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The 40-year war

AGENT ORANGE CASUALTIES KEEP MOUNTING

Story by Ivey DeJesus | idejesus@pennlive.com

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In 1967, about to graduate from Steelton High School, John Galinac wanted more than just a job at the steel mill. He wanted to go to college.

The 19-year-old, second-generation Croatian-American enlisted in the Air Force with his sights on the G.I. Bill.

Within months, he became a military police officer, patrolling the perimeter of Phu Cat Air Base in the Binh Dinh Province in what was then South Vietnam. The jungle around the coastal air base, like much of the Southeast Asian country, was a dense, canopied world that provided a safe haven for the enemy.

John Galinac

But fate put Galinac — and thousands of others — in the path of a killer as deadly but far more stealthy than their North Vietnamese foe. And more than 40 years later, the strategy the U.S. military deployed to decimate that jungle has leveled a lethal legacy.

Galinac is among the roughly 2.8 million U.S. military personnel — out of 7.4 million total — who served in Vietnam between 1962 and 1971 and were exposed to Agent Orange, one of several potent defoliants deployed by the military to destroy the Vietnamese jungle and, along with it, the enemy's hiding place.

Galinac died at the age of 64 on April 24, 2013, almost two years after being diagnosed with a rare form of brain cancer, common among Vietnam veterans.

His story — and that of the other men profiled in this account and thousands of others with untold stories — traces the trajectory of Vietnam veterans, who contend with deadly maladies caused by exposure to Agent Orange and a U.S. government that has, at times, been unresponsive to their needs.

Vietnam War veteran Barry Keefer, 65, has a host of health problems, including, neurological damage to the prostate, which has been linked to exposure to Agent Orange. Keefer has struggled for years to get help from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, and is in the process of appealing his claim, which has repeatedly been denied. What medical care his private insurance does not cover, he pays out of pocket. (Photo by Christine Baker, PennLive staff)

All she got was a flag

John Galinac watched as U.S. soldiers sprayed Phu Cat's perimeter with herbicides, futilely trying to stem the dense vegetation.

"John would say it would be very thick, lushy green," said Brenda Galinac, his wife of 35 years. "He would go to bed and come out the next day, and everything would be gone."

Terry Singer, who was stationed not far from there, recalled a similar experience.

Attached to a light equipment maintenance company stationed in Cha Rang Valley, Singer, then 18, traveled on the roads that had been cleared out from the jungle, their perimeter pushed back as far as possible.

The sight of C-123s flying overhead, plumes of herbicide trailing them, was commonplace.

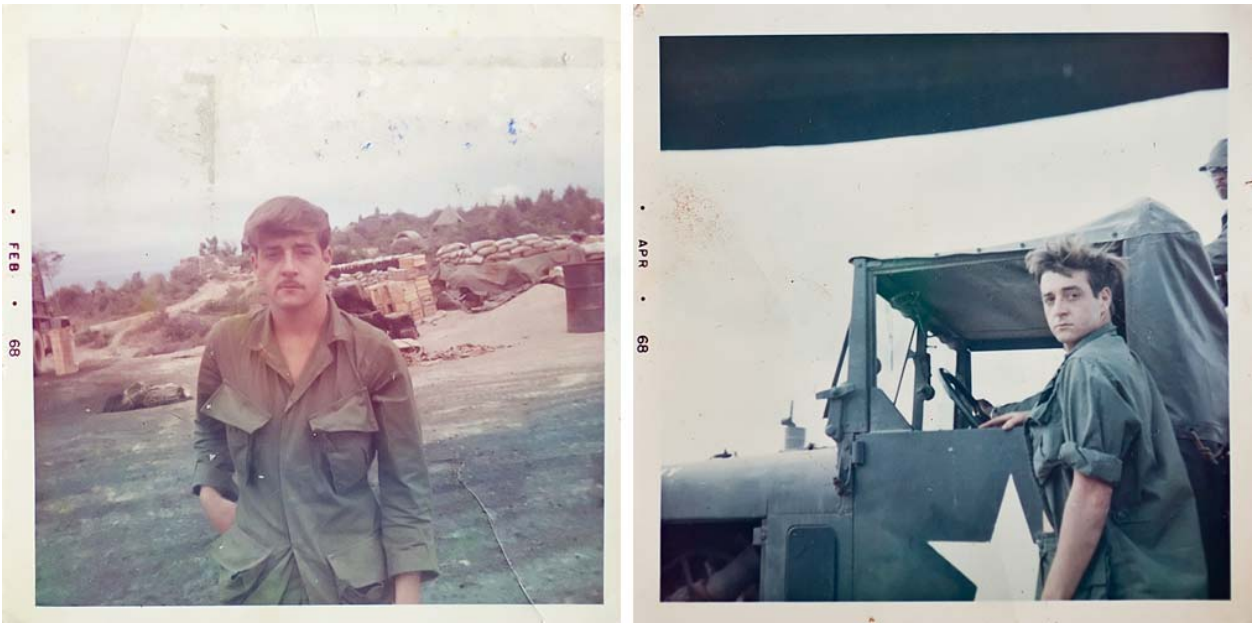
"If you're around ammonia, you know how you kind of feel something in your nose? It slightly alters your taste sensation," Singer said. "I don't recall registering in my mind it being Agent Orange ... I don't think there was recognition that it was Agent Orange."

Barry Keefer's most stunning encounter with those C-123s happened while he was on a field mission in the central highlands of the Kon Tum Province. A transport plane flew overhead, saturating the area with Agent Orange.

Keefer, then also 18, was soaked, his clothes, food and gear covered with the toxic defoliant

He had seven days left in his mission and no change of clothes.

"It was burning," Keefer recalled. "It was wet moisture, and it was burning. I had to run from one hill to another to get away from it. But we are on top of a hill. There is no place to go or wash or anything."



Barry Keefer in 1968. After struggling close to 10 years to secure medical compensation for his ailments, Keefer said he's jaded toward the military and suspicious of the federal government.

Both now 65, Singer and Keefer, like countless other Vietnam veterans, live with the lethal legacy of exposure to the herbicide. Singer has a rare form of blood cancer, and Keefer has a host of health problems, including neurological damage to the prostate.

Their conditions have been linked to exposure to Agent Orange.

Singer, whose cancer is recognized as a presumptive disease linked to Agent Orange, has been deemed 100 percent disabled and entitled to complete medical treatment.

Keefer, on the hand, has struggled for years to get help from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and is appealing his claim, which has been denied repeatedly. The medical care his private insurance does not cover, he pays out of pocket.

"I'm going to fight until the day I die," said Keefer, who lives in Middletown. "I keep shuffling those papers."

Galinac received no compensation or health benefits from the government as reparation for the exposure to Agent Orange.

"They gave me a flag. I got a funeral plot, and I got a headstone, and I have a certificate from President [Barack] Obama thanking me for my husband's service," said Brenda Galinac, who buried her husband at Fort Indiantown Gap National Cemetery.

In recent years, amid a military drawdown in Iraq and Afghanistan, the VA has been plagued with systemic incompetence as hundreds of thousands of veterans languish in protracted lists, waiting to be processed or seen for medical care. Some have died waiting.

Against this modern day VA crisis, the epilogue to the Vietnam veterans' narrative plays out largely away from the nation's scrutiny.

Vietnam veteran Terry Singer was exposed to Agent Orange while in the Army during the war. He now suffers from health problems blamed on exposure to the chemical defoliant. Singer is photographed at Fort Indiantown Gap, May 29, 2014. (Photo by Dan Gleiter, PennLive staff)

'They can't cure it'

Eleven years ago, at a routine physical, Terry Singer's doctor ordered him to see an oncologist. The elevated protein he found in his blood pointed to multiple myeloma, a rare and deadly cancer of the plasma cells and one of the presumptive diseases the government recognizes as associated with Agent Orange exposure.

"I didn't have any connection in my mind between the disease and my service in Vietnam," Singer said. "I didn't know there was any connection."

Singer was told he may have two to three years to live.

"The diagnosis was pretty shocking," he said.

Eleven years later, Singer continues to buck his doctor's expectations. The Hummelstown resident darts from one doctor's visit to the next, tending to quarterly medical screenings. Every four months or so, Singer undergoes blood work, MRIs and CAT scans to monitor his disease. So far, he has staved off treatment, which comes with its own adverse side effects and limitations.

"Sooner or later, it'll stop working," Singer said. "You run through the gamut, and then you have nothing left. They can't cure it."

Singer is playing the odds that he won't need chemotherapy for a long time.

A self-proclaimed news junkie, he worries that the government and VA have not adequately informed veterans of Agent Orange compensation.

"My gut tells me there are thousands, if not tens of thousands, [of Vietnam] veterans across the country ... who have been diagnosed with a disease, who are not aware that they might be eligible for disability benefits," he said.

Singer knows firsthand that, even under the best of circumstances, much less a crisis, the VA puts veterans through an exhaustive undertaking to process claims and secure benefits.

Singer waited close to a year for his claim for a presumptive disease to be settled.

He has never come across publicity or outreach on the part of the VA to inform Vietnam veterans about Agent Orange benefits. The federal agency, for the record, maintains a comprehensive website filled with information related to Agent Orange. Singer worries that thousands of veterans, even those who, like him, find out about the benefits by accident, are falling through the cracks.

"Part of not forgetting the sacrifice of that era, in particular because of the harsh way they were received by their countrymen, part of the commitment that needs to be sustained until that generation no longer exists is to be committed to doing as much as possible to make sure these veterans are aware they are entitled to compensation for these diseases," Singer said.

Singer counts himself lucky. Now retired, he has his own insurance and Medicare, and his 100 percent disability covers the medical care for his blood cancer.

"I feel fortunate that I'm still here and fortunate that I haven't suffered a lot," he said. "I know there are thousands of veterans who have suffered more greatly ... not that any benefit will make up for that. It won't. But it can make navigating things a little easier."

Terry Singer, left, in 1969. He was exposed to Agent Orange while in the Army. He now suffers from health problems blamed on exposure to the chemical defoliant. Every now and then, usually when he is treating the dog for ticks or using a garden product, Singer will smell something that triggers an Agent Orange flashback.

Where was the assistance?

Seven years older than his wife, John Galinac seldom spoke with her about his experience in Vietnam.

One story Brenda does remember is the stark overnight transformation of the surrounding jungle after the herbicide was applied. Accounts of the day tell of lush, broad-leaf forests decimated into barren trunks and branches denuded of any leaves.

John Galinac had told his wife that the men who had sprayed the herbicide did not follow instructions. Agent Orange was supposed to be mixed with 20 parts water to one part herbicide. They sprayed it undiluted, he told her.

A few years ago, Galinac met with the wives of two veterans who had sprayed — by hand — the herbicide at Phu Cat. Both men died young.

"They didn't have time to be worrying about who was spraying what, because they had a job to do and they did their job," Galinac said. "And they paid with their lives."

Galinac took her husband to the hospital three years ago after his seizures began. John's condition was diagnosed as glioblastoma multiforme, an unusually malignant and aggressive brain cancer that typically kills its victims within the first year.

Three weeks later, Galinac had surgery at Penn State Milton S. Hershey Medical Center to remove the cancerous tumor. He was at stage 4.

He had been receiving health benefits from the VA for thyroid cancer and treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder.

Galinac, who served two tours in Vietnam between 1967 and 1969 and maintained immaculate service records, was repeatedly denied compensation for the brain cancer.

"His cancer was not on the list," Galinac said.

A state worker, Galinac has built a quiet life in her Harrisburg home around her son, his wife and her grandchildren. She didn't participate in any Memorial Day observances this year. She said she will visit her husband's grave on her own terms.

Galinac said she is not bitter that her government failed to offer her husband monetary compensation, but she is angry that it denied her what she needed most in the final months of her husband's life: assistance.

Because of her income, Galinac couldn't even qualify for a wheelchair.

With the help of her son, she singlehandedly cared for her husband until his death, tending to his every need, from feeding him, caring for his bedsores, changing diapers and helping him off the floor when he fell.

But in the final months, Galinac returned to work and had to recruit her friends to check on her husband and make sure he had taken his medications, eaten and not fallen.

"What could I have really used during that time period? Money would have been OK, but having more help here to care for him would have been better. That would have meant more to me than money," she said.

A Swatara Township police officer, John Galinac was buried with police and military honors. Township police officers served as pallbearers and escorted the funeral procession from Holy Name of Jesus Catholic Church to the cemetery. Police closed Interstate 81 for his funeral procession.

Vietnam veteran Ronald Brooks was exposed to Agent Orange while in the Army during the war. He is now completely disabled and suffers from a list of ailments blamed on exposure to the chemical defoliant. Brooks is photographed at his Millersburg home, May 27, 2014. (Photo by Dan Gleiter, PennLive staff)

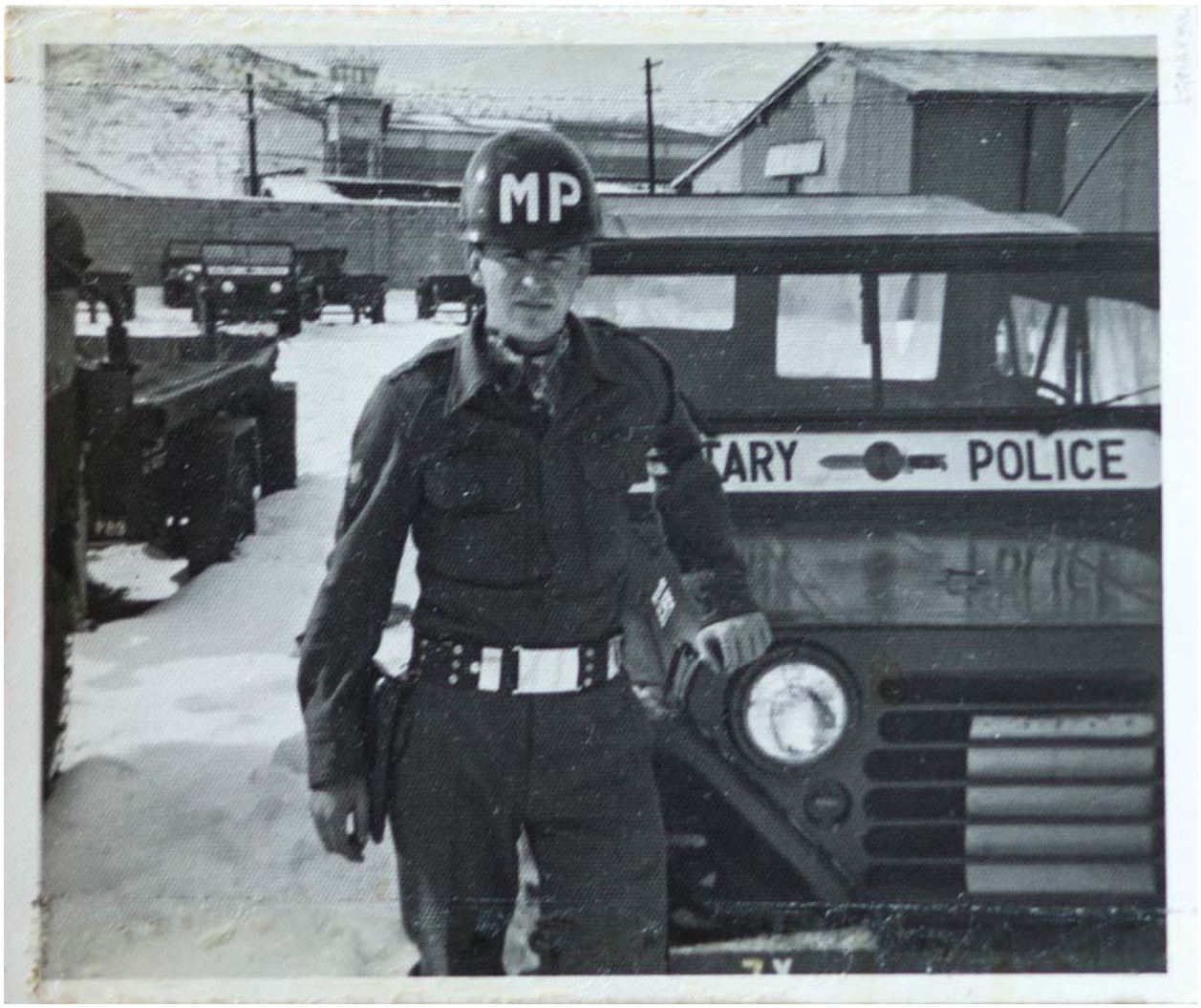
An acrid, burning sensation

A few years ago, as his disabilities progressively robbed him of his mobility, Ronald Brooks ponied up for a massive flat screen television. Amid mounting medical bills, the family was scraping by, but the TV was worth the cost.

Brooks suffers from a litany of maladies, including ischemic heart disease, which has worsened over the years and makes it nearly impossible for him to do anything without gasping for breath. He has had several strokes, has largely lost the use of his hands, and has developed type 2 Diabetes and Parkinson's-like symptoms.

Laying on the sofa in the living room of his Millersburg house to watch television is one of his few joys.

He is unrecognizable from the young 18-year-old in the photographs from 1969 showing him in Vietnam. Brooks belongs to the cadre of young men of his time who enlisted — rather than waited to be drafted — in the Army, eager to join the fighting.



Ronald Brooks in 1969.

"It seemed like when Vietnam came along more factories were working," he recalled. "Everybody had a job ... they were making good money. It was like send your son off to Vietnam and you can buy a new car."

Assigned to military police training, he had a "cushy job" in Vietnam, rounding up and destroying enemy weapons, he said.

Ever present, he recalled, was the acrid, burning sensation in his nose and mouth, after the planes sprayed outposts with Agent Orange.

"They would come in pretty low," Brooks said. "You could see the mist in the air. You just can't go [for] cover; you can't leave your position. Whatever your job is you just can't walk off. You have to maintain. It was an odd situation."

After 2000, Brooks' health began to deteriorate and before long it was clear to him that his health's downward spiral was linked to his time in Vietnam. Over the years, he has learned of the deaths of many of his brothers in arms; some have committed suicide. Almost all, he said, became loners after the war.

Brooks worries that the government will leave veterans "sitting in the street." He worries that the millions who served their country in a war he now thinks was unnecessary are being denied medical care and benefits.

"Vietnam didn't have to be," Brooks said. "There was nothing there, absolutely nothing. Those people had been fighting for years and years, and that's all they know. ... There was no reason to be there. There was nothing to gain. They had no oil or gold or anything like that."

Brooks applied for disability compensation with the VA in 2005 for his ischemic heart disease, one of the VA's Agent Orange presumptive conditions. Type 2 Diabetes and Parkinson's are also on the presumptive list.

His claim was approved in 2011.

For six years, amid worsening health and an inability to work, the Brooks family lived on $800 a month. They couldn't keep a car and learned to get by on bare necessities.

Around 1990, Brooks received an $800 payment from a $250 million settlement fund Dupont established to compensate Agent Orange veterans. Brooks said lawyers got the bulk of it.

"We survived," he said. "It was rough, but I think we're better for it. I wouldn't want other ones to go through it."

Brenda Galinac's husband, John Galinac, served two tours in Vietnam. After he developed complications from exposure to Agent Orange, he tried to get compensation for his brain cancer, but his specific glio blastoma is not included among presumed diseases. He died 4/24/13. Galinac received a grave, headstone and flag from the Army, but that's it. She will receive no further compensation. Their son has also developed cancer; family doctor believes it was connected to his fathers exposure to Agent Orange. (Photo by Joe Hermitt, PennLive staff)

Blue water vs. brown water

The broad Agent Orange compensation guidelines Congress established in 1991 extended benefits and medical care to veterans who had "boots on the ground" in Vietnam from 1962 to 1975.

All compensation is for service in Vietnam and is not linked to exposure to any of the herbicides or dioxin. That may sound like a contradiction in terms, but it underscores the inherent and ponderous complexities of the issue.

"The presumption says we agree you are ill because of that particular service; therefore, you are going to get compensation," said Gary Tallman, a policy expert with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

Presumption paved the way for veterans who had sought compensation for Agent Orange illnesses but were denied to refile claims. The U.S. military would do the same in 2010 for a new generation of veterans, establishing service connection presumption post-traumatic stress disorders.

In 2010, the VA reported having provided $16.2 billion in compensation to nearly 1.2 million Vietnam-era veterans. The agency does not correlate the compensation directly to Agent Orange/dioxin exposure or to any other possible cause.

The Agent Orange Act of 1991 requires the National Academy of Sciences to review periodically all medical and scientific research on the health effects of exposure to Agent Orange/dioxin and other chemicals used during the Vietnam War. The academy issues biennial reports called "Veterans and Agent Orange." The most recent one was issued in July 2009.

The federal government also has allowed compensation for female Vietnam veterans' children who have rare and profound birth defects such as achondroplasia; cleft lip or cleft palate; imperforate anus; neural tube defects including spina bifida, encephalocele and anencephaly; Poland syndrome; pyloric stenosis and fused digits.

Several unanswered questions warrant continued attention by the federal government, according to The Aspen Institute. These include details of research protocols, such as the accuracy of findings and interpretations, and decisions on who should pay and receive compensation.

Tallman said former VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, who resigned this year amid a crisis in his agency, acknowledged that extending broad coverage for Vietnam veterans would exacerbate chronic backlogs in the VA. Shinseki, Tallman said, had no choice.

"It was the right thing to do," Tallman said.

Between 2011 and 2012, thousands of additional veterans became eligible for Agent Orange compensation and benefits, when the federal government added specific Navy units under the presumptive umbrella.

The VA extended the eligibility to Naval service personnel who served in ships that had navigated "brown water" meaning inland and coastal waters, not "deep blue" ships that would have been out to sea.

"They always were, in a sense, in Vietnam," Tallman said. "If they got on shore, they would've been addressed already. But offshore certainly was a different way of looking at it."

Susan Saidel, executive director of the Veterans Law Clinic at Widener University, said she thinks Washington has grossly shortchanged an entire sector of Vietnam veterans, namely former Naval personnel who do not meet the compensation requirements.

These so-called blue water veterans, Saidel said, continued to fight for Agent Orange compensation, even though the government has established compensation for brown-water veterans only. The burden falls on them to document that their ship navigated coastal waters, making them eligible for compensation.

Saidel said the VA does not have the resources to investigate the navigational course of every ship that served in Vietnam.

In the meantime, Saidel said, blue-water veterans exhibit the array of rare diseases on the Agent Orange presumptive list, and while their ranks are not overwhelming, their situation is nevertheless heartbreaking. The odds are stacked against them ever receiving any compensation.

"I think there is an injustice," Saidel said. "It's a black and white thing where the VA says these people are service connected and these people aren't. Of course, veterans don't see it that way."

Over the years, Neal Delisanti, director of the Cumberland County Veterans Affairs, has urged scores of veterans to register with the VA's Agent Orange registry. Similar to Gulf War veterans' registries, it tracks ailments among service personnel and helps determine compensation.

Delisanti, who does a lot of outreach in the veteran community, said he is often amazed at the number of veterans who know nothing about Agent Orange compensation. The VA, he said, fulfills its obligation, but too often, veterans fail to do their part to be informed of benefits.

"The VA takes a rap for everything that goes wrong," Delasanti said. "I understand it's a big organization, but what you don't hear is the good things going on in the VA."

With the Vietnam veterans' pool fast approaching 80, Delasanti sees a growing number of veterans seeking to process Agent Orange claims. He describes some of the claims as a "slam dunk;" others, he said, require more effort.

John Galinac (standing second from left) who served two tours in Vietnam between 1967 and 1969 and maintained immaculate service records, was denied compensation for brain cancer repeatedly.

Agent Orange flashbacks

Production of Agent Orange halted in the 1970s. While the herbicide is not used, one of its components remains widely used in dozens of garden products.

After struggling close to 10 years to secure medical compensation for his ailments, Barry Keefer said he's jaded toward the military and suspicious of the federal government.

"I just don't trust them," he said. "I would just like to get my medicine paid for, so I won't have to pay no money when I go to VA. Me serving my country in Vietnam, I should be able to go there for free."

Terry Singer said history and hindsight has made him cynical, not only toward his government and the military but corporations as well.

"If I really think about it and focus, yeah, I can get angry because of the lives it took, the deception that occurred and the consequences of it all," he said. "But I've never chosen to dwell on it."

Every now and then, usually when he is treating the dog for ticks or using a garden product, Singer will smell something that triggers an Agent Orange flashback.

"I think a lot of people understand that the chemicals in our foods and what's become of water and air is killing us all," he said.

Brenda Galinac said she does not like anything about war. Still, she takes heart that the men and women in uniform today are extended a far more generous and grateful reception by their countrymen than her husband experienced when he returned from Vietnam.

"John said he wouldn't wear his uniform to even fly home," she said. "He didn't want anyone to know. For years, he didn't talk about it at all. It wasn't until he was older that he talked about it. And yet you see he saved everything. It obviously was important to him — an important part of his life even though the people that he was fighting for and protecting and serving didn't necessarily appreciate what he did. And they've shown that again."