

AGENT ORANGE SUPPORT INFORMATION FOR VIETNAM VETERANS AND THEIR SPOUSES

With permission, taken from an email sent to Prostate Cancer Activist/Mentor Charles (Chuck) Maack by Deborah Freed (LPN), Widow of Vietnam Veteran and Prostate Cancer Patient Jim Freed;

I wanted to share some of the things I have learned in the two short weeks since Jim's passing (August 28, 2015).

Things I have learned and to pass on especially for Vietnam veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange.

If a veteran is diagnosed with something on the vast list of related illnesses there is compensation for those but it isn't always shared by the local Veterans Administration. There is a specific Agent Orange connection for compensation. It isn't a given and we did think it had been in his record. Those who were exposed really need to get involved with the outside advocates like the VFW. The advocates there will see that those soldiers are given the compensation they deserve. They waded through the paperwork and do a tremendous job.

The advocates at the Veterans Administration Are employees of the VA so keep that in mind.

Jim was 100% permanent because of his cancer but it wasn't shown in the VA records as Agent Orange related which is a bit baffling because it should've been automatic once those two things were connected. It isn't, so it's important for people to check that and make sure it is part of the compensation package.

Wives do receive benefits from a veteran who had a service connected disability. I receive not only the benefits of an ID card which is great for discounts many places but I also have a free secondary insurance called CHAMP-VA. It picks up most balances and has a calendar year \$50.00 deductible. If I lived near any military base I could shop at the commissaries and BX as well as utilize the motel facilities on those bases when traveling. I will also get one half of his monthly benefit, which is not taxed. I pay no taxes on my primary home and up to 2 acres of land. That is a tremendous relief. This was put into law several years ago. We had to take a letter from the VA to the county tax office to get the tax break. And, we keep it on file since they try to get out of it each year! I also have a DAV license

plate on my car which I do not pay for or the renewals for those tags. Every bit counts. It doesn't have to be a handicap plate either.

It is important for a widow to meet with their VFW advocate as soon as possible after their husband's death to move the process along. As with all things government, expedience is not the way of the bureaucracy. It can take six months or more for the monies to begin.

Partial payment of funeral and burial expenses are also covered but the bills must be submitted and an advocate not directly associated with the Veterans Administration is not always the wise choice. Again, working directly with the Veterans Administration isn't always beneficial or timely.

Faxing or mailing a copy of the death certificate to the VA where a veteran has been receiving care is important to not only cancel any upcoming appointments but to stop correspondence in the future for health exams. That can sometimes be upsetting to surviving spouses when they might receive a phone call a year or so after the death asking if their husband or wife needs an appointment.

I actually called the VA in Salem, Va. yesterday to cancel Jim's appointments so they could be offered to others and was told I wouldn't get anymore phone calls and I swear two hours later someone called from the ultrasound department to make a follow up appointment for Jim. I was a bit upset and told her he passed away two weeks ago and she was quite apologetic so I'll be sending the copy of the death certificate to them right away.

Jim was a very organized person. He was very concerned about my well-being and so therefore had a folder with all pertinent documents I might need to navigate this new path I have found myself on so recently.

His folder contained his DD214, letter of compensation, his copies of contacts and letters to the OPM for federal retirees, annuity and life insurance documents, social security documents and contact numbers for all of them. He did a great job but I found I needed additional documentation for other purposes. He was a Federal Government Civilian employee after his service in the Air Force.

For the VA VFW advocate widows also need a copy of the death certificate, marriage certificate and if they were previously married they need divorce papers or death certificates of previous spouses. I found those things a bit odd but it is what they require.

The funeral homes should be offering not only a flag but a bronze grave marker that goes on the ground. They come in different sizes and are free to veterans. Some cemeteries require a marble or cement base for those and it can be upwards of \$500.00 IF you have a local monument dealer do those. Some cemeteries offer that service free or allow you to place the marker directly on the ground. Jim actually made a cement base for a dear friend's family after they were told a marble base (which you cannot see after its placed) was indeed going to be \$500.00.

Of course all veterans have the right to be buried in a veteran's cemetery but keep in mind some do not offer the same for spouses and it can take a very long time for that to happen so making arrangements prior to death is advisable. Jim wished to be cremated and I actually bought a beautiful urn which also serves as a vault online much cheaper than what a funeral home would charge. Urns that serve as a vault save you the cost of a vault if the remains are to be buried. Again, another \$350.00 plus for a separate vault.

As I navigate my new path I find more and more information I think could benefit others.

One thing we did was make sure all vehicles were in both of our names and with survivor's rights. That makes dealing with the Division of Motor Vehicles much smoother and saves time and money and avoid having to pay to change titles. In most states handicap placards and drivers licenses need to be turned in within 30 days after a death.

Some people find it difficult to deal with these things prior to a death but I can assure you that having as many things in order prior is so much more comforting because of the myriad of emotions surviving spouses are dealing with. There is still a mountain of paperwork to deal with whether you are prepared or not.

You may share this email content with the advanced prostate cancer group if you wish. I am somehow having difficulties posting from my iPad.

Thank you for all your support and advice throughout the years! So much of it really helped us find the best treatment for Jim and I know prolonged his life and helped preserve the quality for a much longer period.

Much peace and many hugs to all,
Deb Freed

