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Remembering Elmo Zumwalt, Jr.

On this Veterans' Day we remember the life of Admiral Elmo Russell Zumwalt Jr. (November 29, 1920 – January 2, 2000) – the 19th Chief of Naval Operations, a highly-decorated war veteran, devoted father and husband, and victim of mesothelioma cancer.

Admiral Elmo Russell Zumwalt Jr.'s life and career reflects the incredible sacrifices, heroics, and tragedies experienced by so many of our veterans. He lived his life in service to his country and family, but it was the very materials deemed necessary for victory that destroyed the health of his loved ones and ultimately killed him as well.

Early life

Zumwalt was born in San Francisco, California, the son of two country doctors. His early achievements hinted at the heights he would someday achieve. He was the recipient of the Distinguished Eagle Scout Award from the Boy Scouts of America, and the valedictorian of his class at the Tulare Union High School in Tulare, California.

In 1939 he entered the United States Naval Academy at Annapolis, where he became president of the Trident Society, vice president of the Quarterback Society and the two-time winner of the June Week Public Speaking Contest. He graduated with distinction and was commissioned as an ensign in June, 1942. (Zumwalt also received an honorary degree from Texas Tech University.)

Zumwalt was assigned to the USS Phelps (DD-360)(<http://www.destroyerhistory.org/goldplater/ussphelps.html>) in 1943, and in 1944s served on the USS Robinson (<http://www.ussrobinson.org/>), where he was awarded the Bronze Star for his valor in action against the Japanese during the Battle for Leyte Gulf in October 1944, which is considered to be the largest naval battles in World War II, if not in history. After the war's end, Zumwalt commanded a mission to help disarm Japanese soldiers in China, where he met his future wife, Mouza Coutelais-du-Roche, whose French-Russian family was living in Shanghai. She returned with him to the United States.

Zumwalt's career continued to soar through the next two decades, and in 1965 he achieved the rank of Rear Admiral. At the height of the Vietnam War in 1968 he became the Commander Naval Forces, Vietnam. In was at this time that Zumwalt made the fateful decision to use a new defoliant manufactured by Dow and Monsanto – Agent Orange.

Although Agent Orange had not been adequately tested for human side effects, Dow and Monsanto were eager to sell their product, and the US military was anxious to use it, as it seemed to offer a way to protect US troops, including Zumwalt's own son Elmo R. Zumwalt 3d who was serving in Vietnam, from "clear and present danger." Soldiers serving on the boats patrolling the coasts, including Zumwalt's swift-boat commander son, faced high casualty rates from Viet Cong snipers hiding in the dense foliage that lined the waterways.

Admiral Zumwalt ordered the use of Agent Orange, inadvertently exposing countless US servicemen and Vietnamese to the toxic chemical. As all good leaders do, Admiral Zumwalt acted decisively on the best available information he had at the time. Unfortunately, that information was biased and unreliable, as later developments revealed.

Elmo R. Zumwalt 3d died in 1988 at age 42 from Hodgkin's diseases and lymphoma most likely caused by the Agent Orange. Zumwalt's own grandson Elmo Zumwalt 4th was, like countless other children of exposed servicemen, born with severe learning difficulties. In some ways he escaped the worst of it – children of are still being born in Vietnam with severe and grotesque deformities, the third generation legacy of Dow and Monsanto's malfeasance.

Zumwalt became Chief of Naval Operations and full Admiral in 1970, and lost no time implementing a series of moves designed to reduce racism and sexism and improve morale in the Navy. His orders included authorizing beards and introducing beer dispensing machines in the barracks.

Zumwalt retired from the navy in 1974 at age 53.

Crusade against Agent Orange and asbestos

Ironically, Zumwalt became a passionate and outspoken voice against the use of Agent Orange on our troops. He charged that the government “intentionally manipulated or withheld compelling information on the adverse health effects” associated with exposure to Agent Orange.

“The flawed scientific studies and manipulated conclusions are not only unduly denying justice to Vietnam veterans suffering from exposure to Agent Orange,” said Zumwalt, “they are now standing in the way of a full disclosure to the American people of the likely health effects of exposure to toxic dioxins.”

“I definitely believe my son would have had an additional 20 years of life had we not used it,” said the elder Zumwalt.

Throughout his watch as Chief Naval Officer, Zumwalt had watched incidents of mesothelioma and other asbestos related diseases in Naval personnel soar. Ironically, he spent the last years of his career fighting on to safeguard Naval personnel from dangerous materials such as asbestos.

Because of heavy asbestos use in shipbuilding starting in World War II, Naval personnel were developing mesothelioma in disproportionate numbers. A full third of all mesothelioma cancers occur in veterans.

Admiral Zumwalt was diagnosed with mesothelioma at age 78. He realized that something was wrong only after he became unusually short of breath following a 5K race. He received the mesothelioma diagnosis two months later after a chest x-ray showed a large tumor. He passed away only 6 months later of complications from mesothelioma.