

Jim

By
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Everyone in the class liked Jim. It's hard to explain why, but there was something special about him that you couldn't exactly put your finger on. His appearance was average in just about every way except maybe the sparkle in his big brown eyes, the hint of a smile that would appear at the slightest provocation, and the air of quiet confidence he projected by his body language. He was older than the rest of us by two or three years – maybe more. He already had a wife who was from Iran, Lila, and a little girl who we had all gotten to know, Sandy.

Jim spoke softly, but carried a big stick – a pool stick that is. Even though Jim was an expert pool player and won almost every time he played, he was just as easy going and nonchalant when he lost. Jim had style and a certain grace well beyond his years. Some men try to get what Jim had and never come close. Jim never tried, but there aren't enough Os in the word smooth to describe how special he was as far as I was concerned.

While our wives and we had been good friends all the way through the Army's helicopter flight school, Jim and I became better friends when we got to Vietnam. We were the last two helicopter pilots assigned to the same unit from a new shipment of replacements that arrived days earlier. What great luck to have Jim with me in Vietnam and in the same unit I thought. I felt assured that with Mr. Smooth with me in this hostile place, we would have a grand adventure together and somehow everything would be okay.

The company's standardization instructor pilot checked us out over the next week or so. I was pleasantly surprised when I beat Jim in getting checked out in the new UH-1D "Huey" an hour or so sooner than he did. Small victory, but it was still fun to beat Jim at something. Jim was impressed that I had finished before him, as the training had been hard. A lesser man might have called my "winning" our little checkout race luck or something else. Not Jim. As always, he had class. He went out of his way to say "Good show!"

We talked about our families, our personal aspirations and the Vietnam War while we drank several 10-cent beers at the officer's club the night before our first mission in Vietnam. It was company policy to send the new pilots on safe administrative runs on their first few flights to get them used to the routine of flying in a combat environment. Even though we knew it was going to be a pretty safe first flight, we were still a little excited about finally flying our first mission in Vietnam.

Jim looked like a seasoned Vietnam helicopter pilot as I caught up with him heading for the flight line just after dawn the next day. He was carrying his M-16 rifle in one hand and his flight helmet in the other. His .45 caliber pistol was snugly tucked into his shoulder holster that was strapped over his flack vest. I had the same get-up on. We laughed when we saw each other. It looked to us like we were armed with enough firepower to head for the OK Corral to take on the Dalton Gang and anyone else who had the bad sense to tangle with us. We even felt more foolish carrying these weapons knowing this was going to be as close to an admin flight as you could

get. We weren't in a position to argue about it; however, as it was company SOP that you carried your personal weapons with you on each flight. We also had had a ¾ inch steel "chicken plate" that slid under our flak jacket. Those were stored on board the aircraft for the two pilots. They were designed to stop small arm rounds. You might be a little sore if you were hit by a stray bullet, but you wouldn't have a hole in your chest.

We took off an hour after sun up with patches of fog hugging the ground. As we approached the secure landing zone, we had to make a 360-degree turn at a fairly low altitude because the lead aircraft couldn't see exactly where to land due to the dense ground fog. As our leader finally got his bearings, we lined up for a straight-in approach.

All of a sudden, out of nowhere, a lone Viet Cong sniper opened up on our four-ship formation with an AK-47 rifle set on full automatic. The helicopter in front of me took hits and the chopper behind me with Jim flying co-pilot took hits too. My aircraft didn't take any. The FM radio came alive with veteran pilots' calmly telling lead what was happening.

"Six, we're taking automatic weapons fire from the village we just flew over," came an animated voice over the company frequency. I jerked my head around to look out the window to see if I could spot Jim's helicopter. There was red and yellow smoke coming out of his helicopter's open cargo door. Some stray rounds must have hit some of the smoke grenades we all carried on board.

"Anyone take any hits?" Six asked in a routine sounding voice.

"Six, this is four, the new guy took a hit," the number four helicopter aircraft commander reported. "I'm breaking off and heading for the VIP pad. The new guy is going to need some help."

"What?" I thought. I'm not hit. Our aircraft didn't even take a hit. How could Jim get shot on this admin milk run for Pete's sake? That's not how it is supposed to work. This is crazy. I was angry and worried. Jim probably got a nick on his arm or leg and now he was going to be out of here. Mr. Smooth had a ticket out of Vietnam on our first damn flight, and I would be stranded in this terrible place all by myself.

I found out a few minutes later, that my friend and the guy who was going to help me get through Vietnam just took an AK-47 round to the head and was killed instantly.

I was ordered to make a positive ID of "the new guy" early the next day since I was the only one who really knew him. I somehow found my way to the 25th Infantry Division's field morgue where Jim was lying on the ground on some sort of pallet. The blood had been washed off his face and I could not see where the bullet entered just under his chin. He looked alive to me – just napping. I looked around to see if someone was playing a trick on me. I almost said, "OK, Jim, you got me. Get up and let's get out of here." But Jim wasn't getting up – at least not again in this lifetime.

I'm sure it was my imagination, but I could have sworn I saw a slight smile on Jim's face just before I left him for the last time. The odd thing was that I never felt alone in Vietnam. Jim's spirit always seemed to be close by whenever I needed him. He never has left me.