

'We Have to Keep Fighting'

A VFW life member and Vietnam War veteran created a nonprofit to honor and memorialize Vietnam War veterans and those suffering from Agent Orange exposure

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When a new Orange Heart Memorial sprouted on the fertile grounds of the Springfield Memorial Gardens in Tennessee last year, the 532 names inscribed on the bronze cenotaphs humbled Ken Gamble.

Each name, that of a Vietnam War veteran, presented Gamble, a Vietnam War veteran himself, with another reason to continue his mission to honor those who fight, and those who fought and succumbed to the devilish effects of Agent Orange.

Representing the Orange Heart Medal Foundation, a Springfield, Tenn.-based nonprofit Gamble started in 2018, the brown-water Navy veteran stood at the Orange Heart Memorial's unveiling ceremony on Veterans Day last year and remembered the journey of Kenneth Webb.

Webb, a Vietnam War veteran from California, had sent an application to have his name added to one of the bronze cenotaphs. He, like Gamble, had fought Agent Orange side effects for decades since their exposure to the herbicide.

"He told me he would love to come in for the dedication after getting his name on the memorial," recalled Gamble, a Life member of VFW Post 2120 in Greenbrier, Tennessee, about 8 miles from Springfield. "But he told me he would have to catch a train because his doctor said he couldn't fly in his condition."

What Webb left out was that he had been living in a hospice, fighting daily to keep from going gently without completing his final mission in life. He later confessed to Gamble that he had gotten an Iraq War veteran to get him out of the hospice and help him get on a plane for Nashville, where he then caught a train to Springfield.

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“He was staying at this hotel in town until the ceremony, but he never made it,” Gamble said. “He passed out in his hotel and was rushed to the hospital, where we picked him up to take him to see the memorial.”

It was in Webb’s private moment that Gamble witnessed the visceral impact his Orange Heart Medal Foundation and the newly sprouted memorial had on those suffering from the long-lasting effects of Agent Orange exposure.

“I remember him tracking his name down and touching it,” Gamble said. “He told us this had been his last mission and then he broke down and cried. He had to miss the ceremony and return to California. He died three days later.”

FIGHTING THE GOOD FIGHT

For Gamble, the Orange Heart Memorial was a labor of love and duty that came from a VFW Post 2120 meeting in the spring of 2019 that welcomed Kentuckian Kathy Diel, who promoted an idea to put a stone in every state to recognize veterans.

She was a guest of Gamble’s, whose creation of the Orange Heart Medal Foundation had gathered nationwide buzz for its mission to bring recognition for veterans who were affected by exposure to Agent Orange.

Gamble, who fought past radiation and chemotherapy at VA hospitals for prostate cancer as a result of his exposure, took on the gargantuan responsibility of serving as a voice for Vietnam War veterans suffering from Agent Orange.

His foundation, which is made up of six veteran board funds to honor veterans suffering from Agent Orange exposure by awarding them an Orange Heart Medal that resembles a Purple Heart.

“You would not believe the amount of emails I get every day from veterans or, sadly, their widows thanking me for what we’re doing,” Gamble said. “They are extremely grateful just to have someone recognize them and their fight against Agent Orange.”

The medals, which are legally recognized in Alabama and Tennessee, with the proposal on the voting floor in South Carolina, North Carolina, Ohio, California, Hawaii, Texas, Arkansas and Missouri, have been shipped to more than 8,000 Agent Orange victims and their spouses to date. But Gamble wanted to expand his mission, thus bringing Diel to the Post 2120 meeting in hopes of finding his next task.

“She did her presentation, and it led to us deciding to instead make it a memorial here in town,” Gamble said. “I reached out to our local Legacy Group Funeral Home, and they offered us a plot of land as well as offering to do all the foundation for it, flagpoles and placing flags on those flagpoles. They even offered to do the memorial’s maintenance for

us.”

‘WE’RE DYING AT A RATE OF 557 A DAY’

The first phase of the memorial, which exceeded \$37,900 in costs that did not include the Legacy Group Funeral Home’s labor donations, was unveiled on Veterans Day 2021 in front of thousands of people from across the country who found their way to Springfield Memorial Gardens.

From Vietnam War veterans to their families, friends, local residents and friends of the foundation, the crowd huddled around the first of what Gamble believes to be many sections soon to be added to the memorial.

"The first phase was made of bronze cenotaphs, each one having 60 names of not just Vietnam War veterans that made it back home, but we also added orange hearts to those suffering from Agent Orange.”

The second phase, which is slated to unveil on March 29 to coincide with Vietnam Veterans Appreciation Day, will set the precedent for years to come, according to Gamble’s proposed plan.

“We want to start hosting ceremonies to unveil new phases of the memorial on Vietnam Veterans Day from here on out,” Gamble added. “We currently have 532 names on there, and we expect it to keep growing.”

Through his time at the helm of his foundation, Gamble also has worked continuously over the last three years with a filmmaker from Florida on a documentary exposing the effects of Agent Orange. From testimonials to recent scientific studies conducted at Vanderbilt University in Nashville, Gamble hopes the documentary can amplify the voice of awareness and extend its reach for Agent Orange victims everywhere.

“Look, we’re dying at a rate of 557 veterans a day, so we’re dying fast,” Gamble said of Agent Orange victims. “We don’t have a lot of time, so we have to keep fighting to raise awareness for these veterans.”

Gamble encourages those wanting to apply for an Orange Heart Medal or add a Vietnam War veteran’s name to the Orange Heart Memorial at Springfield Memorial Gardens to visit the foundation’s website at www.orangeheartmedal.org.

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