

Captain Jerry Zimmer, United States Marine Corps, was born in Maine, New York on May 5, 1944. Raised on a dairy farm, he was the oldest of three boys and enjoyed a close relationship with his family. He attended Brown University on a Naval ROTC scholarship and graduated in 1966, whereupon he entered the Marine Corps and became an F-4 Phantom pilot. Shot down while flying a ground support mission on August 29, 1969, he is survived by his widow Elaine Zimmer Davis and their son Craig Zimmer.

EARLY LIFE

The oldest of three brothers, Jerry Zimmer was born and raised on a dairy farm in the tiny town of Maine, New York. The five Zimmers were a close-knit family, sharing chores and meals and attending the local Congregational Church together each Sunday.

Of his three brothers, Jerry's widow Elaine Zimmer Davis says he was regarded as the most studious and religious. "Jerry was sort of revered within his family. And within the town," recalls Elaine. Later, when she and Jerry would visit his family in Maine as a couple during college, people would pour into the Zimmer house to see Jerry. "They would all bring food in, and then they would listen to Jerry.... I mean, Jerry was comfortable in so many environments."

Growing up on the farm taught Jerry about hard work from a young age: his mornings would begin around 4:00 am, when he would rise to milk the cows and deliver his paper route before the first school bell. At Vestal High School, Jerry was a member of the National Honors Society and star player on the football team; his coach, a former marine, was his mentor.

A scholarship from the Naval ROTC made possible Jerry's dream of a first-rate education. Jerry was a strong candidate thanks to his work ethic, athleticism, and smarts. After graduation, Jerry was accepted to the NROTC program, turning down an offer from the Naval Academy to attend Brown University. For the son of small-town dairy farmers, an elite school like Brown represented hope, opportunity, and the future.

YEARS AT BROWN

Jerry's quiet confidence likely helped ease his transition from the farmlands of upstate New York to Brown University's bustling campus, where he arrived in the fall of 1962. Besides his weekly NROTC commitments, Jerry took a job parking cars, played on the freshman football team, and pledged Delta Tau Delta. According to his widow Elaine, Jerry was a true "guy's guy" and had a knack for making "people feel like they were valuable no matter what." Joining a fraternity helped Jerry cultivate the closeness and support he had always had on the farm.

An Economics major, "Jerry was very smart, but he had to work for everything... Things just didn't come to him, and he prepared for every final," Elaine remembers. "He had certain, certain processes that he went through. And he believed in them. I suspect that Jerry prayed about everything in a very quiet way." Jerry retained a strong sense of faith throughout his time at Brown and later, in Vietnam.

In 1963, his days already packed with commitments, Jerry added another—Elaine. The two met one evening at the Biltmore Hotel downtown, a favorite haunt of Providence students (Elaine

studied at nearby Bryant College). After their first date, Jerry and Elaine saw only each other. She quickly became part of Jerry's family at Brown: "The fraternity wouldn't have had any dates if it wasn't for Elaine," remembers Mike Hudder ' (need year), one of Jerry's fraternity brothers.

"Of all the things that I remember about our relationship, it's the Rock," Elaine says. They would meet at Jerry's carrel to study. "He would light up when he would see me coming, and we would hope no one was looking at us as we were making out in the stacks." She would visit him as he parked cars off Prospect Street. The couple also attended the wild fraternity parties on Wriston Quad, where Jerry's fraternity would hire acts like Diana Ross and the Shirelles to perform on the lawn.

By the end of Jerry's junior year, when Elaine was graduating from Bryant with her two-year Associates Degree, the couple knew they wanted to marry. "Jerry and I were totally inseparable," says Elaine. She took office work on College Hill to remain near Jerry while he finished his degree, working first in the Brown Admissions Office and then for Ann Dewart, the Dean of Students at Pembroke, where she learned shorthand and typing. Back in Maine, NY that Thanksgiving of 1965, Jerry proposed to Elaine at the table in front of his entire family. "Thanksgiving has always had a very special meaning to me," says Elaine. Jerry's proposal shows what a supportive and caring environment he came from, its loyalty and affection. On June 11, 1966, Jerry and Elaine were married.

TOWARDS VIETNAM

After a frugal honeymoon in the Bahamas, Jerry moved from the NROTC to the Marines, and he and Elaine reported to basic training at the Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia. There, the couple lived in a small apartment with other officers and wives in Triangle Woodbridge, Virginia, about 20 miles from the base; their neighbors were Carol and Charlie Piggott, classes of Pembroke '66 and Brown '66, respectively. **(I could add a sentence or two about Elaine's struggles with the pressure of being a military wife. Pertinent?)**

Jerry knew he wanted to become a jet pilot—he'd already gotten his private pilot's license while at Brown, through a government program. Two weeks after basic, he and Elaine headed down to flight school in Pensacola, Florida. There, Marines like Jerry had to compete in a program with both Navy and Marine officers for coveted fixed-wing assignments. Jerry was a natural leader, hosting regular study groups for those who, like him, wanted to fly jets. Friend and classmate John French says he "wouldn't have gotten through flight school if it wasn't for Jerry."

"That's where the competition really, really got tough," Elaine remembers. [["The Navy had several openings for jets because it was a bigger force." The Marines, however, would sometimes select only one or two students per graduating class for jets. "The rest of them would get helicopters," Elaine explains.]] **(I like Elaine explaining this to us because I think it gives her an air of expertise/credibility, but it could go to cut length.)** "Jerry was first often in the class...But the thing that shocked me is the people he was competing with were the people he was trying to help get through it."

After finishing at the top of his class at flight school and winning a jet assignment, Jerry was sent every three or four months to a different station to advance his flight training. On **(date of**

Craig's birth,) "I delivered Craig, our son, in Meridian Mississippi," Elaine remembers. After having Craig, Elaine and Jerry lived in Mississippi next to Carol and Charlie Piggott from Basic. The couple's house was a popular gathering place: "Jerry was such a leader and so easy to be around for guys, whether you were super smart, rich, poor. He was just easy to be around.... People felt comfortable coming to our home." Still, life was quieter as a married military couple than it had been for the lovebirds while at Brown: "The parties that we had at Brown were the last real let loose. The kind of parties that that we had in the military, the guys were growing up real fast. People were dying in the training command, you know."

The couple moved from Florida to Mississippi, back to Florida, to Texas, to Cherry Point, North Carolina, and then finally to Beaufort, South Carolina. In Beaufort, Jerry's last training station before leaving for combat, he completed his pilot training to fly the F-4 Phantom. "That was a two-man aircraft. The backseat was a navigator who had no control [the], over the aircraft, but he could eject separately from the pilot if necessary. And that's what Jerry wanted. And it was the toughest to get," Elaine says. Jerry got it. He spent his time in Beaufort with Charlie Piggott, who was stationed there in another squadron, and a large group of friends. "All the ROTC, a lot of them from Ivy League schools, but some of them weren't," Elaine explains. "Jerry wasn't just one to associate with Ivy Leaguers. That was not his, his way of selecting friends."

After Beaufort, Jerry and Elaine bought a house through the VA in Smithfield, Massachusetts, close to Elaine's parents. "He had about a week or two in the house, and then he left for Vietnam. I took him to Boston, and that was the last time I ever saw him," Elaine recalls. This was March of 1969. "I never, just never, never dawned on me. He was excited like somebody that didn't understand fully. He was focused on flying. I know that's what he loved. It was a little bit like getting to Brown. [[He knew, I mean, the war was going on, and Jerry knew he was going to end up going in and he didn't want to go...as an enlisted man. He wanted to come in as an officer. And this all worked together. Going to Vietnam was not, I know we saw pictures, but when you're in the air...it's like a movie. You know, you're not, you know, you're not there. You're really not seeing the enemy's eye up close. And, and, so he was off, and I went back to Smithfield.]]] **(This portion of the quote is interesting, but not exactly on-topic. Could cut for length or move later in the piece.)**

AT WAR

Jerry was part of the VMFA-542 (Marine Fighter Attack Squadron) stationed in Da Nang. Even as a section leader, there was never enough flying for him. As a jet pilot, Jerry chiefly flew close air support missions, "supporting the ground troops," Elaine recounts.

Mostly, Jerry would drop bombs to clear landing zones so helicopters could drop off and pick up ground troops. He also began taking graduate school classes in Business Law at the University of Maryland's extension in Da Nang. Once, he was selected to fly an aircraft in need of repair to Okinawa and Iwakuni, Japan. In a letter to Elaine, he recounts how the navigation system broke on the way back and he and his co-pilot navigated back to Da Nang "the old-fashioned way."

"I am certain that the first letter I got from him was the saddest letter," Elaine recalls. "I think he was shocked at what he'd gotten himself into. In the sense that he wasn't frightened, but I think he never pictured Vietnam and the lifestyle. I don't think Jerry had really thought about that

enough.” In his letters, Jerry looked forward more than anything to meeting Elaine in Hawaii for R&R. “That was the side of Vietnam that said, ‘If I can make it to R&R, we’ll be okay,’” she recalls

“He never complained about being afraid or being unhappy, but as months went on, he missed me and Craig so terribly that we were like three people that were the only ones in the world,” she continues. “And he would tell me about graduate school, about the future, about probably getting out of the Marine Corps and going to graduate school. But being near an air base so he could be in the Reserves so he could fly. That was really what Jerry loved.” He encouraged Elaine to get her pilot’s license too, and complete her bachelor’s degree.

On August 29, 1969, six months into Jerry’s service, Elaine had already purchased her tickets for R&R with Jerry in Hawaii. That morning in Da Nang, before his hop, Jerry had finished recording a tape for Elaine on an eight-track purchased from a friend; he often enclosed recorded messages along with his letters. “The day Jerry was killed; he was on the hot pad, which is where you would wait in your jet when you were on call,” Elaine recounts. Jerry and his Radio Intercept Officer (RIO, or navigator), Al Graff, were waiting to fly. “I think it was like noontime or something, he was sitting out there, and I’m sure he was bored...Jerry always was bored if he wasn’t flying,” Elaine recalls. Finally a call came in: a reconnaissance team was going into an area considered a hotbed. Jerry and his section needed to drop bombs to clear the area for ground troops and a helicopter to land. The men flew in: first Jerry, then his wingman, Major Jack Gagan; others flew above, including Capt. Mike Wholley, a Harvard grad who had been with Jerry in basic training.

As Jerry was pulling up after dropping his first load, he was caught in 50-caliber gunfire. “The Viet Cong and the NVA would dig in the sides of the mountains,” Elaine explains, “like make a shelf.” When an enemy aircraft came in sight, “they would just start shooting.” It is unclear what exactly caused Jerry’s plane to crash that day. One possibility is that his hydraulics went out, making it impossible to pull up to a safe altitude. Another, more likely outcome, Elaine explains, “is that the aircraft, it was a very mountainous area where they needed to come in and then get right up, and that he was hit. And they would’ve died if they tried to eject because they didn’t have the altitude.” Taking down an F-4 with gunfire was a huge coup; the jets travel upwards of 500 miles per hour, and being felled by groundfire was rare. **(Was Jerry the only casualty in this hop? Feels like an important detail to include.)**

In the Smithfield house a few days later, Elaine had packed a suitcase for Craig. Jerry’s parents would arrive soon. “They were coming to pick him up, and they were so excited,” she explains. Soon Elaine would leave to meet Jerry for R&R. “That day I was sitting in our house. The green car drove up, and this sweet, sweet captain-Captain DeJulay.... I invited him in. I knew...I don’t know how I knew, whether it was from television segments, but Craig was holding onto my leg,” Elaine recalls. “When I had the tickets he was dead already.” She remains “incredibly sad that we didn’t have R&R together. I never forgave God for that.”

Soon after, on September 4, 1969, Elaine received a Western Union telegram informing her of Jerry’s death: he was “19 ½ miles south of Da Nang, Quang Nam Province, Republic of Vietnam. He was the pilot aboard an F4B aircraft conducting an airstrike in support of a

reconnaissance insert in a known high threat area. His plane was observed to impact with the ground after an ordinance delivery. Due to the nature of the incident his remains were not recovered.”

IN MEMORY

The funeral was held at the Zimmer farm, attended by Jerry’s family and high school classmates, a few returned soldiers from Vietnam, and some of Elaine’s childhood friends. There was a ceremonial flyover for the empty casket. “It was like overnight my life changed forever. That was the only thing I could say to anybody,” Elaine recalls.

Elaine decided to join her friend Carol Piggott, whose husband Charlie had been killed three months earlier, near a military base in California. “I wanted to be near people who understood. I didn’t want to be around people who thought my husband was a killer.” By Thanksgiving they were in California; Elaine had driven, her mother and little Craig in the backseat. “I told my mother, ‘Do not tell anybody that Jerry’s dead. Just don’t.’ Everybody, every time we stopped to get gas, my mother would say, ‘Are the tires okay? Her husband was killed in Vietnam.’ I mean, she was, wanted me, wanted to be sure I was taken care of. And then I would get so upset with her,” Elaine recalls. Ultimately, a sympathetic police officer helped Elaine find a safe and comfortable new home in **(Name of town,)** California.

Once they were settled, Elaine, Carol, and their friends would “go where the military hung out, and you would have thought we were the happiest people,” she says. “We didn’t want to scare people away. There is something that I learned early on. When guys or couples had been through Vietnam and they were coming home, people in our position, my position, wanted to be near them. But by the same token, they couldn’t deal with our loss.”

Soon after moving to California Elaine met Ron Davis, who had returned from 13 months as a helicopter pilot in Vietnam the same day Jerry was killed. He lived across the street; eventually the two were married. She graduated from journalism school and worked internationally as a travel writer for a time before travelling to Vietnam in 2006 with Ron. The two went to look for Jerry’s crash site and remains in Da Nang with no luck. “What hurt me the most was here was a guy that loved is family...in a place wehre nobody cares. Nobody is honoring him. And I can’t even get there,” Elaine explains.

Then in January 2008, Ron, their son Brett, and Craig travelled again to Vietnam to try again. Elaine says: “We learned pretty quickly that the government had made some mistakes. The coordinates we received in 1995 gave Craig sort of the closure, all of his dad’s records that the government put his dad’s case in. There was a group called JPAC, Joint POW-MIA Accounting Command. They sent Craig Jerry’s jacket and put his case in the “no further pursuit” category. In 1992 or 1993, the government resumed relations with Vietnam and at that time our government went in and re-evaluated all the cases that were still outstanding... The coordinates given were two clicks off; one klick is a kilometer.” In other words, the government had conducted its investigation of Jerry’s case using the wrong coordinates; if there were crash debris or remains to be found, they had yet to be discovered. But JPAC refused to OK the men’s search; reopening Jerry’s case would be too expensive. In March 2009, Elaine returned herself with Gene Mares, who had flown with Jerry in country while in VMFA-542 and served as best man at their

wedding. This time the search was successful: they recovered debris from the crash along with “life support”—pieces of Jerry’s flight suit and parachute. In September 2009, a memorial service was held for Jerry at Arlington Cemetery. JPAC has since reopened Jerry’s case; in August 2010, they began excavating his crash site.

Elaine reflects, “There are no tomorrows. I always felt like tomorrow was never going to come because Jerry and I, the logic of that is you’re so young, you have to plan for tomorrow because you can’t call it today. I can tell you without a doubt that Jerry and I would be married today because I would’ve done whatever he wanted me to do and vice versa. We would’ve grown old together.” Elaine continues to work closely with JPAC; the search for Jerry’s remains is chronicled on her website, www.bringjerryhome.com.