

## News

## Soldiers hurt in ambush meet again after 34 years; they held hands in a helicopter on way to hospital

Published on 5/27/2003

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This Memorial Day weekend was a special one for Darrell Dickson of Paragould and Larry Peters of Overland Park, Kan.



Thirty-four years ago, the two held hands in a helicopter on the way to a Saigon hospital after being wounded in an ambush by the Viet Cong on the Rach Dong Nhien River. That was the last time they saw each other until Friday afternoon at the McDonald's parking lot in Batesville.

After embracing and introducing their wives, Mary Dickson and Norma Peters, all around, the two veterans spent more than an hour looking through photo albums of pictures and other memorabilia from their Vietnam days - before going into the restaurant to reminisce and do some more catching up.

They made contact with each other just eight days earlier after Peters, who works for a company that manufactures scrapbooks, photo frames and similar items, was looking on a Web site for a combat engineers' logo to use in connection with his job. He saw a posting on one site from someone in his old military unit - Company E, 1st Combat Engineering Battalion, 1968-69- and sent a reply that was, in turn, posted on the message board.



- VIETNAM VETERANS Larry Peters (left) and Darrell Dickson are all smiles as they meet for the first time since the day they were wounded in an ambush in Vietnam 34 years ago. (Larry Stroud)

"I posted a note that said I was there at that time and was wounded on the river," Peters said.

Dickson took up the story: "We (he and his wife) just got a new computer. I saw my particular company (on the Web site) and clicked on it and Larry Peters had left a message. I couldn't believe it. So I hit it and his e-mail (address) came up."

Peters said he was more than surprised when Dickson's e-mail arrived. "I was shocked," he said. "I called my wife and said, 'You're not going to believe what happened.'"



On Feb. 10, 1969, Dickson and Peters, operating a boat, were headed back to their night defensive position after delivering infantrymen upriver. They were the only occupants in their small boat, which was the middle boat in a convoy of three.

"Larry was driving," Dickson said. "I looked over and saw smoke coming out of a bush on the left side of the river and I knew we were in trouble."

Dickson grabbed the craft's M60 machine gun and returned heavy fire. Then a bullet hit him in the left leg and tore through his pelvis. "I started hearing RPGs (rocket propelled grenades) and Claymores," he said. "I started passing in and out. I was helpless after that. I had a lot of thoughts going through my mind."

Although a Claymore is a mine, the Viet Cong packed them with nails, steel balls, nuts and bolts, pieces of concrete, "anything they could find," and placed them on riverbanks where they (the Viet Cong) could detonate them at will, spraying a deadly hail of metal and other items over the river, Peters said.

The ambushers were only about 100 feet away, because the boat had to get close to the bank at that point because of the river channel.

Peters said he remembers Dickson going down. "Then I was in the river. The concussion from the RPG blew me out of the boat. ... I was trying to stay under water as long as I possibly could."

A Cobra gunship flying in support of the watercraft came to their aid, spraying bullets at their attackers. In the meantime, Peters had surfaced and was trying to swim to the lead boat. Eventually, someone pulled him into the boat.

"I had pieces of shrapnel in both hands," he said. Later, he found he also had shrapnel in his shoulder and neck. "I think that's what scared me the worst, was finding shrapnel sticking out of my neck."

They were loaded into a helicopter and taken to a hospital in Saigon. "They put me on the bottom (berth) and Larry on top in that chopper, and his hand dropped down," Dickson said. "I grabbed his hand and we held hands on the way to the hospital."

"Darrell was covered in blood and I was bleeding," Peters said.

That was the last time they saw each other until Friday.

When they arrived at the hospital, they were hosed down separately in "kind of like a car wash deal" and hospitalized. Dickson was taken to Osaka, Japan, for further treatment, then transferred to Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., after a few weeks.

Peters said Saigon was "getting hit pretty hard" just a few days after the ambush. "They evacuated the hospital and put us (patients) on a C-130 and got us out of there." He was taken to Cam Rahn Bay on the east coast of Vietnam, where he remained a month before being returned to active duty.

A military unit investigating the ambush found the Viet Cong had dug tunnels into the river bank so they could get within shooting distance and flee afterward without being easily seen.

James "David" Plumlee, who was in one of the boats in the convoy that day, died in a similar ambush the following year, they said.

Peters and Dickson said the only things that saved them was "that Cobra gunship" and "some help from the Lord," not particularly in that order.

Both were 19 at the time. "We were just young kids," Peters said.

They are 54 now. "We've changed a little," Dickson joked after they met and embraced.

Dickson and Peters hadn't known each other very long before being thrown together the day of the ambush. The day before being wounded, they had spent the night in a former South Vietnamese ambassador's house on the river, and Peters gave pictures of that house, along with several other pictures in a scrapbook, to Dickson on Friday.

In their e-mails, when Peters mentioned he had a picture he had taken of Dickson climbing a coconut tree in Vietnam, "He remembered you taking that," Mrs. Dickson told Peters.

"We both got Purple Hearts and Bronze Stars for what happened that day," Dickson said.

Both also went on to lead productive lives. After finishing out his tour of duty in Vietnam, which included another ambush attempt that was thwarted by Cobra gunships, Peters returned to the Kansas City area where he was raised, or mostly raised.

"I have relatives in Pleasant Plains," he said. "And my father lives near Calico Rock. He's Melvin Peters; he lives at Mount Olive. ... I went to school one year at Pleasant Plains."

That, he said, was his sophomore year, when he lived with his grandfather. He said he's kin to Passmores and Sutters at Pleasant Plains.

The two met in Batesville because both were visiting relatives in the area over the holiday weekend. Dickson's wife, the former Mary Fleetwood, graduated from Cave City High in 1973. Her parents, Ray and Della Mae Fleetwood, live near Cave City and brothers Danny Fleetwood and Karrell Fleetwood and sister Cathy Landers also live in the area.

Peters still carries a physical reminder of the ambush. An X-ray after a minor accident some years after he returned to the states showed "one-half of a hex nut" in his left arm, surprising the emergency room doctor, he said.

Dickson, after returning to active duty in the states to finish his time in service, returned to the Paragould-Jonesboro area and went to work for the postal department. He's now retired and speaks at elementary schools each year on Veterans Day.

"The Vietnam veterans haven't been treated too well by this country," he said. "I've gotten over it ... (but) our country's going to have to stand behind whatever we do. I think the veterans need to be recognized."

Peters said he feels more was at work than just coincidence in his and Dickson's finding each other. "I haven't been able to connect with anyone from my unit, then to connect with the one who was on that same boat, it's almost too much for coincidence," he said.

Dickson said he had long wanted to find Peters but was looking in the wrong place, mistakenly thinking Peters was from Arizona.

Both are now trying to connect with others from their unit, and are starting to find some success. Just four days before meeting with Dickson, Peters located a former buddy in Iowa who was his best friend during those days. They hope to meet again this summer.