

Bittersweet past | Vietnam War widow to share memories of an era

The San Diego Union - Tribune; San Diego, Calif.; Feb 8, 2003; Lisa Petrillo;

Abstract:

4 PICS; 1. [Jan Mitchell] stood this week by a cypress tree at Moonlight Beach where her future husband would park his car when they went surfing. [Jimmy Mitchell] died in Vietnam in 1965. 2. High- school sweethearts [Jan Bertoncini] and Jimmy Mitchell were married April 18, 1964, shown here in a copy of a photo from their wedding. 3. History professor [Linda Dudik] spoke recently in front of her class at Palomar College. Dudik created the class on Vietnam in 1990 and tries to "show the human side of history" to her students. (NC- 3; NI-3) 4. On Aug. 31, 1965, 1st Lt. Jimmy Mitchell was killed in Vietnam in a land mine accident. His widow, Jan Mitchell, will speak at Palomar College today at 1 p.m. (NC-3; NI-3); Credit: 1. Jim Baird / Union-Tribune 3. Don Kohlbauer / Union-Tribune 4. Dan Trevan / Union-Tribune

Full Text:

Copyright SAN DIEGO UNION TRIBUNE PUBLISHING COMPANY Feb 8, 2003

How the sun did shine on golden haired Jimmy Mitchell.

Mitchell was a god at San Dieguito High and down in the glittering surf of Moonlight Beach where the cypress shaded his '54 Chevy, baby blue like his eyes.

"He was so fast a rumor would have trouble keeping up with him," the sportswriters said of the class president.

President Kennedy spoke at his graduation from San Diego State. When Jimmy married high-school sweetheart Jan Bertoncini, descendant of Spanish land-grant ranchers, the society pages gushed.

But then came that blast.

"James Mitchell, the boy who had everything going for him, is dead in a war that is only half a war," the papers said.

On Aug. 31, 1965, 1st Lt. Jimmy Mitchell was killed in Vietnam by a land mine triggered by another Marine. Dead before he ever got to hold his infant daughter.

Now, nearly 40 years later, two women have joined forces to bring Jimmy Mitchell back to life.

o o o

The name James M. Mitchell endures: Carved into the Vietnam Memorial Wall in the nation's Capitol: On angel-white marble at Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery. The one the San Dieguito

High gym was named for.

His name leads the list of war dead on the flagpole at Palomar College, where he was a star. That's where Linda Dudik found him.

Dudik is a history professor who studies the impacts of war, on everyone from the soldiers to the military support staff to spouses, parents, children, friends.

"With war, we have to think about what price we must pay. We need to make war personal," Dudik said. "If we look at war in the abstract, if we just look at numbers and dates, we lose its meaning. For the enemies we use the phrase 'collateral damage' to dehumanize them. I try to show the human side of history."

Dudik created a college history course on Vietnam, a pioneering effort that brought much fanfare when launched in 1990. To bring the global concept of Vietnam home to her students, she brings in local residents touched by the war. That research led her to Jan Mitchell.

Dudik wanted to know James McNair Mitchell in life and death so her students would have greater understanding of the name they walked past at the heart of their campus.

Until Dudik came calling, Jan Mitchell admits, that kind of discussion rarely left the privacy of her own home.

"After he died, I was asked to march in an anti-war rally but I declined," said Mitchell. "Right or wrong, I was not going to protest the war after my husband had gone over and given his life for his country."

Even now, with the distance of time and the rich and growing collection of research and writings on the era, "I don't want to go down that road," Mitchell said firmly.

But Dudik started Mitchell on that road.

Jan Mitchell will be making her first public speech about her husband and the war this afternoon for Dudik's class from 1 to 2:30 in Room P-32 of Palomar's main campus. The event is free and open to the public.

"I want everyone to know I am not the grieving widow. I put closure on Vietnam a long time ago," Mitchell said. "But I believe that talking about Jimmy is important for other people to understand."

o o o

Jimmy Mitchell was one of those guys who always shined, no matter what.

His parents divorced when he was young; his mother's new husband was a career Marine who uprooted the family often until the late 1950s when he retired to Encinitas, and Jimmy

found his paradise.

Though short and stocky, he was fast. As one sportswriter wrote of him, "He was a halfback who caught the winning touchdown pass when San Dieguito defeated Oceanside in 1959. He was the guard in basketball who dribbled past the Oceanside press and the dash man in track who ran away with the league meet."

He was class president, he was voted most popular, he dated cheerleaders. He waited until he was financially stable before marrying. The Marines stationed him in Hawaii, where he and his bride were broke and blissful and Jan was soon pregnant. That spring he shipped out to Vietnam, which he hated. It was hot and buggy and tense and strange. That July he missed the birth of their daughter, Erin. He complained that he could never get anything as simple as a cold drink.

All these years later, Jan Mitchell still worries about his getting something cold to drink in her dreams, a recurring one. "In the dream I keep asking why, why doesn't he come back to Erin and me. And I wake up and it's always the same," she said.

After Jimmy Mitchell died, she moved back home to Encinitas and five years later married another Marine who did come home from Vietnam, although injured. They had more children, moved to Peoria, Ariz., and to other towns until they divorced and she settled in Arizona with Erin. Her daughter was a flight attendant and is now living in Texas with her husband and three children.

Through her involvement in a hospice program, Mitchell met a retired writer who had self-published her life story through a Leucadia-based company called Story Arts. That inspiration, and her contact with Dudik led Mitchell to write her own book last year.

The result is the soft-bound volume, "The Last Stamp: Remembering a Remarkable Young Man."

The slender volume contains a wealth of memories and mementos, prom tickets, letters and the dreaded Department of Defense telegrams. She dedicates the book to Erin, writing in the forward: "I always had a longing to one day write something for you -- something that not only you but your children could hold in their hands. Something that could bring him to life."

She recalls for her daughter a long-ago date she had with Jimmy to see the now-classic film, "Splendor in the Grass," at La Paloma Theater and how afterward, over ice cream, she couldn't stop dissecting the classroom scene where a girl reads a famous poem about the brilliance of life and how bittersweetly it all vanishes.

That night, she recorded the poem into her diary, these lines from William Wordsworth's "Ode on Imitations of Immortality."

. . . What through radiance which was once so bright

Be now forever taken from my sight,

Though nothing can bring back the hour

Of splendor in the grass, of glory in the flower;

We grieve not, rather find

Strength in what remains behind . . .

Now, nearly four decades later, a few nervous days before her big speech, Jan Mitchell stands at the edge of the Pacific Ocean. She shivers in the chilly shade of the one remaining cypress tree where Jimmy always parked his Chevy during their endless happy days at Moonlight.

She muses about how Jimmy never really got into the movie or the poem the way she did. In those days, they were young and beautiful and strong, surrounded by rich farmland and loving family and warmed by the California sun.

And yet at 18, Jan Bertoncini knew that it was vital to know what Wordsworth said, that what was once so bright could forever be taken from sight.

"I knew I would be saying those words someday," she said.

Lisa Petrillo: (760) 752-6741; lisa.petrillo@uniontrib.com

[Illustration]

4 PICS; Caption: 1. Jan Mitchell stood this week by a cypress tree at Moonlight Beach where her future husband would park his car when they went surfing. Jimmy Mitchell died in Vietnam in 1965. 2. High-school sweethearts Jan Bertoncini and Jimmy Mitchell were married April 18, 1964, shown here in a copy of a photo from their wedding. 3. History professor Linda Dudik spoke recently in front of her class at Palomar College. Dudik created the class on Vietnam in 1990 and tries to "show the human side of history" to her students. (NC- 3; NI-3) 4. On Aug. 31, 1965, 1st Lt. Jimmy Mitchell was killed in Vietnam in a land mine accident. His widow, Jan Mitchell, will speak at Palomar College today at 1 p.m. (NC-3; NI-3); Credit: 1. Jim Baird / Union-Tribune 3. Don Kohlbauer / Union-Tribune 4. Dan Trevan / Union-Tribune

Credit: STAFF WRITER