

A friend's final favor



Vicki Walters with her late husband Michael. His unexpected death left her unclear about her financial future.

Air Force veteran connects late friend's spouse with DAV and assists her with death benefits claim

When Vicki Walters' husband passed away unexpectedly in March, she was left in a tailspin of heartache and uncertainty.

"Michael was always a provider and protector for this family, and following his passing, I was just at a loss," said Vicki. "You go into that fog of grief, and it's so very real. You just realize things will never be the same."

Navy veteran Michael Walters served three tours in Vietnam aboard patrol boats clearing foliage along riverbanks by spraying the toxic herbicide Agent Orange. His time in Vietnam was not without tragedy. While back in the United States to attend his grandfather's funeral, the entire crew of Walters' boat was killed.

"He was the only one from his original crew to step off his boat alive," said Nikki Walters, Michael's daughter. "That carried a lot of weight with my dad."

Following his service, he developed diabetes and carried the scars of post-traumatic stress disorder. His grade school friend, Mike Vandrovec, connected Michael with DAV.

"We were good friends in school, and I would see him at the class reunions," said Vandrovec, an Air Force veteran.

Vandrovec knew Vicki was eligible for death benefits since Michael was a 100% totally and permanently disabled veteran. As a DAV life member of Chapter 1 in Fargo, N.D., past Department of North Dakota commander and former county veterans service officer, Vandrovec felt compelled to help his longtime friend.

"I said, 'you need to make sure you get the benefits that Mike earned,'" he explained. "I told her, 'When you get the death certificate, give me a call.'"

With Vandrovec's recommendation, Vicki reached out to DAV National Service Officer Matt Herrud, who began the process for a burial allowance and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) claim. Walters was granted a total and permanent VA disability rating in 2010 but died short of the 10-year requirement for death benefits to become automatic for Vicki.

However, the VA does honor DIC, a monthly payment to eligible survivors of veterans whose death stems from a service-connected disability. Since Michael's sudden death was attributed, in part, to diabetes—a condition he developed after his service in Vietnam—Herrud confidently submitted the claim for Vicki to receive the benefits that Michael had earned.

On July 29, Vicki got the news she had been waiting for. Her claim was approved for death benefits, including a tax-free monthly payment she can expect going forward.

"Once Vicki got the letter notifying that her claim was

granted, she called to thank us for the services we provided," said Herrud. "I could tell in her voice that this really makes a difference in her life."

Vicki said she had "absolute gratitude" for the gentlemen who helped her. "DAV knew what to do, and I am so grateful," she added. "As a widow who just lost the provider of the family, I wouldn't know what I would have done otherwise."

Vandrovec said he does occasionally reach out to the spouses of veterans he knows or worked with, but since he and Walters were longtime friends, this one was special.

"I become attached to the veterans I've known in my life, and just because I'm retired doesn't mean I'm out of business," he explained.

For Vicki, the benefits she'll receive on Michael's behalf will offer some welcome stability and financial certainty during turbulent times. While her husband may be gone, she plans on opening The Branch, a facility in Osage, Minn., dedicated to providing holistic wellness for veterans.

"For veterans who are returning, I know a lot of them have a difficult time readjusting," said Vicki, "just as my husband did when he came back."