



front row: Chuck Rosenblum, Terry Nau, Norm Gunderson, Tony Hoehner, Faye Barbian (wife of fellow behind her). Back row: Carl Miller, Tom Barrett, Bill Kimball, Bill Grelecki, Ken Barbian

By TERRY NAU

Times sports editor

LAS VEGAS, Nev. - Reunions always seem like tricky business, especially when nine veterans of the Vietnam War meet for the first time since they departed Southeast Asia 35 years ago.

But there we were two Fridays ago, flying in from around the country to see how the years had changed us all. Turns out we were all older and fatter and grayer but essentially the same people we knew so long ago.

Adding irony to the affair, our ambitious Uncle Sam (a world-class cop) arranged another war in a far-off place that we could monitor on television during our visit. And we had the added enjoyment of seeing anti-war demonstrators show up in the streets of America, protesting the Bush family's latest incursion into Iraq.

It seemed just like old times.

We had all served with "A" battery of the 2nd Battalion, 32nd Artillery unit between 1967-69. There was no heavy lifting of projectiles for this crew. Most of us toiled in the Fire Direction Center, plotting targets on maps, computing firing data and relaying that information to the gun crews. Our 8-inch and 175-mm cannons could fire 200-pound projectiles between 10 and 18 miles into the night, or we could lower the cannons and shoot "direct fire" if the enemy grew too close, which is what happened one day right after the Tet Offensive in late January, 1968.

"We were all part of a team that worked hard to accomplish our objectives," Bill Kimball, now a Chicago Police Lieutenant, said. "And a fine team we were. If the Olympics had an event for firing artillery guns, we would have won the gold medal, hands down."

We had stories to tell all over again, mainly because we never got to try them out on one another once we returned stateside. And there really wasn't any reason to tell our family or friends. The Vietnam War was so unpopular when we got home that we just closed the book and went on with our lives.

Back in those days, the U.S. Army was filled with conscripted soldiers like ourselves, teenagers drafted out of civilian life when they were 18 or 19 years old and sent overseas after four to 10 months of basic and advanced training in their MOS (Military Occupation Skill). The unlucky draftees were assigned to infantry units. Didn't matter whether you had any college experience or a good score on your draft exams. Uncle Sam assembled his war-making machine any damn way he pleased.

One of our FDC members had completed three years of college at Marquette University. "The Army made me a cook," Bill Grelecki recalled with a laugh. "I only got switched to FDC after I came to Vietnam. Guess they had too many cooks and not enough FDC guys. Actually, I'm glad I learned how to cook in the army. You never know when you're going to have to make a meal for a couple hundred people."

There were stories told of mortar attacks and the panic they created. We recalled the death of a draftee who became supply sergeant and drove his truck over a land mine while taking our laundry back to Tay Ninh base camp in September of 1968. Our zany battery clerk blew a hand off testing a bazooka-like weapon on the berm during the daily "Mad Minute."

We remembered the minor inconveniences of life in the field ... like the rats.

"You hated the rats," Bill Kimball told me. "I remember when they plowed over the Special Forces camp and all the rats came running into our camp at Trai Bi, waves and waves of rats. Me and Dean Vincent used to try to stick them with our bayonets. Dean loved doing that."

Dean Vincent, a quiet Texan who looked like the actor Robert Mitchum (my recollection), couldn't be found when we canvassed the country for our old buddies. But his good buddy Ken Barbian from Abilene, Texas made it to our reunion. Ken drove the armored personnel carrier (APC) for our unit whenever we went on a road trip to places like Cu Chi and Trai Bi.

After a soldier completed his one-year tour of duty in Vietnam, Uncle Sam flew him home in a commercial airplane and returned that unsuspecting young man to a society that had changed its opinion on the "conflict" while he was gone.

(Of course, most of us had changed our minds a few months after we entered Vietnam.)

The original stereotype of Vietnam veterans pictured them as dazed by war and crazed by their inability to cope when they came home, which certainly was true for a small percentage of veterans who saw worse things than we did.

For our group, there seemed to be just the normal rude awakenings in life to deal with. Two of us saw our fathers die suddenly after we got home, almost as if they hung on until we returned. (Our parents had it worse than we did when it came to worrying about our fates. They had the 15 minutes of nightly news to scare them to death. We knew where we were. They didn't.)

Our reunion brought together middle-aged men who had made the adjustment back into the real world and looked forward to the opportunity to talk about the one year in their lives when the adrenalin flowed as never before.

Norm Gunderson, a West Pointer who had earned the respect of all the draftees, was one of two officers who attended our reunion.

"After 35 years, we have our health," he told us. "And while, during the years, each of us might have endured some frustrations and setbacks, life has generally been kind. Of course, we know that others have not been so fortunate."

Gunderson noted that seven of our nine reunion members were draftees.

"I think you should all feel proud that you answered when you were called and served your country well during some trying times."

And with the current Gulf War exploding across our television screens, Gunderson couldn't help but note the many divided sentiments that have once again begun to split our country.

"You continued to serve your country," he said, "by providing moral support to those who followed you. None of you has left the evaluation of the wisdom or justness of our wars, then and now, strictly to historians and politicians. This continuing debate and involvement that we see today is the very core of our democracy."

Most of us, it turns out, are in favor of the current war. And all of us wish it had never come to this point.

"I can't get September 11 out of my mind," said Carl Miller, an easy-going man who owns his own barbershop in Muenster, Ind. "That's why we're fighting this war. We can't let dangerous people from around the world do something like that to us again."

Even though we spent most of the weekend eating and drinking and gambling, we did find time to watch a little bit of the emerging war.

"You watch," Norm Gunderson predicted. "This isn't going to be easy as it looks. Saddam will make it very difficult to take Baghdad."

A day later, the first American POWs were pictured on television, looking scared and shaken, very similar to the way POWs had appeared when the North Vietnamese allowed them to be photographed during our war.

Suddenly this new war had become more than another faceless battle for all of us. A familiar knot settled in our stomachs as we remembered the cost of war. There is no such thing as a good war. People get wounded, captured and killed so often you almost become innured to the loss of human life.

"Let's hope it ends quickly," Norm Gunderson said, and we all nodded our heads, hoping Iraq wasn't going to become the "quagmire" we had all left behind a long time ago.

And when our reunion ended last Sunday evening, we had each come to learn the answer to that great unanswered question from the Vietnam War: Whatever happened to the guys we served with? Now we knew. We had become financial consultants, detectives, barbers, sports writers, tool-and-die makers, school teachers and salesmen.

That door we had closed upon coming home 35 years ago had been opened again in the most unlikely of places. And you know what we all said while heading home?

"Let's do this again next year."

The reunion, not the war.