A Vietnam Veteran’s Leukemia Diary

Bruce Wright, 79, who lives with his wife in Ladera Ranch, California, discovered in 2009 that he had both chronic lymphocytic leukemia (CLL) and prostate cancer.

September 9, 2024 As told to Bob Barnett

April 1968

After I graduated from the U.S. Naval Academy in 1967, my first commission was on the USS Turner Joy, a destroyer that chopped into Vietnam. In April 1968, we went into Da Nang Harbor and spent a day ashore, walking around, dining with the Marines. We drank distilled water, which we later found had Agent Orange in it. We didn’t know anything about its dangers.

1968–1973

After my first deployment, I entered naval aviation training in Pensacola, Florida, becoming a naval flight officer flying F-4s. I deployed twice more to North and South Vietnam and Thailand from ’71 through ’73 and graduated from the Navy Fighter Weapons School, aka Top Gun. I was exposed to Agent Orange many more times. At Da Nang Air Base, helicopters were always spraying above us. Our sleeves were rolled up, and as they took off and landed, they would sometimes drip on our arms.

Bruce Wright near North Vietnam in 1971 Courtesy of Bruce Wright

1974–2011

After active duty, I transitioned to flying in the naval reserves in California. I was married, and we had a daughter, but Vietnam was hard on my wife because there were always reports of F-4s being shot out of the sky. When I came back, she didn't want me to fly. A schism developed between us, and we eventually got divorced. I retired as a commander in 1992 but continued in classified programs in military aerospace. I got married again in 2004. I retired in 2011.

2005

I learned about a program for anyone exposed to Agent Orange (see “Agent Orange and Cancer,” page 12). I started the paperwork but got preoccupied. I didn’t think I had a problem because I didn’t feel bad. I wasn’t accepting the reality. In hindsight, I wish I had.

August–September 2009

I ride a Harley Davidson—I have two of them. One of the guys in the Vietnam Vets Motorcycle Club told me I should apply for the program, and he took me to the local VA [Veterans Administration]. They did an exam, felt my lymph nodes, did a blood draw and a chest X-ray. A couple of days later, I got a call, and they said, “Y’all come back—we need to talk.” I rode my Harley in. The doc told me I had chronic lymphocytic leukemia—CLL. I asked what that was and was told to Google it. They also told me my PSA [prostate-specific antigen] was high—it was 5.8—so they scheduled a biopsy to see if I had prostate cancer.

I drove home on the Harley through LA traffic, which is not a lot of fun, especially on two wheels. I went to my wife’s office—she’s a surgical coordinator. In the hallway, I’m leaning on the wall—it was holding me up—and tell her, “I have cancer!” She said, “That’s OK. I’m with you. I’ll take care of you. We’ll handle this together. We’ll get through this.”

That first doctor left the VA, so on my next appointment, I told my new doctor, a specialist in blood diseases, that I wanted to be his patient. I was starting to self-advocate. He told me the CLL wasn’t ready for treatment yet, so I entered my watch-and-wait period with him. But the biopsy revealed that I had prostate cancer.

August 2011

I had brachytherapy [internal radiation] for the prostate cancer—it was in the gland only—the day after I retired. They implanted radioactive seeds in the prostate in an outpatient procedure. Recovery was six to nine months. It felt like I was peeing razor blades. But then the side effects went away. I currently get my PSA checked, and I’m doing fine.

Google told me I had five years to live with CLL. I was scared. At the time, the only treatment was chemotherapy. I joined a bulletin board group on the web and started getting information.

One day, I got a message from Terry Evans. He [mentioned] starting a CLL support group and asked if I was interested in joining. I said, “Yes, of course.” It was informal, in people’s living rooms. We would meet face-to-face and share information, support each other. I started meeting other veterans who had CLL and helping them through the VA process so they could get benefits

they had earned by serving our country.

That support group eventually became the CLL Society. It was founded by Dr. Brian Koffman. It was the first place where I found real, grounded informative data to help me make a decision. I learned that there were new treatments coming down the pike, real 21st-century medicine.

2012–2013

My VA doc tested me regularly. The CLL support group introduced us to specialists. My wife and I were on a journey to learn everything about CLL.

January–August 2014

My VA doctor told me my spleen was getting bigger, white blood cell count up, red blood cells starting to go down. I was getting fatigued too. From the bulletin board group, I learned that a well-known doctor, a CLL specialist, was putting on a forum in San Diego. That was Dr. Thomas Kipps. It was early in 2014. My wife and I went. She went up to him. He wasn't taking new patients, but she asked if he would be so kind as to take me on. He said, "Have Bruce call my nurse and tell her he is my patient."

By late summer, after a bone marrow biopsy, Dr. Kipps told me that I needed to get into treatment soon. I was in freefall—my bone marrow was 90% occluded by "bad" white blood cells. My red blood cell, white blood cell and platelet factory was about to shut down. He was going to try a new medicine, a third-generation monoclonal antibody.

September–December 2014

But my white blood cell count was so high that debris from the treatment, when the white blood cells are destroyed, would be toxic. We needed to get my white blood cell count down first. They did apheresis—they take your blood out and run it through a centrifuge. That was five hours in the chair, no drinking, can't eat anything, no bathroom. My numbers shot back up again within a few days, so they had to repeat it. Four days later, they put me on that drug. That was September.

The monoclonal antibody had been studied with a chemotherapy drug, but my doctor wanted to see what it could do on its own because that was easier on the body. That was a six-month protocol: first weekly, then every two weeks, then monthly. During the first infusion, within 10 minutes, I couldn't breathe, so they stopped it. They later titrated it more slowly, and it was fine. I had no side effects from the treatment itself. He's a wonderful doctor. I owe my life to him.

My wife and I even went on a 12-day Princess cruise from Quebec to Fort Lauderdale in between monthly infusions. I just took an antibiotic packet with me in case I got an infection, since CLL compromises your immune system.

February 2015–July 2022

I finished treatment in February of 2015. I was in remission. On our way home, my wife and I stopped at Miguel's Cocina, our favorite Mexican restaurant, up by Palomar. I go back to Dr. Kipps every six months. Because, you know, CLL always comes back.

I became a group facilitator with the CLL Society. I gave talks in Boston, New Orleans, Cleveland, Philadelphia, Long Island [New York], Denver. I recruited doctors too. I told anyone who contacted me that [it's not possible to] email me too much, or call too much, or text too much. Empower yourself, know your numbers, never stop asking questions.

August 2022–January 2023

My numbers were up. Dr. Kipps started me on the same six-month monoclonal antibody protocol, which brought my white blood cells to normal levels. After each infusion, my wife and I went to Miguel's.

Bruce WrightCourtesy of Bruce Wright

February 2023–September 2024

I feel good. I’m almost 80, so a little slower. My numbers are coming up again but not like before, so Dr. Kipps says I’m doing OK. I’m chair of the CLL Society Patient Advisory Board, a senior support group adviser responsible for 10 groups and a veterans liaison. I love it when I hear back from a veteran who has treatment success. I do my happy dance. I’ve helped 110 veterans receive their just compensation for having served our country.

I’m the caregiver for my wife now, who gets dialysis at home for kidney failure. I have high blood pressure, pilot’s neck (from the vertebrae in my neck that are compressed from flying) and

pinched nerves in my left arm and hand. I have tinnitus, wear hearing aids. I have PTSD and residual effects from prostate cancer treatment. But, you know, we took battle damage. I could have died five times in Vietnam. Life is working out OK. I have not lost my sense of humor or my religion. As the saying goes, I don’t let the old man in.
