

Father, Soldier, Entrepreneur, Volunteer

James L. Jensen, LTC US Army (Ret)

by Larry Jensen

If “success is a journey, not a destination”, then LTC (US Army Retired) James Jensen (Class of 1947) lived a successful life. Uninterested in money, compliments or fame, the Colonel, as many friends affectionately called him, used what most consider the goals of success as merely tools to advance confidently in the direction of his selfless dreams.

Born in Ashland, Oregon, James was raised with seven siblings who pursued such different paths as farmers, cops, airmen, preacher’s wives, and well, one of them no one really knows. His parents were strict disciplinarians who made sure each child pulled his own weight and was in church whenever the doors were open. A skinny high school graduate, James chose the path of a soldier enlisting at the age of 17.



Captain Jim Jensen just before leaving for Viet Nam.

Perhaps it’s just a coincidence that the U.S. National Security Council (NSC) convened for the first time in December 1947—the same time Private Jensen was assigned to Signal Corp School for Morse code intercept training. He was about to enter the world of spies, codebreakers, and intelligence analysts.

It was December 1948, when the young private took leave to return to California and marry his high school sweetheart, Frances McDonald (Class of 1948). The newly weds spent their honeymoon on a Greyhound bus returning to Virginia. Frances remembers staying up all night looking out the window at snow—something she had never seen before. During their stay in Virginia their two daughters, Arlene and Susan, were born.

Frances was ready for warmer climate when Jim received orders for Clark Air Force Base, Luzon, Philippine Islands. An avid hunter and fisherman, Jim jumped at the opportunity to travel to Hong Kong and Chiangmai, Thailand on a hunting expedition.

The slogan, “It’s not just a job, it’s an adventure” was becoming real for this skinny kid from Santa Monica. Four months before leaving the Philippine Islands, their third child—a son—Larry was born.

While Jim’s work was highly classified, we know that his intelligence career took him from Virginia to the Philippine Islands, back to Virginia, Alaska, England and Germany. Their time in Alaska allowed them the privilege of being in a territory when it became a state. They were in Anchorage on July 4, 1959 for the first official raising of the US flag with 49 stars.

He had earned the rank of Sergeant First Class by the time he transferred to England. Like many others, Jim served as a commissioned officer in the Army Reserve at the same time he was an enlisted man on active duty. It was during his tour in England that he was ordered to active duty from the Reserves—rising in rank from Sergeant First Class to Captain overnight. Along with the promotion came a new assignment to Germany. So, they packed up the VW bus and drove to Germany crossing the English Channel, by ferry,

and passing through France and Belgium before arriving at Stuttgart. It wasn't all work in Germany—the family spent thirty days traveling through Italy, Austria and Switzerland.

By the early 1960's, Jim was tiring of the activities involved in Army Intelligence and the stress it put on him and his family. So, in 1963, Captain Jensen transferred to the Army Adjutant General School at Fort Benjamin Harrison, Indianapolis, Indiana. Graduating first in his class, he was retained as an instructor.

Staff Sergeant Barry Sadler was recuperating from wounds he received in Vietnam when he recorded...“Fighting soldiers from the sky, fearless men who jump and die, men who mean just what they say, these brave men of the Green Beret.” The year was 1966 and it was Captain Jensen's turn to serve in Vietnam. Laying flat on the floor of his second story room while bullets rattled above him was part of his routine as Adjutant General and Director of Personnel in Qui Nhon. He learned quickly that not everything was as it appeared in this war torn country. Simple things like a drive could quickly become life and death events. Jim must have sensed something different about that little boy standing on the side of the road. A gut instinct made him speed up just before the boy tossed a grenade narrowly missing his speeding jeep. He received a promotion to Major and served as a Liaison Officer in Pleiku, An Khe, and Da Nang.



Major Jim Jensen returning to Viet Nam.

It was a sunny day in August when Jim surprised his three children walking into his bedroom, where they were watching TV. On any other day no one would have noticed, but Jim was supposed to be in Viet Nam, not Indianapolis. He had received a 30-day leave and came home unannounced. Frances was driving home from the store with her mother in the van when Jim opened the garage door. You would expect her to jump out of the van to greet him, but she really should have stopped the van first. Her poor mother sat helplessly in the front passenger seat as the van coughed to a stop just before hitting a tree.

In 1967, he was reassigned to Fort Benjamin Harrison as the Assistant School Secretary and Chief of Correspondence Course for the US Army Adjutant General School. He would stay there until his retirement in 1973 at the rank of Lieutenant Colonel. During his 26 years of military service he received numerous letters of appreciation and commendation along with the following medals: Legion of Merit, Meritorious Service Medal, Army Commendation Medal, three Meritorious Unit Citations, Armed Forces Reserve Medal, Republic of Vietnam Cross of Gallantry with Palm, Vietnam Campaign Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Good conduct Medal with four loops, and the national Defense Service Medal with one Oak Leaf Cluster.

“Success is a journey, not a destination.” Pastor William Griffin asked Jim to supervise a Work and Witness team for a two-week trip to Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic. When the team returned home, Jim stayed. Frances soon joined him on what would become a ten-year adventure of constructing homes, schools and churches in Costa Rica, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala and Peru. Merely a tool, his military retirement provided the means allowing them to volunteer their services supervising Nazarene work and witness teams.

Jim became fluent in Spanish and upon his return to Indiana became an interpreter for the Marion County Sheriff's Department. And, his increasing knowledge in construction led him to open Jensen Contracting and helped him draft regulations for handicapped access in the city of Indianapolis. His carpentry skills were also used to provide services for Shepherd Community, a non-profit organization servicing the needs of low income and homeless individuals and families. Jim served on the Board of Directors for Shepherd Community and with Frances volunteered many hours preparing and serving food for special events and

holidays. With a heart for the less fortunate, Jim was generous with his labor and materials providing needed repairs benefiting the elderly, shut-ins, and others in need of assistance.

On November 7, 1997, Jim was decked out in a sport coat and tie complete with snake skin boots as he stood in front of an audience in the Arts Garden in downtown Indianapolis. Out of over 2,000 nominees, 22 people were being honored as winners of the Mayor's Volunteer Partnership Award. "This is quite an honor for doing something I enjoy doing," Jim said. "I could never have completed the tasks being recognized without the assistance of my wife and many volunteers who have given sacrificially to help people in need. I accept this award on behalf of all who have made each project possible." Jim died before he could see his name engraved on a brick in the new Volunteer Plaza built along the downtown canal.

One and a half years after celebrating their 50th wedding anniversary, Jim died of arrhythmia. They had three children, eight grandchildren and two great grandchildren. Was he successful? He was still on the journey.