

Fourteen years after the heart transplant that saved him, Chilcoat savors his life

BY EARLINE WHITE
Correspondent

You've probably met him at the Chowan County Fair, or may be the Historic Edenton Visitor Center, or even a Sons of the Legion meeting, because John Chilcoat is a busy man.

When he isn't volunteering, you can find him taking walks or out on the golf course. A retired Food Lion store manager, this father of three and grandfather of three has a lot going on in his life.

We recently had the pleasure of meeting this lively man at McDonald's on an unseasonably cool morning. Over soft drinks we discussed another of his life experiences - that of being an organ recipient.

Chilcoat's story begins in 1985, when at age 44 he began experiencing fatigue and shortness of breath. Chilcoat knew something wasn't right, so he saw his physician. When the medication he was prescribed failed to work, he consulted a respiratory therapist in Virginia Beach. It was there that the doctor noticed John's heart was beating too fast.

A pulmonary specialist told Chilcoat he had congestive heart failure. It was not until September, 1985 that Chilcoat was finally diagnosed with cardiomyopathy.

According to Chilcoat, his condition most likely resulted from a virus he had contracted. The virus, he said, overstrained his heart muscle, causing severe damage.

According to medical experts, cardiomyopathy, while not common, can be severely disabling or fatal. In addition to viral infections, the condition can result from heart attacks, alcoholism, long-term, severe high blood pressure (hypertension) and other causes not yet known. In addition to the symptoms experienced by Chilcoat, others include: chest pain; fainting, especially after physical exertion; lightheadedness, especially after activity; dizziness; sensation of feeling heart beat (palpitations); and high blood pressure.

Additional symptoms that may occur include: swelling of the legs, ankles, or other portions of the body; abdominal swelling or enlargement; decreased amount of urine; need to urinate at night; changes in mental state such as decreased alertness or difficulty



Having found the courage to undergo a heart transplant, John Chilcoat knows well just how precious life is. Here, he shares a relaxed moment with a special friend. (Photo by Earline White)

concentrating; coughing; loss of appetite.

While the condition is chronic, the progression of the disease varies from person to person.

In Chilcoat's case, his condition was stable for a while, but in early 1986, it worsened. Though early on John hadn't considered the possibility of having a heart transplant to correct his condition, he was beginning to rethink his options. The physical exhaustion was increasing and he felt something had to be done. His continued shortness of breath and inability to sleep peacefully finally led him to want the operation. After extensive testing to see if he qualified physically and mentally, he became 115th on the list of those waiting for heart transplants.

His surgery was performed in Richmond, VA in October. The anonymous donor was a 14-year-old from Pennsylvania.

Even after surviving the transplant itself, though, Chilcoat had other obstacles to overcome. "I almost died twice," he said casually.

One of those episodes occurred during a trip to Salt Lake City. He began running a fever, and for fear of his condition worsening, his wife, Judy, took him to the hospital. During that event, which took

place in the spring of 1987, he remained in the hospital for nine days. His other close encounter with death was in 1996 when he caught pneumonia. Because of his condition, he now has to be careful of all the germs that might come his way through contact with others. "Judy tells me to stay away from big crowds," he said.

Chilcoat is no more susceptible to catching colds than anyone else, but he has a greater chance of a cold developing into something worse. Like someone living with AIDS, his immune system is weaker now because he must re-

main on immunosuppressant drugs to keep his body from rejecting his new heart.

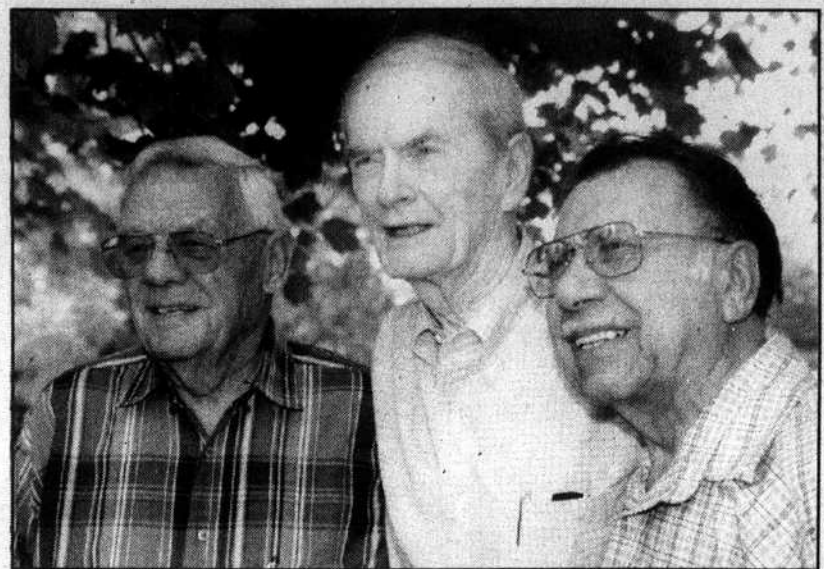
It's been 14 years since John Chilcoat underwent his heart transplant; he has been blessed. After his surgery, the doctors gave him an 80 percent chance of living through the next year. With every year, those statistics dropped significantly. In fact, there were no guidelines for a patient five years after the operation because so few survived past that point.

His doctors should be amazed today. His yearly check-ups in Richmond have been positive. He and his wife of 39 years have come a long way. John is thankful for the support his family has given him. He knows that without the support of a strong family, he couldn't have made it through.

Little has changed in Chilcoat's day to day life in the years since his transplant surgery. Like all of us, he must watch his intake of salt and fat (and avoid a sedentary lifestyle). He cannot be an organ donor himself (because of the medication he takes), but everyone else in his family has taken the necessary steps to be a donor if the occasion should arise.

Chilcoat does have one piece of important advice, though, to offer those with whom he shares his story - particularly those who dread going to the doctor.

"If something isn't right, and everyone knows their own body well enough to know when something is wrong, don't hesitate to check it out," he said. "Go to the doctor. The sooner there is a diagnosis, the sooner there can be a treatment. Some things cannot be put off until later."



Gene Perry of Edenton, at left, with his buddies Joe Costello of Phoenix, AZ and Joe Tranchita of Cleveland, OH. (Photo by Blair Currie)

WWII friendship has grown over the years

BY BLAIR CURRIE

Joseph Eugene Perry is a well-known figure in town, whether it be driving his 1923 Model T Ford in local parades, or just enjoying the company of the morning coffee group at the Chicken Kitchen. A longtime stalwart and past president of the Edenton Lions Club, he is one of the most popular members of this renowned group, but there is also a story many don't know that involved this fine gentleman.

Gene Perry saw service in World War II with the 45th Infantry Division of the Oklahoma National Guard. Originally, the swastika, a good luck symbol, was the shoulder insignia worn by this unit, but with the emergence of Hitler and the Nazis, this symbol took on a different meaning, and was discarded by Americans.

The thunderbird was the new

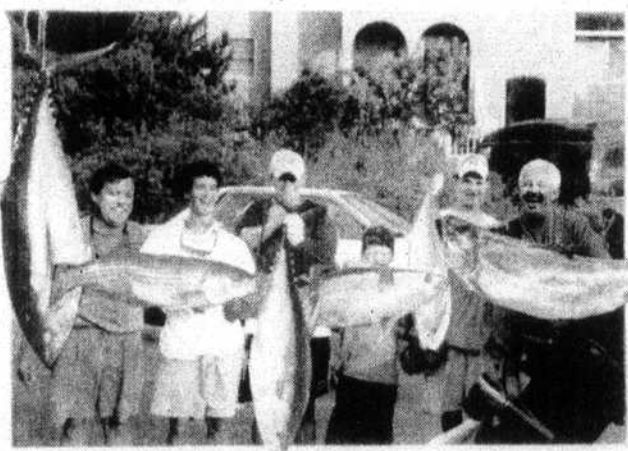
symbol adopted by Perry's unit, and so the division quite appropriately became known as the Thunderbirds. The 45th Division has many battle honors: Anzio, Southern France, Ardennes, Rhine, etc.

It was from the Anzio beachhead in Italy that the most dramatic action regarding the division was recalled. Pinned down on the beachhead for 56 days, constantly harassed by German strafing and bombing, was surely one of those terrible situations that gave credence to the phrase, "War is Hell!"

Gene was featured in an Army's Stars and Stripes newspaper story concerning an incident that occurred at that time. An Air Force plane, damaged in a bombing run to points North, plopped down right on top of Gene's foxhole. Everyone survived, but with typical

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