

# Reflections at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

By William L. Buchanan

I found his name on the third try at panel 13 E, line 61: WAYNE E. DAWSON in half-inch high letters grit blasted into the black Banglore granite of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Streaked with melting snow from an early November storm, it was as if the wall was weeping for the memory of all 58,183 souls it held in polished splendor.

The gunmetal sky and steady drizzle carried me back to the sandy banks of the Thu Bon River outside the coastal city of Danang in the Republic of South Vietnam, December 1966. I was a 24-year-old lieutenant, a platoon commander with the Second Battalion Fifth Marine Regiment. Sergeant Dawson was my squad leader: tall, sandy haired, angular, taciturn, barely 20 years old. Beyond the rice paddy lay what appeared to be a quiet village: traditional bamboo and thatch houses screened by banana trees and thick bushes—an island of green surrounded by flooded rice fields.

Dawson and I huddled behind a bamboo gate pondering the absence of people, the lack of activity, the ominous silence. My plan was to assault the village quickly across open ground as soon as the last rounds of obscuring white phosphorous artillery rounds I'd ordered blossomed like brilliant spiked cumulus. By the time the firestorm of enemy automatic weapons, mortars, anti-tank rockets and hand grenades had ceased, the village was ours; but Dawson lay bleeding from a round in his chest, that glazed look beginning to cloud his eyes. "You'll be okay, Sergeant Dawson. Hang in there," I said as we lifted him into the helicopter.

It had taken me five years to visit the wall since its dedication November 13, 1982, my hesitation caused by anxiety over what my emotional response would be to bitter remembrance, a sense of futility, of unrequited sacrifice. As I stood before the polished ebony walls, I finally was coming to terms after 21 years not only with the pain of Sergeant Dawson's death, but with an intensity of feeling for the marines who served with me in Vietnam, in the process expiating a bitterness I harbored for the hostility and indifference we encountered on returning home: "Well, you can fill out the application if you like, but you're not getting the job. We don't employ hired killers around here."

The rain had stopped. With my handkerchief I dried the area around Dawson's name, then with a mechanical pencil tried to make a rubbing on the back of a hotel bill. It wasn't working very well. A soft voice asked, "May I help you with that, sir?" It was a young woman, a National Park Service volunteer. She placed an 11 x 4 inch form with black borders over the name, then with firm strokes of a wide lead pencil, rendered the letters in crisp contrast to the white background. "Perfect," I said, impressed with her dexterity. "Thank you very much." She smiled, then walked further down the wall toward an elderly couple holding a bouquet of roses, searching the host of names floating almost cloudlike against a reflection of winter branches and oyster shell sky.

Suzanne Sigona's voice has a gentle, reassuring tone, with a subtle Southern cadence. She has auburn hair, green eyes, and a ready smile. On Sunday mornings you can find her at the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wearing a yellow baseball cap, helping veterans find the names they seek, providing a sisterly shoulder of support to men who faced enemy steel with fierce courage but are losing a battle with their own emotions. Volunteers like Suzanne take the rough hands of Vietnam veterans who often have forced themselves to make the trip to Washington, guiding them through psychic minefields to confront their own feelings. She helps them understand what she describes as an "emotional undertow" that seizes many who see the wall for the first time with its 58,000 names arranged in the chronological order they fell on the battlefield, the polished granite reflecting the trees, the sky and most poignantly, the faces of visitors in its surface. Suzanne, whose experience has given her a deep understanding of veterans' reactions to the wall, calls the reluctant ones "tree vets"—those who prefer to sit up in their emotional trees rather than confront their anxieties, the ghosts of a wrenching conflict. She tells of one vet who traveled by train to Washington three times, only to turn around and go home before he finally brought himself to visit the wall. One vet revealed "survivor's guilt" when he confided to Suzanne, "I just had to come here...to see if my name was next to his."

At times Suzanne sounds as if she's atoning for the apathy of youth: "You guys were coming home when we were 18, 19 years old. We could have been responsive, but weren't because of adolescence." She remembers knowing it was Thursday because that was the day they announced the previous week's combat casualties on television.

They come from every corner of the nation seeking spiritual reunion with souls taken from them too abruptly: parents seeking sons, daughters and sons seeking fathers, wives seeking husbands, brothers and sisters their siblings, combat veterans seeking their buddies whom they last saw floating over the triple forest canopy or out across the open piedmont in a Huey helicopter before they could tell them goodbye. In Vietnam there were no funerals, no chance to pay last respects to fallen comrades. The wall serves that final purpose splendidly.

