

Vietnam veteran, 74, dies alone and homeless in Rib Mountain

RIB MOUNTAIN – He had been dead for a while when a person called the police on Aug. 22 after finding a body lying in a small patch of Rib Mountain woods.

“During the initial investigation, we had no idea who he was,” said Marathon County Sheriff’s Detective Brandon Stroik. “He had no identifying documents on him, no identification card. No credit card with his name on it. Nothing with his name on it actually.”

The man had very few possessions, period: a sleeping bag, a shirt, shorts, a hat, a pair of eyeglasses, a wristwatch, a wallet with a few gift cards, and a small bag with a toothbrush and toothpaste.

In the coming days and weeks, Stroik and other investigators would learn that the man was 74-year-old Robert Wenitschka. Family members say Wenitschka was a Vietnam War veteran who came home addicted to narcotics and could not cope with mainstream life. The last time anyone from his family had seen him was 1980 when he walked away from his sister after she picked him up while he was hitchhiking. For Stroik, the lead detective on the case, learning about Wenitschka would be an experience like no other. Although he has been a detective only since early this year, he’s been a police officer for nearly 15 years. “I’ve never had a case like this before,” Stroik said. “I’ve never even *heard* of a case like this before.”



Good Samaritan’s concern leads to an identity

On the evening Wenitschka was found, Lt. Steven DeNovi sent out an email describing the body, his clothes and the other details about what investigators found. Overnight, Deputy Kyle McMullen responded. The man described by De-Novi matched a person he spoke with a few weeks earlier, on Aug. 5. On that day, a good Samaritan came across Wenitschka at a convenience store and gave him a ride to the Rib Mountain ALDI grocery store. The Samaritan called police because Wenitschka seemed to be in trouble; he was just hanging around the cart corral “and didn’t seem to be making sense,” Stroik said.

McMullen told Wenitschka that police had been called by a person who was concerned about his welfare. Wenitschka verbally told McMullen his name and date of birth and insisted that he didn't need any help, medical or otherwise.

"He (Wenitschka) said, 'No, no, no, I'm OK, I'm just resting,'" Stroik said.

Although Wenitschka refused help that day, if the good Samaritan hadn't picked up Wenitschka and hadn't called police with his concerns, "we would have had no way of identifying him," Stroik said.

Knowing Wenitschka's name was key, but investigators still needed to confirm his identity. They first turned to social media. Through that, they were able to track down people they would later confirm to be Wenitschka's sister and his daughter.

'You're my brother ... and I thought you were dead'

Mary Wenitschka Wollenberg, 63, who lives in Rensselaer, Indiana, is Wenitschka's sister. She is the last person in her family to have seen Wenitschka alive.

She was driving her car on Interstate 65 in northern Indiana, and she saw him hitchhiking along the side of the freeway.

"His back was to me, but he stood like my brother," Wollenberg said. When she got closer, she recognized Wenitschka's "crystal blue eyes, like Paul Newman," she said.

Wollenberg said he got into her car and she tried to engage with him, but the hitchhiker denied being her brother. "I told him, 'You're my brother, you're Bobby Wenitschka, and I thought you were dead.'" The man denied it. "No, ma'am, I think you're mistaken," Wollenberg recalls. When she insisted, "No, no, you're my brother," he started to cry, but still denied he was her brother.

"I told him, 'Well, then you'll have to get out of my car because I don't pick up hitchhikers,'" Wollenberg said.

He got out of the car and walked away. "I know it was him," Wollenberg said. "He even had a limp that he got from football."

Wollenberg was about 10 years younger than her older brother and doesn't remember many details about him from when they were growing up in Crete, Illinois, a suburb south of Chicago.

She remembers him joining the Army and that he was in Vietnam in 1968 and 1969.

"And those weren't pretty years," Wollenberg said. "I remember watching the news on television, looking for him." Wollenberg said when Wenitschka returned home, he was hooked on narcotics. He nearly received a dishonorable discharge, Wollenberg said, but their parents went to Fort Campbell, Kentucky, to plead for his case and he eventually received an honorable discharge.

After he got out of the Army, he married and he and his wife had two daughters. But he couldn't seem to cope with life or his addiction, and he eventually just left his home. His parents and wife "tried to get him help," but he didn't accept it then, either, Wollenberg said.

She remembers talking to her father about going after Wenitschka and bringing him home. "My dad told me, 'Leave it alone. Don't look for him,'" she said.

Detective driven by a veteran's connection

After Stroik made contact with Wollenberg and Wenitschka's older daughter and learned about his back story, the case took on new urgency and new meaning for him.

He needed to confirm that Wenitschka was who investigators now believed he was, so he drove to northern Indiana to get DNA samples from the man's sister and daughter, and drove them back to be put on fast-track processing at the State Crime Laboratory in Madison.

The detective felt a connection with a fellow veteran. Stroik served in the Army and did one tour in Iraq in 2006/2007, and after three and half years of active duty he served in the National Guard for six years.

"It was just motivating for me to stay on it," Stroik said.

Stroik has no idea why Wenitschka came to Wisconsin; most records he was able to track down have him in Indiana and Illinois. He has no idea how Wenitschka survived without a home. "I can speculate, but that's all it is," Stroik said.

He thinks, for example, that most of the food Wenitschka ate came from fast-food restaurants or convenience stores because those were most of the purchases made on the gift cards that Wenitschka carried. He guesses, perhaps, that he might have moved from place to place with the help of truckers. When Wenitschka spoke with McMullen, he mentioned that he got work from truckers.

Stroik also believes that Wenitschka was able to break his addiction. There was no evidence that Wenitschka used drugs or alcohol. And when Wenitschka was arrested for a minor theft over 10 years ago, the booking photo does not look like a person who is a drug user or addict, Stroik said.

'He was damaged by war'

Wollenberg said she didn't know whether her brother was dead or alive. She hired a private detective to track down Wenitschka at one point after their 1980 meeting. She even went to a psychic. Nothing.

"It sounds to me like he didn't want to be found," Stroik said.

The way Wenitschka left his family and never contacted them left his daughters and his ex-wife with deep pain, and Wollenberg said their bitterness hasn't gone away after learning about his death.

She's been in touch with people who went to high school with Wenitschka, and they tell her stories about how nice he was, how he had a deep, booming laugh. They remember him as a jock, a football and baseball player. Wollenberg says she will remember her brother that way, too. She feels a sense of relief and forgiveness.

"He was damaged by war," Wollenberg said. "Simple for me to understand."

Stroik feels the sadness of loss, too, but, he said, "I'm happy he's at peace now. Whatever he was dealing with that made him make the choices he made ... is done."

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