

Vietnam Veterans of America South Bay Chapter 53

Scholarship Essay Program

By Robert Bennett

When my high school counselor told me about this scholarship opportunity, I knew I wanted to interview my Guncle Jim, short for great uncle, who served in the military. I had never spoken with him about his experience because I was nervous and didn't know how to start the conversation. This scholarship gave me far more than the possibility of receiving much-needed college funds. It gave me an excellent opportunity to sit down with my Guncle and finally ask about his military service.

My aunt and uncle live in Orange County, but they have always been active in my life, attending my school and athletic events. On a recent Saturday afternoon, I had a volleyball game against Huntington Beach High School that Guncle Jim and Aunt Trudi attended, which allowed me to learn about his service. After badly losing the match, Guncle Jim took me to dinner, encouraged me about the game, and began sharing his military history. I learned that he served in active duty during Vietnam as a proud member of the U.S. Navy.

My Guncle Jim was born James Franklin Kern in 1946 in Horton, Kansas. At age 5, he moved to Wayne, Nebraska, where he lived with his parents, two younger sisters, and younger brother until he graduated from high school. As an 18-year-old teenager who went by Jimmy at the time, my Guncle Jim began his military service when he received the honor of an appointment to the United States Naval Academy, where he was a cadet from 1964 to 1968. After graduating from the Naval Academy, he was commissioned as an officer with the rank of Ensign (O-1). He reported to his first duty station at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida, where he began flight school. He continued his flight training at the Naval Air Station Chase Field in Beeville, Texas, to prepare for his combat deployment to Vietnam. In December of 1969, ENS Kern earned his wings as a jet pilot and was promoted to the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade (O-2). LTJG Kern's first tour of duty began in January 1970 when he was deployed to Vietnam, with his initial stop in the Philippines before arriving at Da Nang Air Base. He was assigned temporary duty to Marine Air Group 11 (MAG-11) as a Bronco pilot, flying combat missions in the OV-10 Bronco to provide close air support for Army and Marine ground troops. In early 1971, the North Vietnamese Army launched rocket attacks on Da Nang Air Base, leading to a change in deployment for MAG-11. By July 1971, MAG-11 had left Da Nang Air Base.

My Guncle Jim completed a second tour of duty in Vietnam from January 1972 until May 1974, serving with Carrier Air Wing 17 (CVW-17) off the USS Forrestal as a pilot flying the A-6 Intruder (Iron Tadpole) in the VA-85 "Black Falcons" attack squadron. One of his most harrowing experiences as a combat pilot during his deployment with VA-85 was returning to the USS Forrestal after delivering a heavy payload of ordnance in support of Marines on the ground. Anti-aircraft artillery had severely damaged his A-6 Intruder after an unusual low-altitude daytime mission. He and his bombardier-navigator (BN) pushed their A-6 to its limits, trying to reach the beach and get over the water. LT Kern's BN established contact with the USS Forrestal and the ever-present rescue helicopter hovering nearby, waiting for the squadron to return. Realizing they could not make a safe landing back home on the ship, the command was given to "ditch" as far from the beach as possible. LT Kern tapped the leg of his BN, signaling him to eject, and then ejected himself a few seconds later. Fortunately, both aviators landed safely in the ocean and waited for rescue by the USS Forrestal's helicopter. Upon completing his second tour of duty in Vietnam, my Guncle Jim resigned from active-duty service and entered the U.S. Navy

Reserve in 1974. Lieutenant Kern (O-3) retired from the reserves in 1978 after 14 years of honorable service to his country.

Because of this scholarship, I got the opportunity to learn about my Guncle Jim's military service. I did not know what branch he served in, where he served, what he did, or his combat role. I am glad he took the time to come to my volleyball game and talk about how the United States Navy gave him many opportunities and made him the man he is today. Although I have taken history and knew something about Vietnam, my Guncle explained to me that even though the United States government never officially declared war, it was an official war for everyone who served. He told me we sent thousands of our service members overseas to fight and, unfortunately, die in a military conflict that was a war, whether it was "officially" declared or not. I asked him why he felt it was important to explain to me the lack of an official declaration of war. His response saddened me. He told me that many people in the United States were not supportive of sending our troops to Vietnam. Many young men who came home were not received honorably, even though they had served their country and fought for freedom and democracy. He shared that despite being proud of his service, he kept it to himself because he saw how badly and disrespectfully so many of his fellow servicemen were treated when they came home. My Guncle Jim also told me how hard it was to lose some of his close friends in battle. He told me that one of his friends from the Academy, who served in the Marines, was killed in action when he was only 22 years old. It was hard to comprehend what that was like for him because it made me think about losing my 22-year-old brother. My Guncle explained that most of the troops who died serving in Vietnam were younger than his friend. Although he shared tragic information, my Guncle also told me about the incredible lifelong friendships he made during his service in Vietnam. It really struck me how much pride my Guncle had as he shared stories about his life and experiences in the military. As he talked about everything he did, even though it was tough and he lost many friends, his face beamed with honor and pride. He said everyone who served was a hero, and he made sure I understood that he had it much easier than the troops on the ground, who had lost many more.

At the end of my visit with my Uncle Jim, I asked him what he would tell high school students about the importance of military service. He highly recommended that all young people serve in the military for at least two years because they would have many opportunities not found in any other experience and grow up fast. They would learn to make decisions, be accountable, not make excuses, and follow through. Most importantly, he said young people would understand that brave men and women sacrificed and served in the military with honor to give us our freedoms.

On the drive home, my perspective changed as I thought about everything my Guncle told me. I realized the challenges and difficulties my friends and I face are trivial. At the beginning of our talk, I was upset about losing my volleyball game earlier that day. Yes, losing was disappointing, but I no longer felt like I faced a challenge or difficulty. It was the first time I felt privileged to lose a volleyball game. My Guncle Jim and so many others have been willing to give their lives for me to have the privilege of thinking that losing a game was a real "challenge." I never understood the example of honor, selflessness, and bravery our military veterans have set until that Saturday afternoon. I hope more young people will take the time to talk with military veterans to learn about what they have volunteered to do for us, our country, and democracy in the world. Most kids I know have a pretty sheltered life and don't truly understand the sacrifices others have made for us and how much more we need to do for them when they return home from battles like the ones in Vietnam. I believe it is our duty to honor the life their service has given us, and I plan to use the lessons I learned from my Guncle in my own life.