

USAF Lieutenant Colonel Lowell “Chris” Howard Christensen (1934 - 2017)

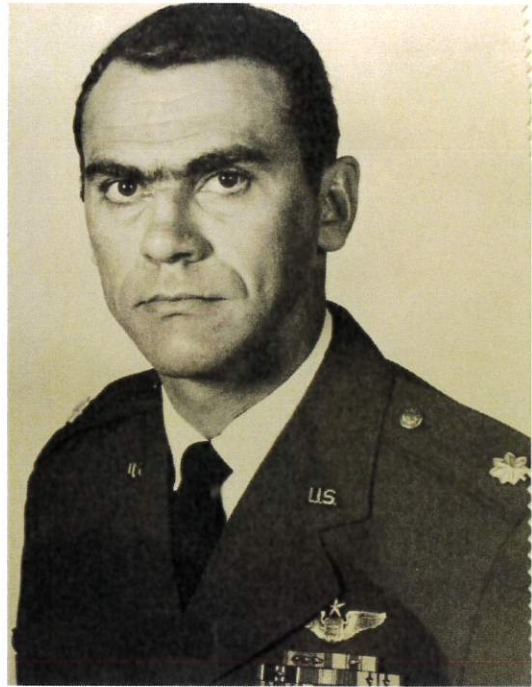
Lieutenant Colonel Lowell H. Christensen proudly served America through a distinguished nearly 28-year career in the United States Air Force with tours of duty during the Vietnam War and the Cold War. After retiring from the military, Lt. Col. Christensen joined the Hughes Aircraft Company working as a civilian in the nation’s defense industry at the Nevada Test Site in the top-secret location known as “Area 51” until he retired to a quiet life, spending much of his remaining years in the U.P. on Lake Ruth in Three Lakes.

Born in Ishpeming, Lt. Col. Christensen was the son of Charles, a Norwegian immigrant, and Tirzah Rowe Christensen. Lt. Col. Christensen grew up in Champion, graduating from Champion High School in 1952. He went to Michigan Tech and was awarded a Bachelor of Science degree in mechanical engineering in 1956. While at Tech, he was a brother of Theta Tau Fraternity and served in the Air Force ROTC program. During this time, he met his future wife, Mary, on a blind date watching the Tech hockey team take on the University of Michigan where Mary was attending and would later graduate from with a Bachelor of Arts degree in education. They were married until his death for 57 years.

Upon graduating Tech, Lt. Col. Christensen was commissioned as a 2nd Lieutenant and began his military career in St. Louis, Missouri, where he worked for McDonnell Aircraft Company until he was called for active duty in late 1956. Over the next decade, he was stationed in eight different domestic and foreign Air Force bases, working in aircraft maintenance, civil engineering, weapons, navigation, tactical warfare and operations and electronic warfare. He ultimately became an expert in electronic warfare.

In 1967, he was tapped to serve in the Vietnam War. Lt. Col. Christensen, then a Captain, was stationed in Thailand for a year as an Electronic Warfare Officer. He flew more than 90 combat missions with 630 combat hours entering North Vietnam as part of a new top-secret unit called Project Rivet Top Task Force in the Tactical Air Command. The unit was a group of hand-picked, highly skilled officers. The Rivet Top EC-121K aircraft was one-of-a-kind and equipped with experimental, state-of-the-art electronic reconnaissance equipment. Only two crews ever flew the aircraft. In addition to his flight missions, Lt. Col. Christensen provided the mission commander with real-time data used for anti-MIG/SAM activities in the forward combat area and wrote numerous reports and studies on improving the electronic and operations systems on the aircraft. He also spent time in Saigon for tactical meetings briefing commanding officers of the 7th Air Force. He was a part of the Vietnam Air Offensive Campaign Phase II and III with 50 of his flight missions coming under fire and described as “extremely hazardous” by his commanding officers.

Following Vietnam, Lt. Col. Christensen was deployed to the Tactical Air Warfare Center at Eglin AFB in Florida; the 4501 Computer Services Squadron with the Tactical Air Command at Langley AFB in Virginia; 5041st Tactical Operations Squadron at Elmendorf AFB in Alaska; the USAF Warfare Center and Air Combat



Command/ACEVAL-AIMVAL Joint Test Force at Nellis AFB in Nevada; and finally, the Electronic Warfare Center, Electronic Security Command at Kelly AFB in Texas.

While at Nellis, he was a member of a hand-picked Air Force Navy Joint Test Force responsible for conducting joint tests with F-5, F-14, F-15 and F-16 aircraft which defined the future of air-to-air missile characteristics and fighter force levels. He received a Joint Service Commendation Medal for his work.

In the early 1980s while working at the Air Force Electronic Warfare Center at Kelly AFB, he directed the development of complex computerized models of electronic warfare systems for the automated screening of real-time electronic intelligence worldwide to determine combat vulnerabilities of U.S. operational forces. Under his leadership, the Electronic Warfare Flagging program went from a concept to a fully operational Air Force mission and prompted similar programs in the U.S. Navy and Army, gaining international recognition. This system for the integration of operational and intelligence data in support of electronic warfare had, at that time, never been attempted, let alone achieved. It became a mission function that was considered a prototype for electronic warfare reprogramming support throughout the Department of Defense. Due in large part to his work in this area, the Air Force Electronic Warfare Center implanted a new mission area called "Serene Byte" which evaluated the Air Force's capability to reprogram its operational electronic warfare equipment worldwide. He received the Meritorious Service Medal for this work.

Overall, he received the Air Medal with Three Oak Leaf Clusters, the Air Force Commendation Medal with Two Oak Leaf Clusters, the Air Force Outstanding Unit Award with Fifteen Oak Leaf Clusters and other commendations for aerial flight and bravery during his service in Southeast Asia and for other meritorious actions during his time in the Air Force.

His commanding officers noted how much he enjoyed flying and made himself available for any available flight. Over his notable military career, as a navigator or Electronic Warfare Officer, he flew in the cockpits of the T-29, B-57, F-100s, C-118 and C-121 aircrafts, served as flight leader, squadron leader and was a part of assignments requiring top military clearance.

After retiring from the military, Lt. Col. Christensen joined Hughes Aircraft Company working at the Nevada Test and Training Range at Groom Lake, known colloquially as "Area 51" for 14 years. As part of the Air Defense System analysis team, he planned, conducted and analyzed tests of military systems and equipment, including underground nuclear weapons tests. The Cold War spanned most of his career.

Along the way, he earned a master's degree in industrial engineering with an emphasis in computer science from Texas Tech University.

Throughout his life, he was continually recognized for his calm, quiet and unassuming nature; his ability to get along with everyone; and his intellect, integrity, humor and leadership. To his family, he was known for being a wonderful, loving Dad. Lt. Col. Christensen's legacy is sustained through his beloved wife, Mary; his son, Drew R. Christensen, and daughter-in-law, Nell; his daughter, Dawn K. Christensen; and his grandchildren, Chase, Caden, Chloe and Cole.