

# Lifestyles

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## Chance Encounter

### Local Vietnam veterans meet again after 35 years

By Robert Blankenship  
The Leeds News

A few years ago, Debs Day and Harrison Gulledge were two men who had not seen each other in almost 30 years. Little did they know that a chance encounter in the Leeds Wal-Mart would reunite them and rekindle a long-lost friendship that started halfway around the world.

Debs Day, a resident of Moody, was in Wal-Mart on a routine shopping trip when he noticed a man wearing a cap that he recognized. That cap was a naval-style cap for the USS Point Defiance — a ship he had served on for two years and two tours in the Vietnam War.

"He was wearing a 'PD' hat. After 35 years I didn't recognize who it was. I went up to him and asked if he had served on the 'PD'," Day said.

Gulledge, who has lived in Dunnivant since he retired from the military in 1976, said he didn't recognize the man asking him about the Point Defiance, but knew he must be have been a member of its crew.

"The only people who call it the 'PD' are the men who served on it. I knew right then that he was a member of the crew," Gulledge said.

But, the two men weren't just crew members of the same ship. They had actually served at the same time and worked closely together.

"When he said his name was Debs, I knew exactly who he was," Gulledge said.

The reunion came about thanks to Gulledge's choice of hats that morning.

"I had not seen Harrison since 1969 when I was discharged. If it had not been for his hat, we would have walked right by each other," Day said.

It wasn't very odd for Gulledge to be roaming around the Leeds Wal-Mart. After all, he was born in Birmingham and was raised in the area that is now the intersection of highways 119 and 280. In 1964, he married Gayle Alexander, a nurses maid from Leeds.

Day was a much more unlikely candidate to be in Leeds on that day. Day is a native of Eufaula, Oklahoma. In 1986, he moved from his native state to Alabama where he worked as a member of the U.S. Postal Police. As a captain in Birmingham, he responded to burglar alarms and performed

security functions for the area post offices. Although he retired in 2002, he decided to remain in Alabama and the city he now called home — Moody.

The last time the two men had seen each other was 1969 when Days was discharged. Shortly after he left the Point Defiance, Gulledge was re-stationed to a naval destroyer.

The USS Point Defiance (LSD 31) was the first major ship to exchange fire with Vietnamese shore batteries near the demilitarized zone.

Gulledge, who worked in the steam propulsion division, remembers staying busy aboard the ship.

"There were quite a few instances that we had to repair the steer unit on the ship," he said.

Not far away, Day worked with the repair division as a ship fitter, or welder. Often the two

men would run across each other as their divisions crossed paths. In fact, the two men crossed paths each day on the way to their work stations.

"There was a one-inch bulkhead separating where I worked from where he worked," Gulledge said.

Day said even if the two had not worked closely together, they would have still known each other.

"A ship like the PD is not like an aircraft carrier, which is like a large city. The PD was more like a small town where everybody knows each other," Day said.

The PD held approximately 300 crew members during each tour.

The two men served two tours aboard the Point Defiance together. A tour on a naval vessel at that time was eight months. Gulledge served a total

of five tours aboard the PD in 38 months. Day, who enlisted in the Navy shortly after being discharged from the U.S. Army, served two tours in two years.

"We lived aboard that boat together for eight months at a time twice," Day said. "We would be out to sea about three months then would go in for repairs and liberty call."

Day joined the Navy after serving as a combat medic in the Army from 1962 to 1965.

"I was dissatisfied with civilian life after being discharged from the Army," he said. "The Navy had a deal where if you had prior military service you could join for two years. I wasn't doing anything and I had a brother who was in the Army and was serving in Vietnam at the time. I decided to go ahead and enlist in the Navy."

Gulledge, a few years older than Day, enlisted into the Navy

in August 1956. He retired as an E-6 in 1976 after a 20-year career. Upon retiring he earned an associate degree at Gadsden State and earned a bachelors degree in history from the University of Alabama-Birmingham. He worked at Dewberry Engraving until 1982 when he took a job at the Veterans Hospital in Birmingham. He retired in 1996.

Since their chance encounter, the two men have rekindled their friendship and speak several times a week.

"We call each other quite often and will meet each two or three times each year," Gulledge said.

The two also see each other each during a shipmate reunion that is hosted in a different city each year. Day did not know about the reunions until he ran



ROBERT BLANKENSHIP/THE LEEDS NEWS

Harrison Gulledge, left, of Dunnivant and Debs Day of Moody served together on the USS Point Defiance during two duties in the Vietnam War. The two men met again after a chance encounter in Leeds several years ago.



# Shipmates reunite

From 1B

into Gullede. A few months ago, both men attended the reunion in Boston.

"I have been able to go the past four years and it is something I look forward to now. I just make it my vacation each year," Day said.

Gullede also makes the annual trek to the shipmate reunion, and like Day, it serves as his annual get-away.

"My wife and I will save our money so that we can go to the reunion each year. Every year different shipmates show up because we have it in different parts of the country," Gullede said.

Gullede and Day have been across the country, from San Francisco, where the Point Defiance is currently anchored, to Chicago and Boston, attending crew reunions.

John Nickolosi coordinates the reunions and tries to have them

in different parts of the country so that different crew members can attend.

In addition to the reunions, Days spends much of his time since retiring on the golf course. He also has taken on the task of helping retired federal employees in the area as the president of the National Association of Retired Federal Employees, Chapter 2302, which serves the Leeds and Moody area. The group meets each month at the civic center in Moody. Days has two grown children. His son, Jerry Day, lives in Florence, Ala. with his wife, Jennifer and his three children, Lauren, Madilyn and Caleb. He also has a daughter, Lisa Resetz, who lives in Broken Arrow, Okla. with her husband, Jeff and her two children, Kayelyn and Jeremy.

Gullede, along with his wife, started the Dunnivant Volunteer

Fire Department in 1978. The couple remained active volunteers with the department until 2002. The Gulledeges raised three children. Their oldest son, George Gullede, lives in West Blockton, Ala., along with his wife Sherry. They have two sons, Eric and Chris. Their daughter, Debra Lovell, has four children, April, Tally, Megan and Gabrielle. His youngest son, Rusty Gullede, is married to Regina Gullede and they have one son, Matt. Gullede also has one great-grandson, Grant, who is the son of Eric Gullede.

As for the "PD," which was commissioned in 1953 at Pascagoula, Miss. and was decommissioned in 1983. After sailing the equivalent of 32 times around the world, the Point Defiance is now anchored at Susion Harbor in San Francisco.

## Ten Questions with ... Harrison

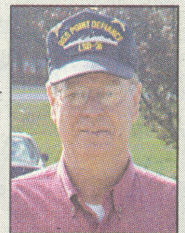
1. What would you want for your last meal?  
**Answer: Steak with all the trimmings**
2. What is your favorite book or movie?  
**Answer: "In Harm's Way"**
3. Besides family, who would you most like to invite into your home?  
**Answer: Colin Powell**
4. What do you like to do on weekends?  
**Answer: Travel and spend time with family**
5. If you had to change jobs, what would you want to do?  
**Answer:**
6. Where would you go for a dream vacation?  
**Answer: Australia**
7. If you won \$1 million, what is the first thing you would buy for yourself?  
**Answer: A new pickup**
8. What advice would you give to young people?  
**Answer: Get an education and vote**
9. Who do you consider a hero?  
**Answer: World War II veterans**
10. What do you like most about living in Dunnivant?  
**Answer: The people and the country setting**



Harrison Gullede

## Ten Questions with ... Debs Day

1. What would you want for your last meal?  
**Answer: Steak and potato**
2. What is your favorite book or movie?  
**Answer: "Forrest Gump"**
3. Besides family, who would you most like to invite into your home?  
**Answer: George W. Bush**
4. What do you like to do on weekends?  
**Answer: Play golf and visit with family**
5. If you had to change jobs, what would you want to do?  
**Answer: Work for the State Department**
6. Where would you go for a dream vacation?  
**Answer: Australia**
7. If you won \$1 million, what is the first thing you would buy for yourself?  
**Answer: A new home and pay for my grandkids' college**
8. What advice would you give to young people?  
**Answer: Stay in school**
9. Who do you consider a hero?  
**Answer: John Wayne**
10. What do you like most about living in Moody?  
**Answer: The small town atmosphere and the friendly people**



Debs Day