

Vietnam Veterans of America South Bay Chapter 53 Scholarship Essay Program - Interview

By Bradley Bennett

When I heard about this scholarship opportunity, I thought it might be something I could apply for because I knew my great Uncle Jim had served in the military. Although I knew he was in the Navy I really didn't know much else about his service. He had never talked much about his military service and, honestly, I never really asked. We all just know him as "Uncle No Mas" because he was the one who would always tell me, my brother, and my cousins "No Mas" when it was time for us to put away the baby pacifier for good. This scholarship presented me with far more than the possibility of being awarded much-needed college funds by giving me a great opportunity to sit down with my uncle and finally ask him about his experience in the military. The first thing I learned was that he did serve in active duty during Vietnam and that got us started talking.

My Uncle, James Kern, served in the United States Navy at various levels of duty from 1964 to 1978. He was born in 1946 in Horton Kansas until moving to Nebraska at the age of 5. He lived in Wayne, Nebraska with his parents, two sisters, and brother until he graduated from high school. A young James Kern began his military service by receiving the honor of an appointment to the United States Naval Academy where he was a cadet from 1964 to 1968. Upon his graduation from the Naval Academy, he was commissioned as an officer with the rank of Ensign (O-1). He was immediately sent to flight school at the Naval Air Station in Pensacola, Florida and continued his flight training at the Naval Air Station Chase Field in Beeville, Texas to prepare him for his future deployment. At the completion of flight school in December of 1969, he earned his wings as a jet pilot with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade (O-2) His first tour began in January of 1970 when he was deployed to Vietnam first arriving in the Philippines and then in Da Nang. Lt. JG Kern was assigned temporary duty to Marine Air Group 11 (MAG-11) where flew combat missions in the OV-10 Bronco providing close air support for army and marine troops on the ground. My Uncle Jim continued his military service in the U.S. Navy on a second tour from January 1972 until May 1974. He was deployed as a pilot in the VA-85 attack squadron flying the A-6 Intruder with Carrier Air Wing 17 (CVW-17) off the naval supercarrier USS Forrestal. Upon the completion of his second tour of duty in 1974, my Uncle Jim resigned from active-duty service and entered the U.S. Navy Reserve. Lieutenant Kern (O-3) retired from the reserves in 1978 after 14 years of serving his country.

As I mentioned earlier, prior to learning about this scholarship opportunity, all I knew about my Uncle Jim's military service was that he had been in the military. I did not what branch of the military he served in, where he had served, what he did in the military, or whether he had served in a combat role. I was really excited to learn more about his service and experiences so I drove down to his house in Orange County on a Saturday morning. We spent the afternoon talking about how the military gave him so many opportunities and that he would not be the man he is today without the United States

Navy. One of the first things my Uncle Jim did was to correct me when I asked him to tell me about his service in the Vietnam War. Although I have taken history and knew about Vietnam, the political implications of the United States government never “Declaring” war in Vietnam had never been explained to me by someone who was there in person. He told me we had sent many thousands of our service members overseas to fight and, unfortunately, die in a military conflict that was actually a war whether it was “officially” declared or not. The fact that he took the time to make this distinction really struck me so I asked him why he felt it was important to explain to me about the lack of an official declaration of war. I was saddened by his response. He explained to me that many people in the United States were not supportive of sending our troops to Vietnam and many young men who came home were not received in honorable ways even though they had served their country and fought for freedom and democracy. Although he now knows people supported the troops, he said it did not feel like it at the time and some people were really terrible to the servicemen when they came back home. My Uncle Jim also shared with me how hard it was to lose some of his close friends in battle. He told me about how his best friend from the Academy served in the Marines and was killed in action when he was only 24 years old. He explained that most of the troops who died serving in Vietnam were significantly younger than his friend. Despite some very sad and tragic information my uncle shared that day, he also told me of the incredible lifelong friendships he has as a result of his service in Vietnam. He continues to stay in touch with many of his Navy and Marine buddies to this day. One of the most impactful things I experienced that Saturday afternoon that you just don’t see very often was how much pride he had as he shared stories about his life and experiences in the military. I was so impressed by how much honor and pride he had in everything he did even though it was very difficult and he lost many friends. He made a point to make sure I understood that he had it much easier than the troops on the ground who lost many more and he said they should all be remembered as heroes.

At the end of my visit with my Uncle Jim, I decided to take the long way home along the coast and enjoy the infectious sense of pride he had passed on to me that day. The fact that he and so many others have been willing to give their lives for the safety and freedom of others sets an example of selflessness and bravery which is rarely seen by a 17-year-old high school student. Although I don’t know that I have the courage to do what my uncle and all of the other men and women who have served and currently serve in the military do, I hope I can live up to the honor of the life we have been given by their service. After talking with my uncle, I think it is really important for people my age and younger to be given more exposure to 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. My Uncle Jim’s experiences gave me a newfound admiration for not only his sacrifice but also his values and work ethic throughout his whole life that I know I will use as a foundation in my own life.