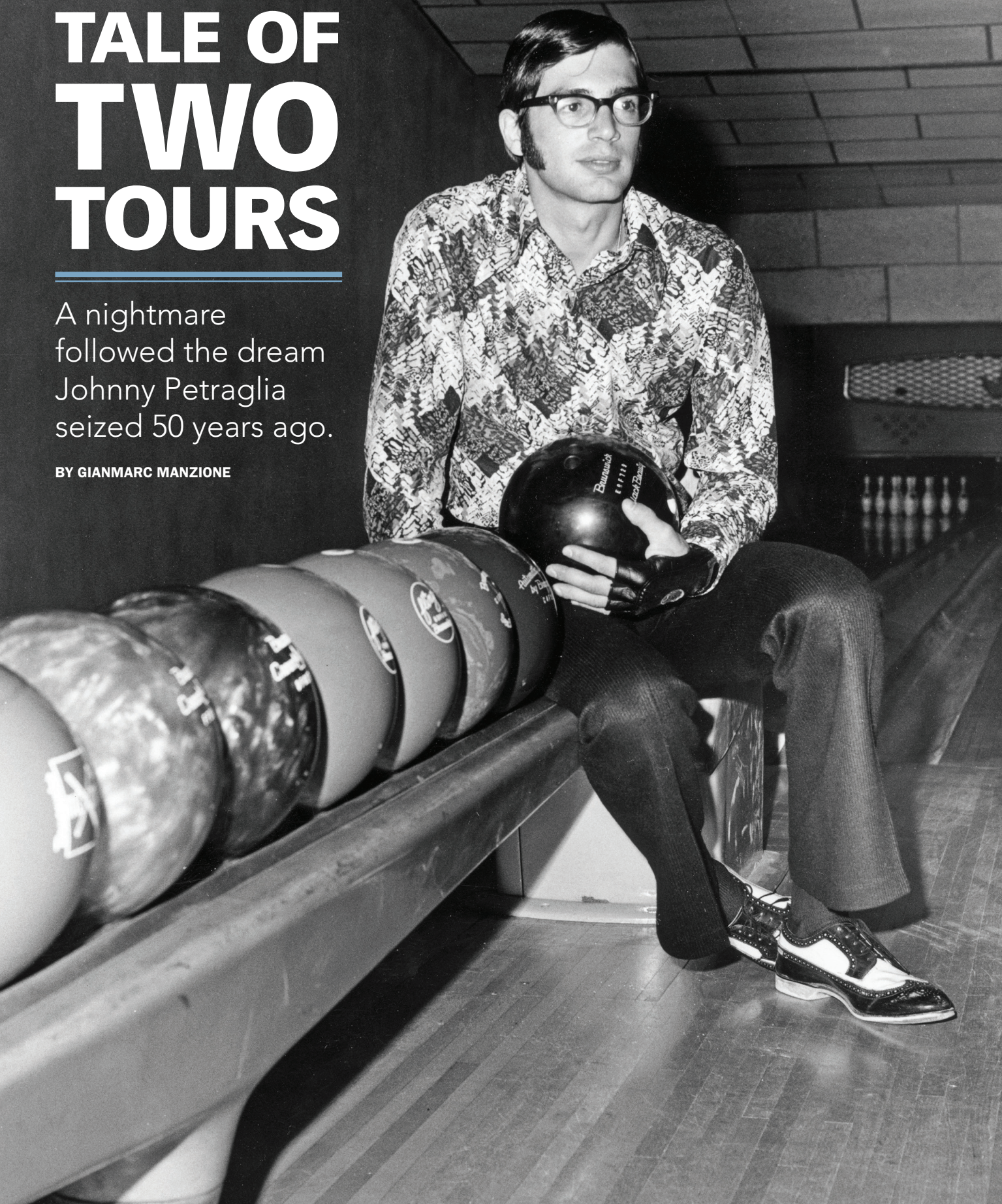

TALE OF TWO TOURS

A nightmare
followed the dream
Johnny Petraglia
seized 50 years ago.

BY GIANMARC MANZIONE



There is a man that Johnny Petraglia sees in his mind nearly every day. He rides the Dong Ha River in Vietnam in September of 1967, paddling on a sampan toward the pieces of driftwood he sees there. Like many who live in the villages that flank one side of the river while U.S. Navy ships crowd the other, he wishes to gather some for his shack. He is about 80 years old; his snow-white beard dangles lengthily from his chin. He is Petraglia's worst nightmare.

Petraglia, who was drafted into the U.S. Army in 1966, watches the man from the stone stanchion erected in the middle of the river where he is pulling guard duty. He has been in Vietnam for 10 days.

He is little more than a year removed from the day he bested by 272 pins a field full of future PBA Hall of Famers at the 1966 Fort Smith Open in Fort Smith, Ark., to win his first PBA Tour title. Along the way, he bowled the first certified 300 of his life.

He did what any 19-year-old kid might do in such a moment: He called his parents. They had some news for him, too. He had a draft letter awaiting him at home.

He had just dominated a field featuring the likes of Dick Weber, Barry Asher, Bill Lillard, Harry Smith, Jim Stefanich, Jim St. John — and even Bobby Jacks, who that summer alone won three PBA Tour titles. Most of his fellow tour players headed to Dallas to bowl the Labor Day Classic; Petraglia headed to basic training with the Army.

Finishing behind Petraglia in Fort Smith was Barry Asher. A year later, Asher stood behind Petraglia in an altogether different environment. The stakes by then had become far greater than bowling.

"What I knew, and what Johnny didn't know, was that I had a draft notice at home, too," Asher says. "I'm supposed to go to Vietnam. I bowl four tournaments. I come home. I'm not going to Vietnam; I'm going to Oakland Army Base, for

the remainder of my 14 months. I knew Johnny was coming; I didn't know when."

Petraglia did come. Asher was the one who later drove him to Travis Airforce Base, where Petraglia boarded a plane for Vietnam.

"I walk out on the tarmac with Johnny, and he is up there — my friend, getting on that plane to go to who knows where

watches. The man paddles closer to the wood. Petraglia fires a round. The man pauses, looks at Petraglia. Then he looks back at the driftwood, seeming to decide for himself whether Petraglia is capable of actually killing him.

"I probably looked like I was 16," Petraglia recalls. "And my uniform was still clean. He made the decision that I wasn't going to kill him."

Petraglia had a few seconds to consider what he would do should the man proceed. He took careful aim as the man resumed his approach to the driftwood, then fired 19 rounds to blow off the front of his sampan, which began to sink. A gunboat rushed up the river at the sound of automatic weapons fire and fished the old man out of the water as he cursed Petraglia.

The commanding officer to whom Petraglia then had to report told him that since he only had been in Vietnam for 10 days, he would not court martial him for disobeying a direct order. Petraglia insisted the man never would have been able to reach him.

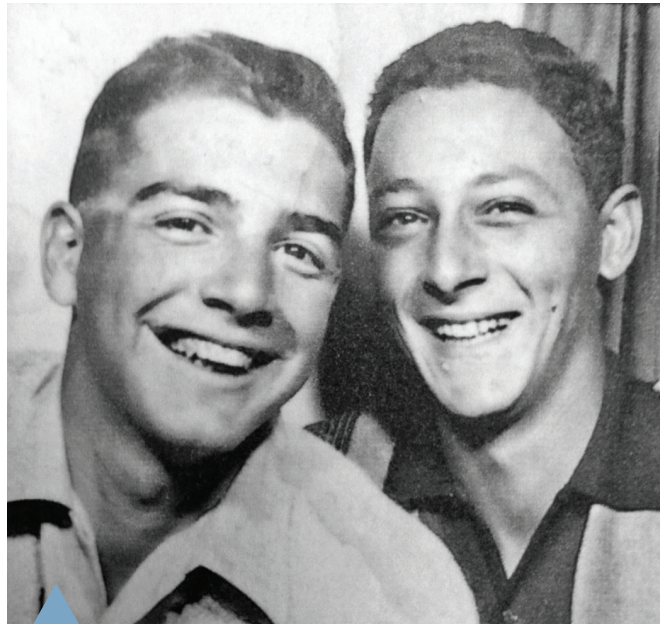
"You don't know that," the C.O. replied. "If three sailors are dead, then what?"

"OK. You're right," Petraglia said. He did not think his C.O. was right.

The field of memory that reverie brings to any Vietnam veteran is a troubling place to travel. For Petraglia, it is a place where he is haunted by that old man on the Dong Ha River.

It is a place where he is a staff sergeant on Jan. 31, 1968 at 3 a.m. The Vietnamese Lunar New Year, or Têt, is underway — a time when historically both sides in the Vietnam War have observed a cease fire as the holiday is celebrated. That is about to change.

The calm night erupts with the obscene commotion of weapons fire. North Vietnamese Army mortar and rocket fire rains down over General Westmoreland's headquarters at Tan Son Nhut Airbase. Vietcong commandos breach the wall



A Promise: Barry Asher (right, in 1966) was the last person to see Petraglia (left) off on his Vietnam-bound plane at Travis Airforce Base and told him, "I'll be right here when you get back."

in Vietnam. I look at him, and I just pointed down at the ground, and I said, 'I will be here when you get back.'"

A year from there, on the Dong Ha River, Petraglia knows too well where he is in Vietnam. He is a split second away from taking a man's life.

He considers his orders — to fire a warning shot should any Vietnamese come within throwing range of the stanchion. Should the warning shot fail to turn them back, Petraglia's orders are to shoot them dead with the second shot.

"Oh, God," Petraglia thinks to himself. "This guy's going to try to go for that wood."

He grips the trigger of his gun and

surrounding the U.S. embassy in Saigon. Hundreds more burn down the South Vietnamese Army's headquarters at Hoi An. Government officials are executed in their homes in Hue. Radios bray out the hysterical confusion of the night with hollered reports of attacks from seemingly everywhere.

In his small corner of an event that would be known as the Tét Offensive, Petraglia is ensuring that two wounded troops from his squad get medevacked out to the 3rd field hospital in Saigon. Six days later, he visits them at the hospital.

Nurses dressed in fatigues whizz by while the wounded themselves pull guard duty because Saigon is not yet secured.

"If the patients are pulling guard duty, what was it like here on January 31st?" Petraglia wonders.

These days, Petraglia wonders about something else. He wonders about two nurses whose names now are on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall among the more than 58,000 Americans who lost their lives in Vietnam. The nurses died when their medevac chopper went down during a rescue. They were stationed at the 3rd Field Hospital in Saigon. Were they attempting to rescue some of Petraglia's own troops? That is a question he can't stop asking himself, half a century from all that. He never will know the answer.

Petraglia travels this dark field of memory over a lunch of chicken drumsticks and a glass of red wine in a cramped corner of McCall's Tavern at Spanish Springs Lanes in The Villages, Fla., where he has just wrapped up another qualifying block on the PBA50 Tour on which he has added eight titles to the 14 he won on the regular tour. He wears glasses and a blue and black short-sleeved shirt bearing the logo of the company he has represented for as

long as he has been back from Vietnam: Brunswick. His bushy mustache has grayed, while some darker threads color a mostly silvered head of thinning hair. The man has aged; the memories that live inside him never do.

How many PBA titles does he think his military service cost him? How did he manage to care again about bowling after having witnessed the horrors he endured half-a-world away?

Those questions will wait. Petraglia is still traveling the darker places those

Tachakawa. "It was about 60 degrees, after I'd spent a year in a place where it's 100 degrees every day."

What Petraglia and his fellow troops did not know was that a change in the weather was underway back home.

"We land in Seattle-Tacoma, and there are a bunch of people on the other side of the fence," Petraglia recalls. "We're walking to the bus that's going to take us to Ft. Louis, Washington, and then we hear somebody yell, 'Baby killers!'"

"What did he say?" one of the returning troops said.

"I don't know," another said. "Somebody killed a baby, or something?"

Petraglia zeroes in on the horror neither he nor his fellow troops knew awaited them at home.

"We didn't even know he was talking about us," he says. "They're calling us baby killers."

When Petraglia returns from Ft. Louis back to the airport to go home, he books a flight to New York, stops in a gift shop to buy a magazine, and begins walking to his gate. Then the horror he thought he had left

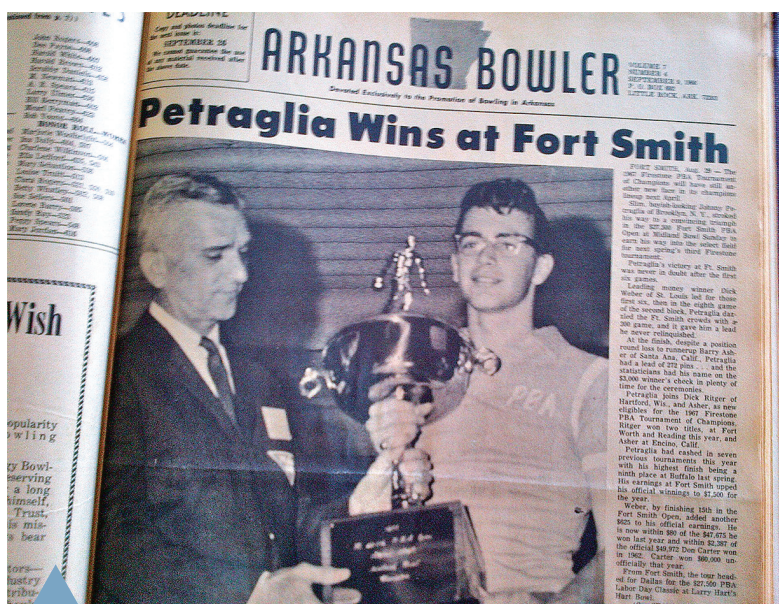
behind continued — not the horror of violence he survived in the steaming jungles of a foreign land, but the horror of ingratitude he encountered when he returned to the land he went there to fight for.

Three young men with long hair walked up to him.

"You think you're a big man?" one of them asked.

"What?" Petraglia replied, bewildered. "You think you're a big [expletive] man?" he repeated, slapping the medals on the uniformed Petraglia's chest.

"I don't even know why you're doing this," Petraglia said. "The only thing I do know is I don't know what I am like right now. Don't let this go any further."



All in a Day: The day Petraglia won his first PBA title was the day he learned he'd been drafted.

horrors opened in his mind. The places he cannot close.

It is a place where the plane taking him home after a year in Vietnam takes off from Cam Ranh Bay, and the only thing on his mind is how high the plane must get to be safe from enemy fire.

"It was very melancholy on that plane," Petraglia recalls. "I can't believe I am taking off."

It is a place where he realizes something as he debarks the plane in Tachakawa, Japan, on his way to Seattle-Tacoma and, eventually, back to his native Brooklyn: For the first time in a year, he does not have to worry about being shot at.

"And the other thing is that it was chilly," Petraglia says of the weather in

The guy took a swing at Petraglia. "Pretty much what happens after that is a blur," Petraglia recalls. "The next thing I know, this big M.P. has me leaned up against a counter."

This time, it was the M.P. who had a question for Petraglia.

"Can you hear me?" he asked.

"Yeah, I can hear you just fine," Petraglia said.

"Good," the M.P. said. "I hope you know this. If you do something in the next 72 hours that's against the law, you not only have to answer to a civilian court, you also have to answer to a military court."

"Yes, I know that," Petraglia said.

"OK, great. Let's walk you to your gate," the M.P. said.

Back in the present over lunch at McCall's, Petraglia's voice begins to quiver.

"And they sit with me, until it's time to board the plane," he says.

Petraglia begins to cry.

His tears have come and gone over the years. He cannot hold them back when he recounts one final memory. He has saved the least bearable one for last.

It happened at a PBA Tour stop Petraglia bowled after having returned from Vietnam. An African-American competitor and fellow veteran walked up to Petraglia to shake his hand and connect over their shared service in Vietnam.

"Welcome home, brother," Petraglia told him.

Someone else walked up to him minutes later. He wanted to know what he had said to that fellow veteran.

"I told him, 'Welcome home, brother,'" Petraglia said.

The person gestured toward the veteran. Petraglia looked. The veteran was weeping in his seat.

Now, Petraglia is weeping in his seat at McCall's, gripped by a lonely hurt he can't undo.

Instead, Petraglia has focused on what he *can* do.

He joined a group called "Athletes for VIPs," as in "very important patients," with stars from other sports such as NFL great, Johnny Unitas, and baseball's Brooks Robinson. He visited intensive care units at V.A. hospitals such as Walter Reed with legendary American Olympian, Jesse Owens, whom he calls "a great gentleman." Petraglia says those experiences "made me realize how lucky I was."

He did, and he saw Calderone standing on the eight inches that were left of one leg. He stood that way through the entire anthem.

A spectator later asked Calderone why he thought Petraglia does what he does for BVL.

"Do you think it's because he didn't leave anything there, and he feels guilty?"

Calderone said, "You don't think



Tour Away from the Tour: Petraglia (right) with two fellow soldiers in Vietnam in May, 1968.

Petraglia moved on to a group known as the Bowlers Victory Legion, now the Bowlers to Veterans Link (BVL). In 1990, he met Bob Calderone, a man who left one leg and more than half of the other in Vietnam. He participated in Petraglia's pros/wheelchair bowlers doubles tournament to raise funds for BVL at Carolier Lanes in New Jersey.

While the National Anthem played before the tournament began, Joe Hutchinson, himself a Vietnam veteran and a four-time PBA Tour titlist, poked Petraglia to get him to look over at Calderone.

Johnny left anything there? You don't know much about war."

That stuck with Petraglia.

"Bob has half a body, and I'm 69 years old and still bowling on tour, and he looks at it as though we both lost something. How can you not help people who think like that?" Petraglia says.

There are many questions about Vietnam that Petraglia never will be able to answer. The question he asks about people like Bob Calderone is one he answers every time he lifts a finger on behalf of BVL.