



Colonel Claire Ellsworth "Sonny" Brittain, Jr., USAF Retired

July 12, 1938 - June 27, 2025

Colonel Claire Ellsworth "Sonny" Brittain, Jr., USAF, Retired, 86, beloved husband of Kay Fifield Brittain, went home to be with the Lord on June 27, 2025, following complications from a fall in late 2024.

Claire was born on July 12, 1938, in Beaver Falls, PA, to the late Claire Ellsworth Brittain, Sr. and Rose Redfern Brittain. He grew up in Beaver Falls and later in Aliquippa, PA, where the family settled on what is now Brittain Lane in 1952. He graduated from Hopewell High School in 1956 and earned his degree in mathematics and engineering from Geneva College in 1960. Following ten months in the U.S. Air Force Reserves, Claire entered active duty in 1961 as an aviation cadet at Harlingen, TX (Class 61-07). That same year, he was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant, beginning a distinguished 30-year career in the U.S. Air Force.

While stationed at Donaldson AFB, Claire met and married Geraldine "Jerri" Phillips on April 14, 1962. Jerri was the daughter of Henry Fowler "Perk" Phillips and Ruth Smith Phillips of Woodruff, SC. Together they raised two sons—Thomas Henry, born in Savannah, GA in 1964, and Robert Elroy, born in Dover, DE in 1967—as they traveled from assignment to assignment around the world.

Claire flew the Douglas C-124 Globemaster II, affectionately known as "Old Shaky," earning his Master Navigator wings and later served in a variety of aircraft, including the C-5 Galaxy, within what is now the unified airlift command. He logged more than 8,000 flight hours and held multiple

leadership roles in operations, training and logistics. Notably, from 1968 to 1972, he flew for the 89th Airlift Wing at Joint Base Andrews, supporting transport missions for the President, Vice President, senior cabinet officials, and military leaders. He also served in Vietnam from 1973 to 1974 while stationed in Thailand, and later as an instructor at the Air University at Maxwell AFB in Montgomery, AL. During his time in Alabama, Claire earned a master's degree in public administration from Auburn University. Claire was a proud, decorated servicemember and was awarded the Defense Superior Service Medal, the Air Medal, and several Air Force Commendation medals. A lifelong fan of Pittsburgh sports—especially the Steelers, Pirates, and Penguins—Claire also enjoyed boating and the outdoors. He was a devoted husband, father, grandfather, and great-grandfather.

After retiring in 1991 with the rank of Colonel, Claire remained active in his community, helping build homes in Greenville, SC, and serving as a dedicated member of First Presbyterian Church. He also became the primary caregiver for his first wife, Jerri, during her battle with early-onset Alzheimer's disease. Jerri passed away in April 2010.

In 2011, Claire married Kay Fifield Brittain, with whom he shared a deep and abiding love. Together, they made homes in Greenville, SC; Fort Myers, FL; and Camdenton, MO, before settling permanently in Florida. They were active members of New Hope Presbyterian Church. Claire received the Distinguished Service Award from Geneva College in 2020.

Claire is survived by his wife of 14 years, Kay; his sons, Thomas H. Brittain, Col., U.S. Army (Ret.), of Sykesville, MD and partner Bonnie Komiske, and Robert E. Brittain of Minneapolis, MN and partner Jean-Yves Girard; three stepchildren, Victoria Drake DeForest, Jake Drake, and Christine Drake Williams, all of the Lake of the Ozarks, MO area; three grandchildren, Jessica Henrikson of Colorado Springs, CO and husband Randy; Lauren Rose Miller of Gig Harbor, WA and husband Brandon; and Thomas "Tommy" Brittain, Jr. of Tacoma, WA and fiancée Danielle; five great-grandchildren, Josephine and Kyler Klutts and Lillian, Lucy, and Lola Miller; and nieces Kathy Hetrick and

Laurie Jack Lindsay, and nephew Billy Jack.

Claire is also survived by his sister, Rosemary Holliday of Venetia, PA. He was preceded in death by his parents; his sister, Rebecca "Becky" Jack (2022); and his brother, William Brittain.

Visitation will be held at 9:30-10:45 a.m., Saturday, August 16, 2025, at The Wood Mortuary.

Services will be held at 11:00 a.m., Saturday, August 16, 2025, The Wood Mortuary Chapel in Greer, SC with webcasting available. Claire will be laid to rest next to Jerri in Hillcrest Memory Gardens with full military honors following the service.

Online condolences may be made to www.thewoodmortuary.com.

Cemetery Details

Hillcrest Memory Gardens

14050 East Wade Hampton Boulevard
Greer, SC 29651

Previous Events

Visitation

AUG 16. 9:30 AM - 10:45 AM (ET)

The Wood Mortuary, Inc.
300 W Poinsett St
Greer, SC 29650-1595
(864) 877-3351

Service

AUG 16. 11:00 AM (ET)

The Wood Mortuary Chapel
300 West Poinsett Street
Greer, SC 29650
(864) 877-3351
woodmortuary@bellsouth.net

Tribute Wall



“ *The Wood Mortuary created a Webcast in memory of Colonel Claire Ellsworth "Sonny" Brittain, Jr., USAF Retired*



The Wood Mortuary - August 16, 2025 at 09:24 AM

SF

“ *Sara Karns and the Karns Family purchased the Beautiful Dreams for the family of Colonel Claire Ellsworth "Sonny" Brittain, Jr., USAF Retired.*



Sara Karns and the Karns Family - August 13, 2025 at 07:36 AM



“ *Magnificent Life Spray was purchased for the family of Colonel Claire Ellsworth "Sonny" Brittain, Jr., USAF Retired.*



August 08, 2025 at 07:48 PM



“ A [Memorial Tree](/store/Product.aspx?ProductId=4518) was planted in honor of Colonel Claire Ellsworth "Sonny" Brittan, Jr., USAF Retired.

August 08, 2025 at 07:48 PM