

**2nd Platoon, Delta Co., 1st Battalion 6th Infantry, 198th Infantry Brigade,
23rd Infantry Division (AMERICAL), US Army, Vietnam, 1968 – 1969**



[Note: Nineteen of the soldiers from 2/D/1-6, pictured here in 1969, reunited on the 2002 Veterans Day weekend in Washington, D.C. This article from The Daily Inter Lake, a newspaper published in Kalispell, MT, tells their story. Used with permission.]

Vietnam War platoon reunites for first time since conflict

By **Matthew Bunk**

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Vietnam veterans Norbert "Nobby" Hageny and Terry "Swede" Andreessen search the Vietnam Veterans Memorial for names of former members of their platoon who died during the 17-year conflict. It was the first time either of them had been to the memorial.

***Matthew Bunk**/ Daily Inter Lake*

Standing at the foot of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., surrounded by almost two dozen of his old army buddies, there was a fleeting

moment when David Gibson could have sworn that the helicopter flying overhead was an army chopper, circa 1969.

It wasn't.

"Man, that's weird," he said. "That helicopter sounded like a Huey. It felt just like we were back ... "

His voice trailed off before the inevitable words "in Vietnam." But nobody in the motley bunch needed him to finish. A couple of the old grunts probably had the same flash.

Five years ago, Gibson would have kept that whole thought to himself.

Like many of the remaining members of the 198th Infantry Delta Company Second Platoon, he thought the inability to escape the mental strain of war was a sign of weakness. He thought he was alone.

Again, Gibson was mistaken.

"I never would have thought," Gibson said in a thick Ozarkian accent. "All these years, everyone else felt the same way I did."

A few years ago, Gibson, a Kentucky resident known strictly within the platoon as "Budweiser," decided to hunt down his old comrades.

Except for a couple of phone calls decades ago, virtually none of the unit members had stayed in touch. In fact, the majority of them received last-minute Army releases and didn't get a chance to say goodbye when they were discharged from a small Vietnamese hamlet in the central highlands called Chu Lai.

Their platoon was isolated for much of the time they were stationed at the outpost. Understandably, they became close friends. Then, as the missions and body counts piled up over time, they became brothers.

"There is a bond between us that will not be broken until we die," said platoon member James Cheek. "There is no way to explain it."

Gibson and his wife, Mikey, began an excruciatingly slow process of Internet searches and gleaning military records — not to mention a few illegal methods — to find the men he had known as boys.

The couple's load lightened when Gibson located Terry Andreessen, a Libby business owner who served as sergeant in the platoon in 1969.

"That man right there," Gibson said, pointing at Andreessen, "he is the reason we are all together. Once you set him on course, look out."

Andreessen took on Gibson's challenge, doggedly tracking down names and phone numbers of guys they served with. Often, the leads went nowhere.

Once in a while, Gibson said, the results of a successful find were highly disturbing.

"I found one of the black guys in our company that I had been very good friends with," he choked out between upward glances and several throat lumps. "His family told me he drank himself to death."

It was a bad deal, but Gibson continued searching. The following discovery, though, was just as discouraging.

"The next guy I tried to contact had killed himself in 1988," he said. "It was a severe blow. I was useless for three days. I didn't leave the house."

That's when Mikey picked up her husband's slack and stumbled upon Andreessen's phone number. She convinced Gibson to make one more phone call.

"I couldn't believe it," Andreessen said. "When I heard that voice, my knees went weak."

That was in the spring of 2000. For the next 2 1/2 years, Andreessen added names to a roster that still isn't complete. When he had found enough of the key guys, he planned a reunion.

On the weekend before Veterans Day, 19 platoon members finally got a chance to say the words that had been trapped in time.

"We all needed this — to see each other one more time," Andreessen said. "If nothing else, just to say 'I didn't say goodbye. I'm sorry. I appreciate what you did for me.'"

"Most of the guys, nobody has thanked them in 33 years."

When they first met in the lobby of their hotel, none of the aging soldiers knew what to expect. They communicated primarily with their expressions and sideways glances. They spoke, but they didn't really say anything.

One of them stayed in his hotel room for hours before joining the rest. And it took last-minute prodding by three other members of the platoon to keep him from leaving before it started.

Eventually, they began talking about their past lives in a country that no longer exists. And they became family all over again.

And what started as a quiet drizzle soon became a downpour.

"At first, I didn't want to come to this thing," said retired Maj. Larry Smith, who led the platoon as a first lieutenant in 1968-69. "But they kept after me. And now that I've started, I'm not going to quit until I've given them everything they can handle."

Smith opened the banquet with a ceremony to present the Purple Heart to Doug Sykes, one of the platoon veterans who was selected to receive the medal 32 years ago after being wounded in battle. Almost every member of the platoon has been awarded the Purple Heart, but Sykes' was lost somewhere in the shuffle.

Following the belated ceremony, Smith strayed from his planned speech to direct a severely informal chat session that pushed nearly the entire bunch to tears before the night's end. The three-hour rap was so emotion-laden that Smith, a compelling man who some of the veterans still call "sir," had to leave the room several times before finishing.

Afterward, his former subordinates concluded that he had just gone through a sort of self-healing process familiar to all of them.

"What you just heard was Lt. Larry Smith's coming out," said Andreessen, also a recipient of the Purple Heart. "That was more for him than it was for us."

But whether talking about the past helped Smith, the rest of the platoon seemed gratified to hear that the man who led them also respected them.

"The standard that I used to measure all of the other units I ever commanded came from you guys," said Smith, whose first commission as an officer was the second platoon.

He continued a military career after Vietnam, and retired almost 20 years later as a major. But the platoon still calls him lieutenant, which doesn't seem to bother him a bit.

None of the men, including Smith, had been to the Vietnam memorial prior to the reunion. One by one, they searched out the names of the men that had died in front of them.

"This is amazing, isn't it," said Winston "G.I. Joe" Carbonneau, a sergeant who served three tours in Vietnam, one with the platoon. "All these guys together

again. And here we are, at this wall with 58,000 names on it, some of them we knew."

Smith says he doesn't have any regrets about Vietnam. He does, however, get a little riled that the U.S. government didn't fully commit to winning the conflict.

"Anytime someone is trying to control another person, government or whatever, I'll step in," he said. "I wasn't doing it to protect the right to burn flags. I was there to keep a government from being taken over."

But it seems Smith is one of the only ones who was able early on to rationalize the killings as necessary.

Almost all of the men at the reunion, and indirectly their wives, have struggled to overcome feelings of failure. Many said it would have been easier to come home to a different social climate, one that didn't include public ridicule.

"Until six months ago, I didn't even talk about Vietnam with my family," Andreessen said. "And I still haven't told them some of the stuff."

"I think a lot of the guys were like me. They felt like a real man could forget about what happened and not let it bother him. But it's got nothing to do with being tough. We were considered a disgrace, the only soldiers in United States history to lose a war. Being a disgrace — that's a huge burden to bear."

It took them a significant part of their lives to overcome the fear and loathing that accompanied coming home, said Frankie Brosious, a tall man who always has been one of the quiet ones in the bunch.

Brosious said his biggest struggle came the night he was discharged from Vietnam.

After fulfilling a two-month extension to his tour, Brosious was airlifted out of the Chu Lai and plopped overnight at a military base in Camron Bay. The Viet Cong launched a mortar attack on the base that lasted through the night, keeping Brosious from getting any sleep.

In addition to the immediate threat to his life, the implausible idea that he was abandoning the rest of the platoon kept Brosious awake.

"I was worried about leaving the rest of those guys," he said. "I didn't want to leave."

The Army transferred him out the next morning, and by that night, he was back home in Sunbury, Penn. But the army didn't tell him what time he would reach his hometown bus station, so he was greeted by an empty building.

Then Frank came to the strange, sobering realization that sometime during his 14 months of combat he had forgotten his home phone number. Other things seemed more important to remember during a full-circle war, he said.

Left with few other options, he decided to walk home that night. That's when he realized the worst part of coming back: The jungle had followed him home.

Viet Cong kept popping out of the bushes, he said.

"I couldn't sleep that night because I kept thinking mortars were going to fall on the house," he said. "I didn't ever feel safe."

Thirty-three years after returning to the states, Brosious still doesn't sleep well.

A lot of people didn't understand why the drafted soldier had such a hard time leaving the war. But Frankie doesn't know why they can't comprehend. Only hours, days or weeks before, that collective paranoia had been the platoon's stopgap between life and ambush. It was instinct, not choice.

"I was always scared," Brosious said. "For years, the only time I would leave my house was to go to work."

He thinks he could have gotten over the dysfunction if he would have been able to talk about it with other veterans. But, until the roster grew to include him, he didn't know how to find any of his old friends, who often were known only by their nicknames.

Widespread military use of nicknames did turn out to be a serious roadblock, said Andreessen, or as the unit calls him, "Swede."

"Some of these guys, I can still remember their faces, but not their names," he said.

"Everybody had nicknames," said Andreessen, of German and Dutch ancestry. "I used to say nobody knew my real name. I probably could have left the country without anyone knowing it."

There are still several platoon members they haven't located. But the group, steeped in a tradition of leaving no man behind, vowed to continue searching.

"We've still got a couple left to find," Gibson said. "And we'll get 'em."

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