

A life not forgotten

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PHOTO COURTESY OF JAN MITCHELL MEYER

Encinitas woman still trying to understand husband's death

"I've been looking for you for years," the man told Jan Mitchell Meyer over the telephone. His name, he said, was Norm Kegerreis. He'd been a corporal in her husband's platoon in Vietnam. "I just wanted to tell you what an outstanding Marine Lt. Mitchell was. I've never forgotten him."

"As I thanked him," Jan says, "I was thinking how often I'd heard someone use the words — 'I've never forgotten him' — when they were talking about Jim."

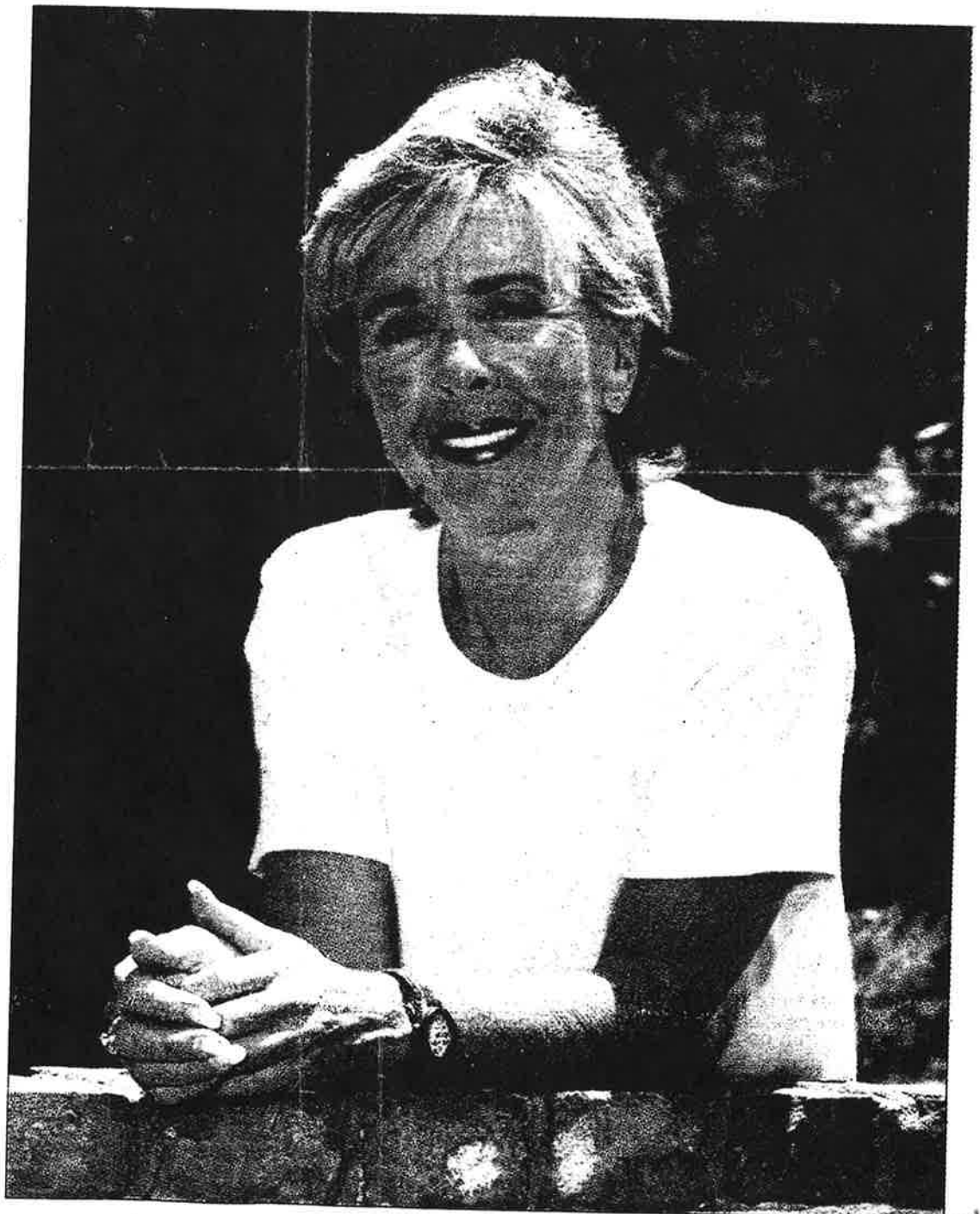
"He was excited about the baby," Kegerreis said. "A girl, right?"

"I told him, yes, that Erin was 29 now. She'd been only six weeks when Jim was killed at Chu Lai, when a land mine exploded. He never saw her, although I had managed to get a photograph to him through the Red Cross."

Kegerreis, she realized, was still talking: "He was telling me that Jim hadn't been killed instantly, as I'd always believed. I knew he'd been hit in the heart by mine fragments. This man, who'd been a stranger minutes before, was telling me that he'd been there, on that patrol, that Jim had struggled to his feet, and begun shouting orders to his men, trying to sort out the chaos, before he dropped."

For Jan, the information was another piece of a strange mental jigsaw composed of wondering, of trying to imagine what it had been like for her husband on those last weeks of his life. It was to be 32 years before the process was complete.

When she met James M. Mitchell Jr. at San Dieguito High, the year was 1959. She



BILL WECHTER / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Jan Mitchell Meyer, above, and James M. Mitchell Jr., top, were San Dieguito High sweethearts. The two married in April 1964, shortly before Mitchell was sent to Vietnam. He had planned to make the Marine Corps his career, but a land mine took his life in 1965. 'Jim was special,' said a friend, Mike Shores. The high school named its auditorium in his memory.

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was 16, a cheerleader for the Mustangs, a surfer whose picture — in "Sandra Dee" checked shorts — was on the cover of the Del Mar Surfcomber. Her surname was Bertoncini then. Her great-great-grandfather had been Juan Maria Osuna, once granted 8,824 acres of what is now Rancho Santa Fe, although her family no longer owned the land.

Mitchell dazzled her. "He dazzled everybody," she says. He was 18, an athlete with phenomenal speed — there are many former San Dieguito students who still, after 40 years, remember the pleasure of watching him — at football, track and basketball.

"Jimmy was special — it's hard to describe what he had if you didn't know him," his friend, Mike Shores, who played on the same basketball team, says.

"At one of our basketball games, someone on the opposing team called out something derogatory about Jimmy's height — he was 5 feet 5 inches, which is really unusual in basketball. Mitchell bounced the ball between the guy's legs, zipped around him, started dribbling it. No one could catch him — you could never get a ball away from him — so the crowd was roaring with laughter. But after the game, he was friendly to the guy who insulted him. That was Jimmy. You couldn't play with the guy and not be up."

"My mother was always filming us during the five years we dated," Jan remembers. "With Super 8. I used to hold my hand up and say, 'Mom, not again!' Now I'm glad she kept right on filming."

They were married in April 1964, in St. James Catholic Church in Del Mar, right after Mitchell finished his platoon leader's course at Quantico, Va. A military wedding, with crossed sabers that Jan's mother, of course, got on film. They had 11 months together at Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii, before he took a platoon to Chu Lai with the 1st Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment. "I shared a house with three other Marine wives," Jan says. "We were all pregnant. We're all still friends."

Letters were their only contact with their husbands, "apart from a single phone call, which was very frustrating because the sound was terrible. It was like hearing someone calling from the bottom of a well. All four of us felt depressed afterwards," Jan remembers. Although Mitchell was intensely proud of being a Marine, and had planned to make the military his career (his father had retired as a colonel), Jan says his letters were beginning to hint that, maybe, when his time was up, he'd come home to Encinitas and coach. "I could only guess at what was going on out there in Vietnam," she says. "I kept wondering, how bad is it?"

"I have not realized how easily lives can be brought to an end," Mitchell wrote to her shortly before his 25th birthday. "I have learned a great deal in the last few months." Jan has a picture taken on that birthday, Aug. 8, 1965. Bare-chested, holding a "cake" — it was actually a block of mortar studded with four sharp spikes — he looks healthy and muscular, but so serious for a man described by his commanding officer as "infectiously cheerful."

He had 23 days to live.

Three months after his death, Jan, who was living with her parents in Encinitas, went out to the mailbox and found a letter from him. Another small piece for her jigsaw. North County newspapers at that time contained letters from people who wanted to rename Earl Warren Junior High the James Mitchell Junior High.

"It didn't happen," Mike Shores says. "But San Dieguito High named the new auditorium after him."

Eventually, Jan got on with her life. She married an FBI agent, who is also a veteran of Vietnam, and, in 1971, had a son, Brandon. Because of her husband's work, she's lived in six different states. Although they're now divorced, "we're close friends," she says.

Against the wall of her Solana Beach living room is "the trunk." Black, brass-bound, sturdy, "the trunk" has moved as many times as she has. In it, among numerous other souvenirs, are newspaper articles about Mitchell, his dark-

'I have not realized how easily lives can be brought to an end.'

— JAMES M. MITCHELL JR.
In a letter shortly before his death

blue San Dieguito letter sweater, the white "S" yellowing a little, his letters, and the flag that draped his coffin.

Their daughter, Erin Rhode, has three children of her own now: Kye, 3, Chase 2, and Ally, born last March. "The trunk," Jan says, will go to them — with its solid reminders of a grandfather who'll never age beyond 25.

And then there are Jan's mom's old movies, transformed into videos. The grandchildren will be able to watch Jimmy Mitchell zooming across the Colorado River on water skis, riding a surfboard at Moonlight Beach and, being kids, they'll probably fall off the couch laughing at this one, their grandfather pulling up in his '56 Chevy to take their grandmother to her junior-senior prom.

A year ago, Jan read the book "Fortunate Son" by ~~Chesty Puller Jr.~~ *L. Puller*

"He was a Marine lieutenant who went out on patrols in Vietnam. He wrote in such a way that it came alive for me. I really saw the misery, the fear and stress they lived under. This is where I finally found out what Jim went through."