecticut, turning his fight for full medical benefits for veterans suffering from Agent Orange exposure into a full-time job.

He purchased an orange Honda Goldwing trike motorcycle and set off on a cross-country journey to collect signatures supporting legislation to remove the end dates on Agent Orange treatments. Riding with the moniker “Sprayed and Betrayed,” as well as “I was killed in Vietnam. I just haven’t died yet,” sprawled across his bike, Wright drove more than 22,000 miles and collected about 7,200 signatures.

“We are trying so hard to keep it in the limelight to let people know that we’re still out there fighting for this,” Wright said. “It’s a fight I’m not willing to give up on. We owe it to all those we’ve already lost.”

While on his cross-country trip, Wright also stopped in Ennis, Texas, where he discovered a marvelous Agent Orange Memorial sitting at the town’s Veterans Memorial Park.

“I knew I had to have one here in Andover (Connecticut),” Wright added. “I didn’t think about it twice. Whatever it would take, I was going to get it done.”

When he returned to Andover, he began a fundraising campaign that required selling individually inscribed bricks paid for by donors, which also would become part of the walkway to the Agent Orange mural at the Andover Veterans Monument Park.

It took about six months, according to Wright, and more than \$30,000 was raised through brick sales and donations for the Agent Orange monument.

Nolan's Hamden Monument Co., in Hamden, Conn., provided the inscribed rock, added Wright, who also worked with a sketch artist at the Coventry Police Department in Rhode Island to design the back of the monument.

The unveiling ceremony was held on June 5, welcoming more than 400 guests, including Rep. Joe Courtney (D-Conn.) and former state VA commissioner Linda Schwartz.

"This monument is dedicated to every veteran, every family member and anybody who was poisoned by a dioxin called Agent Orange," Wright said. "The reminder of this monument is for future generations not to make the same mistake that our government did in 1961."

Wright's next mission is to use some of the remaining proceeds to add a six-foot bronze Battlefield Cross near the Agent Orange mural at the Veterans Monument Park in Andover.

"We're thinking the spring of 2022 because I don't want to hurry this," Wright added. "At the end of the day, this isn't about me. Everyone who has ever donated as a veteran or on behalf of one is forever going to be a part of this."

This article is featured in the October 2021 issue of [VFW magazine](#), and was written by [Ismael Rodriguez Jr.](#), senior writer for VFW magazine.