



Ralph Meader (left) of Bristol chats with Dennis Hill, secretary of the group, during a gathering of the International Association of the 173rd Airborne Brigade at the Brandon Inn.

Albert J. Marro /
RUtland Herald

Article published Feb 23, 2010

Brigade of Vietnam veterans reunite in Brandon

By [Cristina Kumka](#) Staff Writer

BRANDON — It's not often you'll find members of the same highly-decorated brigade that fought in Vietnam living in the same small Vermont town.

For the national 173rd Airborne Brigade or "Sky Soldiers," it's never happened before in all of New England — until now.

The brigade's regional Chapter 9 never saw a reason to come to Vermont until this year when ranking members of the chapter discovered three surviving brigade members living in Brandon.

Residents Tom Whittaker, Gary Stanley and Anthony Albarello all hailed from different parts of country and converged on the town of about 4,000 people many years ago.

Whittaker of Brandon and Stanley of Virginia met at a Rotary meeting in the mid-1970s.

Whittaker, a real estate agent, sold New York's Albarello a home in town and noticed a 173rd brigade sticker on his car.

"There is a bond there for anybody, no matter where they live," Whittaker said at the brigade's first bi-monthly meeting in Vermont, held Saturday afternoon in the Brandon Inn.

The brigade was first deployed to Vietnam in May 1965.

Members received 13 Medals of Honor, 46 distinguished service awards, 1,736 Silver Stars and about 6,000 Purple Hearts in the brigade's six continuous years of combat.

There are 1,790 "Sky Soldiers" inscribed on the wall of the Vietnam Memorial.

New members of the brigade are currently fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Today, the three former brigade members from Brandon march side-by-side in the town's Memorial Day parade.

Their camaraderie and the chapter's new rarity was acknowledged by the town's Select Board Saturday, naming Feb. 20 "Sky Soldier Day" in Brandon.

"As we get older, we get fewer," said Peter Klausner, president of the New England Chapter who spoke to 13 members present at the meeting.

"Unless you've been in combat with someone, you've never really known them," he said, tears welling up in his eyes.

"We've shared foxholes and we shared blood."

Klausner said the Vermont reunion was nice but it hurt at the same time.

"It's like meeting with your spouse," he joked.

To close the meeting, the chapter named an honorary member — 9-month-old Margaret Ann Murray.

Murray is the granddaughter of member Bill Maloney of Massachusetts.

The baby remains in the hospital after being born premature.

The membership gave Maloney a plaque out of love and concern for his family.

Asked if the Brandon brigade members would support troops from the area who come home after fighting this generation's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Stanley responded, "absolutely."

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