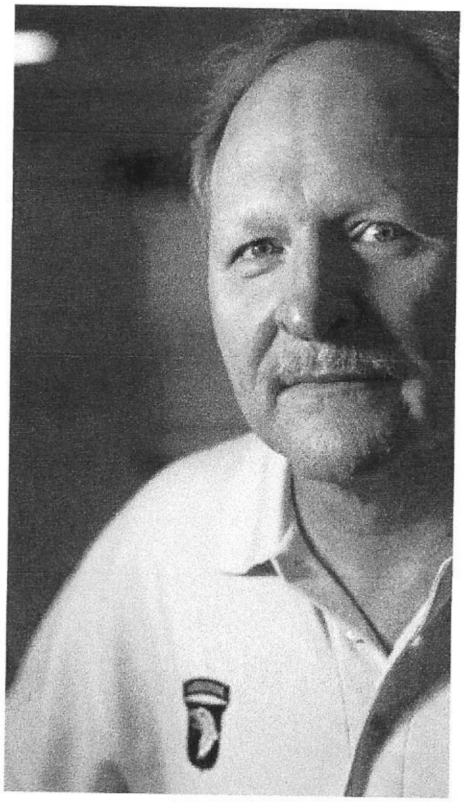
Memorial mission



SHOW CAPTION

1 / 19

By Mary Schmich

MAY 29, 2011, 10:28 AM

The woman walks toward the wall.

She presses a fingertip into the shiny, dark stone, traces it down the wall, left to right, left to right, name after carved name, a roster of the dead palpable against her skin.

Jim Zwit is about to leave when he catches sight of the woman. He has been on the Washington, D.C., mall with two old Army buddies for several hours on this sunny April day, the 40th anniversary of the 1971 firefight that killed eight of his fellow soldiers. He has cried a little, reminisced and prayed, talked to the kids who arrive by the busload to see the memorial and learn what the Vietnam War was really like. He's ready to go home.

The woman bends, her eyes scan lower.

Zwit, noting that she is middle-age and black, thinks: It can't be. Can it?

Zwit knows this stretch of wall as well as he knows his scars, the pink welts that run from below his navel to his right nipple, the sinkhole of puckered skin where he once had ribs.

This is Panel 4W. The names of the eight men who died the night he earned his scars begin close to the bottom, at

Line 123.

Robert. Jerry. Charles. Terry. Ronald. Rex. Paul. William.

Over the past four decades, Zwit has dedicated himself to finding their families so he could tell their mothers or fathers, their brothers or sisters or cousins, how they fought, how they died, and that they weren't alone.

He has tracked down relatives of all the men. All except one. William. William Ward. No matter how he searched, every clue went cold.

The woman drops onto a knee. Zwit walks over, kneels down next to her, rests a hand on her shoulder. He feels the rustle of a dormant hope.

"Can I help you find something?" he says.

In April 1971, Jim Zwit, the second in a family of nine children from Chicago's South Side, trekked with his infantry company down into the A Shau Valley and up onto an enemy ridge to retrieve the body of a soldier killed two days before.

Like the other 77 men known as the Delta Raiders, he carried 80 pounds in his rucksack. His M60 machine gun weighed 28 pounds more. He had just turned 20 years old.

At dusk on the second day, the men trudged up a trail littered with trees toppled by American bombs, swatting machetes at the suffocating jungle. They could sense, but couldn't see, the underground tunnels and bunkers of the North Vietnamese soldiers who had lured them deeper into danger by moving the body they came to get.

Shortly before 7 p.m., in the dying light, the quiet jungle erupted.

Explosions, the pop of machine guns, shouts and screams, bullets, blood, shrapnel, the stench of sweat and burnt gunpowder.

Then silence.

From up the trail, in the kill zone, a voice floated back toward the men hunkered behind a felled tree.

I'm hurt. I need a medic.

Zwit recognized the voice. It belonged to Paul McKenzie, the only black lieutenant in the company, a guy who never put you in danger without standing next to you.

Zwit was big and blond in those days, a wrestler and a hockey player whose Chicago friends called him a Pollock even though his parents were of Slovakian and German stock. He'd also been called hyperactive. Outgoing. Life of the party.

Now he jumped over the protective log and darted up the trail.

From the brush, he heard Vietnamese chatter. Spying the entry to a camouflaged bunker, he walked over, aimed his gun into the hole and fired.

Forty years later, in his La Grange Park kitchen, he will close his eyes and squeeze his crossed arms tight across his scarred chest when he recounts how the bunker suddenly went quiet. He had never killed before.

Zwit lugged McKenzie over his right shoulder and was halfway down the trail when the second mad minute -- that's what the soldiers called the bursts of violence -- struck.

McKenzie died almost instantly, hurled to the ground, riddled with metal fragments and looking Jim Zwit in the eye.

Without the shield of McKenzie's body, Zwit may have been killed too. As it was, he was just bloodied and broken. When the rescue helicopter finally arrived, it couldn't land, so Zwit was reeled up, slamming from tree to tree as the chopper lurched to avoid gunfire from the ground.

This is how Zwit remembers it. Others who were there that night tell a similar story. There are a few hard documents that testify to what happened, like the handwritten military report for April 15, 1971, that noted Zwit's condition when he arrived at the hospital:

"Multiple frag wounds to chest ... Doctors do not believe he will live."

He lived.

He lost his right kidney, a piece of his liver and four ribs. He would spend the rest of his life with shrapnel in his abdomen. But he did what eight men he fought beside that night weren't allowed to do. He lived.

After a couple of years of surgeries, he got a job as a Chicago cop. He married, had two kids, divorced, remarried in 1987, would soon have two more kids. He left the police force to go into business as a process server who also did investigations for law firms.

And through it all, he kept thinking about the promise he'd made to Bob Hein.

Hein was one of the men who'd carried him over the log to safety the night of the firefight. In the hours before the rescue helicopter came, Hein dashed back repeatedly from the combat to bring Zwit water, until, at some point, he didn't come back.

Months earlier, the two had made a pact: If only one of us gets out, the survivor has to find the family of the other guy and tell them how it happened.

Somewhere between Vietnam and home, Zwit lost Hein's address, and in those days, it was hard to find people. There was no Internet, no Facebook, no email. War documents were classified. Nothing was digitized.

Zwit remembered Hein was from Sacramento, though, and once a friend visiting California ripped the "Hein" pages from the Sacramento phone book. Zwit called every one. No luck.

When he heard about a Sacramento TV anchor involved in a California memorial for Vietnam vets, he wrote and asked for help. The anchor sent his letter to the commission handling the memorial. One of the men on the commission was a vet and a property appraiser; he scoured property tax records. No luck.

Finally, in 1988, a chain of coincidence led Zwit to Hein's mother. She still lived in Sacramento, but she'd remarried and changed her last name.

The day he called her, she told him that Bob had received a posthumous medal for carrying one of his comrades to safety.

"Mrs. Hein," Zwit remembers saying, "I'm the guy he carried back."

After that, Zwit went, in his words, a little bonkers. He vowed to find the families of the other seven dead soldiers.

He made call after call to the National Archives in pursuit of leads. He phoned newspapers in tiny towns, searching for obituaries. He narrowed one search with the help of a private investigator buddy who had access to a credit-check company.

One by one, he found the dead men's relatives. In West Virginia. Oklahoma. New York.

One by one, they thanked him, for giving them more details than what came in the curt government notification, for bringing what was lost briefly alive again.

"We got no personal belongings of Terry's back," one mother wrote him in a shaky hand, from Nashville, N.C. "Not even his glasses. He had worn them since 2nd grade and wore them all the time except when sleeping or bathing. I'm sure he died with them on his face ... I am sending a picture of Terry that I have cherished for years."

Only once did Zwit feel that his overture was unwelcome, and he understood.

And only one family's whereabouts eluded him. William Ward's.

'Can I help you find something?" the man asks.

But Lois Daniels has just seen the one name, the one out of the more than 58,000 names on the black wall, that she's looking for.

"William Ward," she murmurs.

She points her camera. The gleaming stone reflects the image of the big guy in blue jeans, with wispy faded blond hair, who has appeared beside her.

"Did I hear you right?" the man says. "Did you say, 'William Ward?' "

Does he say it before she stands up? After? When they tell it later, they won't remember it exactly the same.

But he has heard her right.

She says she grew up in the North Carolina countryside near Ward's family, is married to his cousin. She says Ward's mom and six younger siblings are still alive, though no longer on the North Carolina farm.

Two men who have come to the wall with Zwit today join them. One is the helicopter pilot who pulled Zwit out after the firefight. The other is Bob Gervasi, a platoon buddy who carried Ward's body away.

Soon, they're all hugging and, as Gervasi will say later, a little wet behind the eyeballs.

"It's great you came for the anniversary," Zwit tells Daniels.

She says, "What anniversary?"

She doesn't realize that April 15, 2011, is the 40th anniversary of Ward's death. She's here only because it's grandparents day at her grandkids' school. Her daughter in nearby Maryland has invited her to join them on a drive to D.C. It is her first visit to the wall.

"It was," she'll say afterward, "a divine appointment."

A month later, in May 2011, the Ward family held a reunion.

Among other events, they gathered to watch a video Jim Zwit sent of the slim, young guy they called Spooky.

For years, Ward's family didn't talk about his death, though year after year, on the anniversary, his mother placed a photo of him, in uniform, in the local paper.

They knew little about how Ward died, nothing about his comrades. They are grateful for what Zwit has told them, especially for the reassurance that, unlike so many other men, he went fast and didn't suffer.

"It feels good to know the full story," said his sister, Ethel Carter. "Maybe that's why I couldn't talk about it. I didn't know what I was talking about. Now I know."

When they played the video at the reunion, several people whooped in delight.

Look. Spooky, in Vietnam, down by some water, in his green uniform. Smiling, just like he did the day he left for the airport and said, "I'll see you all."

But then someone noticed Ward's mom. The video had upset her.

They cut it off.

Later, several of William Ward's siblings made plans to go to the wall this Memorial Day, for the first time in many years, for which they thank Jim Zwit.

Remembering is a mixed blessing.

Some people like to remember what's difficult as a way to preserve life or to understand it. Others try to forget.

Jim Zwit has wanted the knowledge he has shared with the families of eight dead soldiers to give them a choice about what and how they remember.

And he has, no doubt, wanted something for himself, too, something to do with his own memories, even if he's not sure what.

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For 15 Vietnam vets, the reunion of a lifetime

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On Friday evening, if everything goes according to Jim Zwit's plan, he and 14 other Vietnam veterans will stand next to home plate at U.S. Cellular Field to be honored by the Chicago White Sox.

Most of the guys haven't seen each other since the 1971 jungle firefight that cost Zwit a kidney, a piece of his liver and four ribs. But a few weeks ago, buoyed by the response to a story I wrote on his quest to find the families of the eight men who died in that battle, he embarked on a new mission involving the men who survived:

"I said, 'Let's have a reunion.' We're getting on in years. I just want to be able to hug these guys and talk to them and laugh and cry together."

The men are coming to Chicago from places as far-flung as Paris, Ohio; Lumberton, N.C.; and Catoosa, Okla. Only one, besides Zwit, lives here.

"Cub fan," says Zwit. "I'm going to make sure the Sox introduce him as being from Chicago's North Side. I want him to get booed."

He cackles with a South Side relish.

Zwit was just 19 when he left his big South Side family to go to war. The other men, too, were barely more than boys. Now a couple are overweight and diabetic. One is blind. Zwit is ordering a wheelchair for one who can hardly walk.

A former Chicago cop who works as a process server, Zwit has been waking up regularly at 3 a.m. to invent new ways to make this the trip of a lifetime for old friends he suspects he'll never see again.

His daughter is turning over her Burr Ridge home for the weekend. He has bought a dozen inflatable mattresses. Brother Rice High School, where he often lectures about the Vietnam War, has offered two school buses, driven by volunteer dads, to carry the men to Sox park and back.

Zwit, a master of the Weber grill, will cook a weekend's worth of meals, including his specialty breakfast of chorizo and scrambled eggs.

At Friday's Sox game, each man's name will be announced and the story of the 1971 battle will echo across the field.

"Forty years," Zwit says, "none of these guys have been recognized. None. For me, to have the White Sox do this for them, it's very meaningful."

Zwit has kept the weekend's precise plans secret from the guys, and he's hoping they don't read this column. When a Sox official suggested that springing the game on them unannounced might not be a great idea — maybe the men would like to dress up for the event? — Zwit found that funny.

"They're not women," he says. "These guys are 60-year-old farts."

The Sox official's comment did give him the idea, though, to have 15 special shirts made, emblazoned with the badge of the 101st Airborne Division.

After Friday's game, the men will spend the weekend just hanging out in Burr Ridge. The outdoor speakers will be cranked up. The giant flat-screen TV will show a collage of 850 old photos Zwit has collected on a DVD. And there will be stories, lots of stories. He's glad his daughter's house is secluded.

"I'm going to be busting some stones," he says. "It's going to be Katie-bar-the-door."

Then he laughs.

"Guess what? Probably at 11 o'clock at night, we'll be sleeping."

But he likes thinking about the kind of party they'd have if they were still 19, strangers thrown together in a jungle and a war, back before they understood about first times and last times.

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