



Staff photo by Dan Gross

John Kraft, who served in the Air Force during the Vietnam War, gets emotional while talking about his Parkinson's disease. The Department of Veterans Affairs has recognized several conditions, including Parkinson's disease, as possibly being related to Agent Orange exposure. The U.S. military sprayed millions of gallons of Agent Orange in Vietnam to kill crops and foliage, reducing the advantage American enemies had in the country's thick jungles.

WAR STORIES

Honoring those who served during the Vietnam War

About this series

This is the third in a six-part series about the stories and sacrifices of local men and women during the Vietnam War. The series complements a Maryland Public Television initiative coming this summer honoring veterans of the war.

The first story in the series, on Vietnam veterans affected by post-traumatic stress disorder after the war, was published in January.

The second story in the series, on local residents preserving hundreds of Vietnam veterans' stories, was published in February.

AFTER ORANGE

Vietnam veterans fight lifelong effects of Agent Orange

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John Kraft spent much of 1969 surrounded by Agent Orange. He was 23, serving in Vietnam with the U.S. Air Force. He didn't think twice about the liquid that covered the tarmac where he worked as a mechanic fixing fighter jets.

"We thought it was like a hydraulic fluid or something," Kraft recalled.

Fast forward to 1980. Kraft felt tired, abnormally exhausted for a 34-year-old. He began to experience tremors in his fingers, subtle at first but growing increasingly noticeable.

He went to the Washington DC VA Medical Center seeking answers, but didn't find any.

He sent a letter to the U.S. Department

of Veterans Affairs, concerned about the puddles on the tarmac where he stood a decade before. The VA responded that his concerns were "irrelevant."

It wasn't until eight years later when a doctor in Gaithersburg shared a diagnosis that he even knew the name of this strange set of symptoms: early onset Parkinson's disease. By then, he was exhibiting many telltale Parkinson's symptoms, including hand and foot tremors and trouble forming words.

The next three decades were marked by increasing challenges as the effects of the progressive nervous system condition worsened.

The U.S. military sprayed millions of gallons of Agent Orange in Vietnam from 1962 to 1971. The chemical concoction was

(See **VETERANS A5**)



Photo courtesy of Wanda Perkins

Charles Edward Perkins died Dec. 11, 2015. His exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam is suspected of being a cause of health problems he had for decades.

Veterans

(Continued from A1)

used to kill crops and foliage, reducing the advantage American enemies had in the country's thick jungles.

The herbicide was tested at Fort Detrick long before the Vietnam war. According to the Army Corps of Engineers, the Army sprayed about 17 pounds of Agent Orange at Fort Detrick between 1944 and 1951.

The Army has acknowledged that the testing at Fort Detrick caused health problems for employees and has paid their disability claims.

The Department of Veterans Affairs has recognized several conditions related to Agent Orange exposure. Since the early 1990s, that list has grown.

It wasn't until 2009, though, that the VA recognized Parkinson's disease as one of those conditions.

Kraft said he was upset at the announcement, which answered the question he'd asked nearly 30 years before. But the knowledge at least brought some satisfaction for his wife, Mary Kraft.

"It was like somebody cared enough to look into it," she said.

Jim Onaitis was one of those somebodies. A project manager at Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, he recalled the early research that linked Parkinson's to Agent Orange exposure.

"We had volumes of information," he said. "With that, we were able to establish Agent Orange as a causality of Parkinson's disease."

Years later, Mary Kraft reached out to Shepherd's Staff In-home Care, a Walkersville-based business that provides in-home care for seniors. She was looking for someone to keep her husband company while she worked, someone to be there in case of emergency.

He was matched with Onaitis, who had since retired from Walter Reed.

Given their histories — his medical research and his patient's disease — Onaitis called the chance pairing a sign from God. "It was fate," he said.

Wanda Perkins' husband, Charlie Perkins, was a Marine who rode in helicopters as a gunner in Vietnam during the war. "He very seldom talked about it. I can't say that he ever really did," Perkins said.

The details trickled out when she took Charlie to a psychiatrist at the Veterans Affairs hospital in Baltimore. The psychiatrist asked him about his experiences during the war.

"He talked about having friends killed right next to him," she said.

Charlie and Wanda, both Walkersville natives, got married about a year after he returned from Vietnam.

"Back in that time, he did drink a lot, and had a pretty quick temper," she said.

In the late 1980s, he was diagnosed with diabetes.



Staff photo by Sam Yu

A portion of Wanda Perkins' home near New Midway is devoted to the memory of her late husband, Charles Perkins, a Vietnam War veteran.

Biographies

CHARLES EDWARD "CHARLIE" PERKINS
Branch: United States Marine Corps
Rank: Corporal
Service dates: April 27, 1967, to May 1, 1970
Commendations: National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Campaign Medal with device, Rifle Marksman Badge, Vietnam Service Medal, Good Conduct Medal

JOHN THOMAS KRAFT
Branch: Air Force
Rank: Staff sergeant
Service dates: April 18, 1967, to Feb. 1, 1971
Commendations: National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal, Air Force Good Conduct Medal

Friends in Frederick Parkinson's Disease Support Group

What: Support group for local residents with Parkinson's disease and their caretakers
When: Third Wednesday of each month at 1 p.m.
Where: Mount Pleasant Ruritan Club, 8101 Crum Road, Walkersville
For more information: Call 301-845-6514 or visit the Friends In Frederick website at ffpdsg.org.



Staff photo by Dan Gross

Jim Onaitis talks about being a caretaker for John Kraft, left, in Kraft's Walkersville kitchen. The Department of Veterans Affairs has recognized several conditions, including Parkinson's disease, which Kraft has, that could be the result of Agent Orange exposure.

one of the first indications he had been exposed to Agent Orange.

"The diabetes was first, and then the stroke," she said.

His stroke in 2006 showed that his carotid arteries, in his neck, were almost completely closed. In 2010, after years of failing to convince his doctors that his chest pain was a problem, he went to the Veterans Affairs hospital in Washington, where he had a stent put in his heart.

Between 2012 and 2014, he developed pneumonia four times.

While Charlie was alive, Wanda talked to other widows who said she was lucky to have her veteran return after the war.

"He might have made it home, but it's killing him every day," she told them.

Their lives changed as Charlie's condition worsened. He couldn't visit friends, go on his annual trips to NASCAR races or visit their daughter in Virginia Beach.

By 2014, the year he



Staff photo by Dan Gross

Mary Kraft holds a snapshot of her husband, John Kraft, from his younger days.

turned 65, he was in constant pain from head to toe.

He was housebound and couldn't walk from his bedroom to the front of the house without losing his breath. Wanda gave him sponge baths and changed their family's diets to accommodate his kidney disease and diabetes.

"I've gone through stages of anger with him for not telling me how bad he was feeling, but that was Char-

lie," Wanda said.

On a cloudy February afternoon, Kraft, now 70, gazes out the windows of his Walkersville home. His speech is halting and his tone somber as he reflects on how that single year on the tarmac shaped the rest of his life. The hardest part has been accepting the limitations brought on by his disease.

"I can't drive," he said. "I

Maryland Public Television salutes Vietnam veterans

Maryland Public Television's salute to Maryland service members of the Vietnam era has been three years in the making. The salute is a thank-you to those who worked and fought in an unpopular war. It will culminate with a two-day event called "Landing Zone Maryland." Tens of thousands of people are expected to attend.

LANDING ZONE MARYLAND
 June 18, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m.
 June 19, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m.

Maryland State Fairgrounds, 2200 York Road, Lutherville-Timonium

There will be a tribute ceremony, a memorial chair ceremony, a motorcycle honor ride, family activities, vendors, Vietnam-era military vehicles, entertainers and an art gallery. For more information, visit <http://vietnam.mpt.org/lzmaryland>.

MARYLAND VIETNAM WAR STORIES

Three-part documentary film
 Airing May 24, 25 and 26 on Maryland Public Television

MARYLAND PUBLIC TELEVISION SALUTES VIETNAM VETERANS TRAVELING EXHIBIT

Features artifacts, current-day and wartime images of men and women along with their memories of the war. To request that the traveling exhibit stop in your town, contact Maryland Public Television at 410-581-4182.

Diseases associated with Agent Orange

The Department of Veterans Affairs maintains a list of "presumptive diseases" that are related to exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicides during military service.

Even if a veteran is diagnosed with one of the following conditions, he or she must provide evidence of service in Vietnam or exposure outside of Vietnam to be eligible for compensation.

- AL amyloidosis
- Chronic B-cell leukemias
- Chloracne (or similar acneform disease)
- Diabetes mellitus, type 2
- Hodgkin's disease
- Ischemic heart disease
- Multiple myeloma
- Non-Hodgkin's lymphoma
- Parkinson's disease
- Peripheral neuropathy, early onset
- Porphyria cutanea tarda
- Prostate cancer
- Respiratory cancers (includes lung cancer)
- Cancers of the lung, larynx, trachea, and bronchus
- Soft tissue sarcomas (other than osteosarcoma, chondrosarcoma, Kaposi's sarcoma, or mesothelioma)

hospice care. He stayed in their living room, where he could still watch television with his family. A hospice nurse made sure he was comfortable.

If Charlie was angry about what the military put him through, or how his illnesses took over his life, Wanda said he never showed it.

Charlie died at home in December, surrounded by his family.

Toward the end, Wanda said, her husband stopped watching the military drama and action movies he used to enjoy. She thinks he realized what his time in the service had done to him.

"This was no life for anyone to have to live, but especially for someone that had served their country in war time," Wanda said.

Kraft doesn't know how long he'll live. But he's still found an opportunity to enjoy the life he has, in part thanks to a surgical procedure known as deep brain stimulation. The neurotransmitter implanted in the brain uses electrical stimulation to relieve some Parkinson's disease symptoms, such as tremors, stiffness and difficulty walking or moving, according to the National Parkinson Foundation website.

Kraft's neurotransmitter, covered through his VA medical insurance, lasts for 10 years. It's rechargeable, too.

"I have the iPhone plugged in, the iPad plugged in and now I can plug my husband in," Mary Kraft joked.

Since having the surgery, she said she's seen improvements. He can feed himself and walk on his own, sometimes with a walker. He and Onaitis make frequent trips to the local McDonald's for his favorite vanilla milkshake. They visit Wal-Mart three times a week, where Kraft maneuvers through the store in an electric cart.

"He just zooms all over," Onaitis said. "He can really cut a corner."

The Krafts soon will move to a retirement community in Mount Airy.

Onaitis will stay on with weekly visits. They have already identified the nearest Wal-Mart and McDonald's, Onaitis said.

Follow Sylvia Carignan on Twitter: @SylviaCarignan. Follow Nancy Lavin on Twitter: @NancyKLavin.

“I decided I needed help and other people needed help.

JOHN KRAFT, Vietnam veteran