Vietnam Veterans of America

Chapter 324 - PO Box 18631 - Milwaukee, WI 53218

In Service to America

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Meeting Notice

15 March 2017

Elks Lodge 5555 W. Good Hope Rd.
Board Meeting 6:30 p.m.
Chapter Meeting 7 - 8 p.m.

Future Meetings 2017

19 April, 17 May, 21 June, 19 July, 16 August,
20 September, 18 October,
15 November, 20 December

Chapter web page: www.vietnamvetschapter324.com
National web page: www.vva.org

Chapter Officers

President: Pat Ciofani rezmel(at)sbcglobal.net
414-702-7734
Vice Pres: Oliver Williams w.oliver96(at)yahoo.com
414-358-4416
Secretary: Dennis Symanski dski06(at)hotmail.com
414-453-3600
Treasuer: Pat Moore irishpatat(at)sbcglobal.net
414-354-2533 Cell: 414-731-6029
Director: Paul Balge
414-212-3993
Director: David Titter d.titterat(at)sbcglobal.net
414-870-7012
Director: Mike Ducette miducette(at)aol.com
262-968-5508
Director: John Morgan asa600(at)aol.com
414-871-9274
Membership: Joe Herbert Joe's a Luddite
414-873-7341
Newsletter: John Zutz john(at)zutz.org
John is listed in the phone book - good luck findinng one

CHAPTER ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD AT THE APRIL MEETING

MEMBERS MAY NOMINATE CANDIDATES BY CONTACTING A CHAPTER OFFICER
OR BY ATTENDING A CHAPTER MEETING

VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Milwaukee Chapter 324
February 15, 2017

As a result of not reaching a quorum, no meeting was held for February 2017.

SAVE THE DATE & SPREAD THE WORD!

MILWAUKEE VA WILL HOLD
A 150TH BIRTHDAY CELEBRATION

JUNE 3, 2017

This all-day event will feature re-enactors, our history and current, world-class healthcare, plus lots more fun treats!

Dr. Orange: The Secret Nemesis of Sick Veterans

Mike Hixenbaugh and Charles Ornstein 11 November 2016 co-published with The Virginian-Pilot

Editor's note: This large article has been divided because of space considerations. The conclusion will be printed in the April newsletter.

A few years ago, retired Maj. Wes Carter was picking his way through a stack of internal Air Force memos, searching for clues that might help explain his recent heart attack and prostate cancer diagnosis. His eyes caught on several recommendations spelled out in all capital letters:

"NO ADDITIONAL SAMPLING …"

"DESTROY ALL …"

"IMMEDIATE DESTRUCTION …"

A Pentagon consultant was recommending that Air Force officials quickly and discreetly chop up and melt down a fleet of C-123 aircraft that had once sprayed the toxic herbicide Agent Orange across Vietnam. The consultant also suggested how to downplay the risk if journalists started asking questions: "The longer this issue remains unresolved, the greater the likelihood of outside press reporting on yet another 'Agent Orange Controversy.'"

The Air Force, Carter saw in the records, had followed those suggestions.

Carter, now 70, had received the 2009 memos in response to public records requests he filed after recalling the chemical stench in a C-123 he crewed on as an Air Force reservist in the years after the Vietnam War. He'd soon discovered that others he'd served with had gotten sick, too. Now it seemed he'd uncovered a government-sanctioned plan to destroy evidence of any connection between the aircraft, Agent Orange and their illnesses. And the cover-up looked like it had been set in motion by one man: Alvin L. Young...Carter had gotten his first glimpse of "Dr. Orange."

Young had drawn the nickname decades earlier as an Air Force expert on herbicides used to destroy enemy-shielding jungle in Vietnam. Since then -- largely behind the scenes -- the scientist, more than anyone else, has guided the stance of the military and US Department of Veterans Affairs on Agent Orange and whether it has harmed service members.

Young tested the weed killer for the Air Force during the war, helped develop a plan to destroy it at sea a decade later -- a waste of good herbicides, he'd said -- then played a leading role in crafting the government's response to veterans who believed the chemicals have made them sick. For a while, he even kept a vial of Agent Orange by his desk.

Throughout, as an officer and later as the government's go-to consultant, Young's fervent defense hasn't wavered: Few veterans were exposed to Agent Orange, which contained the toxic chemical dioxin. And even if they were, it was in doses too small to harm them. Some vets, he wrote in a 2011 email, were simply "freeloaders," making up ailments to "cash in" on the VA's compensation system.

Over the years, the VA has repeatedly cited Young's work to deny disability compensation to vets, saving the government millions of dollars.

Along the way, his influence has spawned a chorus of frustrated critics, including vets, respected scientists and top government officials. They argue that Young's self-labeled "investigations" are compromised by inaccuracies, inconsistencies or omissions of key facts, and rely heavily on his previous work, some of which was funded by Monsanto and Dow Chemical, the makers of Agent Orange. He also served as an expert for the chemical companies in 2004 when Vietnam vets sued them.

"Most of the stuff he talks about is in no way accurate," said Linda S. Birnbaum, director of the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, part of the National Institutes of Health, and a prominent expert on dioxin. "He's been paid a hell of a lot of money by the VA over the years, and I think they don't want to admit that maybe he [isn't] the end all and be all."

Birnbaum, whose agency studies how environmental factors affect health, questions how Young's training in herbicide science qualifies him to draw some conclusions. "He is not an expert when it comes to the human health effects," she said.

Others complain that Young spent years using his government authority to discount or resist new research, then later pointed to a lack of research to undercut vets' health claims.

"For really almost 40 years, there has been a studious, concerted, planned effort to keep any study from being done and to discredit any study that has been done," said Jeanne M. Stellman, an emeritus professor at Columbia University. Stellman, a widely published Agent Orange researcher, has repeatedly clashed with Young and the VA.

Stellman said Young provides a reliable

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response when it comes to Agent Orange: No.

Anyone who set foot in Vietnam during the war is eligible for compensation if they become ill with one of 14 cancers or other ailments linked to Agent Orange. But vets with an array of other illnesses where the connection is less well established continue to push for benefits. And those vets who believe they were exposed while serving elsewhere must prove it -- often finding themselves stymied.

It's not just the vets. Some of their children now contend their parents' exposure has led to their own health problems, and they, too, are filing claims.

In recent years, Young, 74, has been a consultant for the Department of Defense and the VA, as well as an expert witness for the US Department of Justice on matters related to dioxin exposure. By his own estimate, he's been paid "a few million" dollars over that time.

"He's an outstanding scientist," said Brad Flohr, a VA senior advisor for compensation, defending the agency's decision to hire Young in spite of the controversy surrounding his work. "He's done almost everything there is. He's an excellent researcher, not necessarily just Agent Orange."

In an interview and emails, Young defended his role. To date, he said, there's no conclusive evidence showing Agent Orange directly caused any health problems, only studies showing a statistical association. It's an important distinction, he says.

"I've been blamed for a lot of things," Young said. He likened the criticism he faces to Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump's smearing of "Crooked Hillary" Clinton after 30 years of public service: "They say, 'Crooked Young.'"

Young said he believes most sick vets are simply suffering from the effects of old age, or perhaps war itself, rather than Agent Orange. It's a point even critics say has some validity as vets have grown older during the benefits battle. His critics, he said, are as biased against the herbicide as he is accused of being for it. "Who's an impartial expert? Name one for me, by all means."

When Carter came across Young's name, he knew nothing of the controversy that surrounded him. He also had no need for benefits related to Agent Orange: He was already receiving full disability compensation from the VA for a back injury suffered during the first Gulf War.

Reading the memos after his 2011 cancer diagnosis, it seemed clear there was a link between Agent Orange and illnesses plaguing those who'd flown aboard C-123s.

But to get answers -- and to help others get benefits -- he'd have to take on Dr. Orange.

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In the summer of 1977, a VA claims worker in Chicago took a call from the sobbing wife of a veteran claiming "chemicals in Vietnam" had caused his cancer. The woman mentioned a mist sprayed from above to kill plants on the ground. The claims specialist, Maude DeVictor, called the Pentagon and was transferred to Capt. Alvin Young, who knew more about chemicals used in Vietnam than perhaps anyone.

By then, Young, who'd gained an appreciation for herbicides on his family's farm, had a doctorate in herbicide physiology and environmental toxicology and had spent nearly a decade studying defoliants for the Air Force. In 1961, the US began spraying millions of gallons of herbicides across Vietnam's thick jungles. Then, in 1971, it halted the effort after the South Vietnamese media reported a surge in birth defects in areas where the chemicals had been used -- a political decision, according to Young, who didn't believe the claims.

DeVictor peppered Young with questions on the phone that day. Within weeks, she'd identified more than two dozen other vets who believed their contact with Agent Orange had made them sick. DeVictor prepared a memo on what she had learned and shared her findings with a reporter, spurring national media attention on Agent Orange for the first time.

"Dr. Young was very helpful. Without him, I wouldn't have known anything," said DeVictor. She was later fired by the VA; she claimed for speaking out about the herbicide.

Young publicly refuted many of the comments attributed to him -- especially those suggesting Agent Orange might have harmed vets -- and criticized media reports that he felt sensationalized the risks. But the episode was a turning point, moving Young from the Air Force's internal herbicide expert to public defender of Agent Orange.

Over the next decade, as concern grew about the effects of Agent Orange, Young was repeatedly promoted to positions of increasing influence, despite public clashes with prominent politicians and some federal health experts. In 1980, an exasperated Rep.

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Dr. Orange continued

Tom Daschle, D-South Dakota, who later became the Senate's Majority Leader, challenged Young's testimony before a House subcommittee by rattling off recent studies and media reports that suggested vets had suffered because of Agent Orange. "I really find it somewhat interesting," Daschle said, "that they are all wrong and he is correct."

Moments earlier, Young had said he didn't doubt the competency of other authors, they just couldn't match his 12 years of analyzing records. "It is a very complex issue," he said.

Young's genial, almost folksy style belied a resolute confidence that while his listeners' opinions might differ, no one knew Agent Orange as well as he did.

In a 1981 Air Force research paper titled "Agent Orange at the Crossroads of Science and Social Concern," Young questioned whether some vets were using Agent Orange "to seek public recognition for their sacrifices in Vietnam" and "to acquire financial compensation during economically depressed times." The paper earned him an Outstanding Research Award from the Air Force's staff college.

The same year, the Air Force assigned Young to serve as director of the VA's new Agent Orange Projects Office, in charge of planning and overseeing initial research into emerging health claims. Here, too, he attracted congressional ire. Sen. Alan Cranston, R-California, warned the VA's chief medical director in 1983 that Young's dismissive comments about possible health risks might cause the public to doubt the "sincerity of the VA's effort."

Soon after that, the White House tapped Young to serve as a senior policy analyst for its Office of Science and Technology Policy, giving him broad influence over the nation's policy on dioxin. Over the next several years, the Reagan administration was accused of obstructing, stalling and minimizing research into Agent Orange.

In 1986, another House committee faulted Young for undermining a planned study of chemical company workers exposed to dioxin. Young maintained that previous studies conducted by Monsanto and Dow of their workers "might have been enough," the panel's report said.

Young recently denied interfering with that research but took credit for helping to shut down a major Centers for Disease Control and Prevention study of Vietnam vets in 1987 that sought definitive evidence of a link between health issues and Agent Orange. Young said data on who had been exposed wasn't reliable enough, though others argued that military records on spray missions and troop movements would have sufficed.

In the end, answering the question of who was exposed was taken out of the hands of the scientists. Under pressure from vets and their families, Congress passed the Agent Orange Act. Signed into law by President George H. W. Bush in 1991, it presumed that all vets were exposed if they set foot in Vietnam during the war or traveled in boats on its rivers. And it provided compensation for them if they had certain conditions linked to exposure.

In Young's view, the vets won; the science lost. By his final years at the White House, he was tiring of the battle. Young said emotions had risen so high he began "receiving threats to my family, threats to me."

Back in the US, the C-123s were repurposed for use in the Air Force reserves. Wes Carter flew aboard the planes while assigned to a Massachusetts base. He remembers an overpowering stench from a C-123 named Patches for its many patched-up bullet holes. (Matt Rota, Special to ProPublica)

Carter didn't serve in Vietnam and thus wasn't covered by the Agent Orange Act. His connection to the herbicide began in 1974, when for six years he served as a crew member on a C-123 as part of his reserve duty at Westover Air Reserve Base in

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Dr. Orange continued

Massachusetts.

During the war, C-123s criss-crossed southeast Asia, mostly ferrying troops and supplies. A few dozen were modified for spraying herbicides and insecticide. Back home, most were stripped of the spray gear, cleaned and put into service with the Air Force reserves.

For Carter, the planes were an exhilarating break from his civilian marketing gig -- even though when they flew through rain clouds, water seeped into the cabins and they were always too hot or too cold. He often flew on a C-123 that had been nicknamed "Patches" because it was hit almost 600 times by enemy bullets in Vietnam -- then patched up with metal. Over the years, he served as an aeromedical evacuation technician, flight instructor and flight examiner.

Even then, Patches' former duties in Vietnam worried Carter and other reservists, who complained about the overpowering odor coming from it. But after an inspection, he said, "the wing commander assured us that the aircraft was as safe as humanly possible."

Patches was sent in 1980 to the National Museum of the Air Force near Dayton, Ohio, where it was displayed outside because of its chemical odor. Then, in 1994, during a restoration attempt, Air Force staff toxicologists said samples from the plane showed it was "heavily contaminated" with the dioxin TCDD, an unfortunate byproduct of manufacturing Agent Orange. Later, other planes were also found to be contaminated.

But no one alerted Carter or any of the 1,500 to 2,100 reservists who'd flown them at least two weekends a month plus two weeks a year, often for years. Instead, most of the contaminated planes were quarantined in Arizona at Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, a sprawling airplane graveyard nicknamed "the Boneyard." In 2010, at Young's recommendation, they were destroyed.

One year later, when Carter learned he had prostate cancer, his best friend from the reserves found out he did, too. With a few phone calls, Carter quickly tallied five from his old squadron with prostate cancer. The sixth he called had died. His squadron commanders and others tied to the planes also had Agent Orange-related illnesses.

"Nearly two months into this project," Carter wrote on a blog he kept, "it seems I have trouble finding crewmembers who don't have AO-illnesses!"

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Decades after the last of the military's Agent Orange was supposedly incinerated aboard a ship in the Pacific Ocean, Army vet Steve House went public in 2011 with a surprising claim: He and five others had been ordered in 1978 to dig a large ditch at a US base in South Korea and dump leaky 55-gallon drums, some labeled "Compound Orange," in it. One broke open, splashing him with its contents. More than three decades later, House was suffering from diabetes and nerve damage in his hands and feet -- ailments that researchers have associated with dioxin exposure.

Around the same time House came forward, other ailing vets recounted that they, too, had been exposed to Agent Orange on military bases in Okinawa, Japan.

The Pentagon turned to a familiar ally.

"I just heard back from Korea and the situation has 're-heated' and they do want to get Dr. Young on contract," one defense department official wrote to others in June 2011, according to internal correspondence obtained by ProPublica and The Virginian-Pilot via the Freedom of Information Act.

By then, Young had established a second career. From his home in Cheyenne, Wyoming, he and his son ran a sort of Agent Orange crisis management firm. His clients: the federal government and the herbicide's makers -- both worried about a new wave of claims.

In 2006, under contract for the Defense Department, Young had produced an 81-page historical report listing everywhere Agent Orange had been used and stored outside of Vietnam, and emphasizing that even in those places, "individuals who entered a sprayed area one day after application … received essentially no 'meaningful exposure.'" Among the scholarly references cited were several of his own papers, including a 2004 journal article he co-authored with funding from Monsanto and Dow. That conflict of interest was not acknowledged in the Defense Department report.

In an interview, Young said the companies' financial support essentially paid the cost of publishing, but did not influence his findings. He and his co-authors, he said, "made it very clear" in the journal that Dow and Monsanto had funded the article. "That doesn't mean that we took the position of the companies."

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