

# Vietnam: A Life Rewritten

*Frederick J. Fruehan, II*

Somewhere on a wall in Washington D.C. is the name Robert Kimes\*. Somewhere in Oklahoma lives his best friend, Jim Gavlock\*. His phone rings and rings. I picture him in a small, dilapidated, clapboard house on a dusty plot of land. He is irritated by the intrusion, and I see him pacing nervously as he waits for the answering machine to screen his calls. I am told he is a recluse. His friends say they might hear from him on a weekly basis, almost to the point of being bothersome, and then they may not hear from him for two years. Jim sometimes becomes depressed, and no one can reach him. His phone rang for four days before I gave up.

In the summer of 1968, he and his friend, Robert Kimes, surfed up and down the coast of Southern California. With high school behind them, they pushed their freedom to its limits. The Pacific Coast Highway led them to their stomping grounds in fast cars, showing off California's best at every twisted



turn. There was music, girls, and surf. They were happy. They thought if they could open a "Surf Shop" they could ride the wave forever, but the wave crashed.

Robert received his draft notice first. Jim's came just two months later. It never slowed their plans. They were young, and the war in Vietnam was insignificant compared to their days spent near the Pacific Ocean. They would each serve a tour of duty and return to California. After basic training, Jim was transferred to Fort Sill, Okla-

homa for advanced individual training. On January 9, 1969, while on bivouac, he received news on a small pink memo note. Robert Kimes was killed during combat while in Vietnam.



Robert's mother requested through our congressman that Jim escort the body home. It was a duty he was honored to carry out, but not emotionally equipped for. The details of that plane ride remain with Jim, buried in a small clapboard house along with his dreams. He had lost hope, his dreams, and his best friend; he hadn't even stepped foot in Vietnam.

On February 7, 1969, after burying his best friend, Jim Gavlock was sent to Vietnam. He was ordered up on a combat assault. They landed in a field of very tall, thick, dry grass surrounded by dense jungle. Helicopter gunships had fired rockets around the perimeter, and the grass had caught fire on nearly all sides. For reasons Jim does not know or can't recall, he loaned his artillery radio to another "grunt." When Jim was discovered without his radio by his new commanding officer Capt. Dunbar, he was severely reprimanded. He was told to NEVER be without his radio and ordered to retrieve it at once.

He took off all his gear and began to move through the grass in search of his radio. Barely able to see through the smoke and the tall grass, he moved toward the direction he thought his radio to be. After approximately twenty minutes of circumnavigating the hot spots, he found the radio. He then went in search of the command post to meet with Capt. Dunbar and the others.

\* To respect privacy, the names have been changed.

Rather than move into the tree line for cover, the unit waited for Jim to return. Once he arrived, Jim became aware that he had left his gear behind and it was now burned in the fire. This was his second major error, and things were going from bad to worse. Suddenly, several explosions occurred, some as close as twenty feet away from Jim. They were taking "incoming" directly on the command post area, the nerve center of the entire company. There were screams for help. There were wounded everywhere. Jim found a man down and began pulling him from the flames. One soldier's pack caught fire as the wind whipped around. He dropped his gear, and bent down as a claymore mine exploded in his face. It started a chain reaction and three or four more explosive devices detonated.

When the medics began arriving on the scene, Jim realized he needed his radio. Through the flames, he could see the dark shapes of the medics moving around and working on the wounded. He



He began to feel distant from the horrible reality taking place before him. He sat in shock and began to feel as if he wasn't there at all. A medivac was called in and it was up to Jim to give the landing instructions. All he could do was sit and shake with the radio's handset to his ear. He could feel the propeller's wash and the flying dirt, but he was unable to speak. Another more seasoned radio operator noticed his condition, took the handset from his ear, and landed the pilot.

He could do nothing but shake and relive all the major errors he had just committed. He began to feel sick, and at some point, he vomited. Two men died that day. He felt that because of his mistakes he was responsible for their deaths. Jim had left his gear behind when he went to retrieve the

radio, and now everything was burned in the fire. He found himself with no pack, no food, and little water. Capt. Dunbar ordered one of the men to secure one of the dead men's packs for Jim to use.

That evening he laid out the dead soldier's gear and took inventory of what he could use. The blood from the fallen soldier was on much of the contents, especially on his poncho



liner which was used for sleeping gear. He was ordered not to get into the man's personal gear, but Jim felt compelled to. There was a picture of his girl and a picture of his family back home. They were all standing arm in arm under a big oak tree. There were many letters. Jim sat on the ground and thought about the man's life. He began to cry. He pulled the bloodied poncho liner over his body and tried to sleep.

On April 22, 1970, Jim completed his tour and returned to the States, but he returned to a life that was rewritten by a draft notice and a small pink memo. He will always be remembered in my heart as a Vietnam Veteran, but in my imagination, I allow him to live the life he was meant to live. Somewhere, he is still surfing and his laughter can be heard by all his friends. We continue to call him, but he never answers.

*"Jim Gavlock" was the childhood friend of the author's father. This account is factual. It is based on stories that the author's father told him and on information from private letters. Frederick Freuhan is a 37-year old adult learner in the College Connection program at Belfast Adult & Community Education in Belfast, ME. He is pursuing a degree in English and hopes to become a writer. He lives with his girlfriend, Elizabeth, in the most beautiful place in the world, Burketville, ME.*

