



James Harry Drake

July 2, 1934 - February 15, 2021

James Harry Drake of Cheyenne lived a full life as an Air Force military policeman and special investigator, VA Medical Center police chief, cowboy and motorcycle rider. He was also a devoted husband, father and grandfather who put his family's interests above all else. Jim, 86, was born to Harry Audrey and Mary Esther Drake on July 2, 1934 in Slate Lick, Pennsylvania. He died peacefully in his sleep at the Life Care Center in Cheyenne on Feb. 15, 2021. He had lived independently at his home until the final two months of his life.

Jim enjoyed growing up in rural Slate Lick, particularly its fishing and hunting opportunities. He attended a one-room schoolhouse for the first eight grades and graduated from Freeport High School in 1952. At 6-3, Jim and another student were the tallest members of their class and were eagerly recruited by the high school basketball coach. Jim, however, didn't like the sport. "It seemed like all you did was run up and down the court and fall down on the hardwood," he later reminisced. "I took up the trombone and joined the marching band. I was the worst trombone player in the world, but it beat doing that."

Jim enlisted in the Air Force in February 1953 and was assigned to Sampson Air Force Base in New York after being trained as a military policeman. While stationed there he married Bernice Drake of New Kensington, Pennsylvania on Oct. 23, 1954. Their son, Kerry, was born at the base in September 1955. The couple had agreed that their son would be named David James, but when his dad filled out the birth certificate paperwork, it became Kerry Alan. "Kerry Drake" was a popular comic book detective, and Kerry's middle name was in honor of Jim's favorite actor, Alan Ladd. For the record, Bernice was not amused when she woke up.

The family moved to F.E. Warren AFB in Cheyenne in 1956. For his next assignment in Bitburg, Germany, Jim had a tough decision to make: Accept a solo tour of duty for a year and a half or bring Bernice and Kerry and stay for three years. Not wanting to uproot his young family and go overseas for that long, Jim chose the shorter option and they lived with his parents. When Jim returned, Mom was there to greet him at the airport. She didn't recognize him when he walked toward her -- in the photos he sent from Germany, Jim always wore his Air Force hat or a cowboy hat. The man who left with an Elvis-like haircut

returned nearly bald!

Reunited, the Drakes traveled across the country to Jim's next tour of duty at Beale AFB in central California. He had been in law enforcement for nearly a decade when he decided to apply for the Air Force's Office of Special Investigation. After receiving his training in Washington, D.C., Jim was transferred to the OSI's office in San Jose, California. His duties included investigating criminal actions and performing as a counterintelligence technician. He loved his work and was proud to serve his country. The most challenging part of his Air Force career came in 1968, when he was transferred to Bien Hoa AFB in the Republic of South Vietnam, where he spent a harrowing year. He survived 26 rocket and mortar attacks at the base, which was just 15 miles from Saigon.

Jim's job took him throughout the war-torn country, and it was dangerous work. "The Viet Cong had placed a bounty on the head of every OSI agent," he recalled. Jim was extremely proud of his investigation of the theft of gasoline from his base, which sparked extra security measures at U.S. bases throughout the country. He was awarded the Bronze Star for his performance and service during the war. Jim's trip back to the States was a haunting one, as he often recalled. "On the flight, the pilot and I were the only ones alive," he said. The plane was carrying the bodies of fallen soldiers.

The Drakes had one more stop to make before Jim completed his Air Force career, and it was a familiar one. They moved back to Warren AFB, where Jim worked at the OSI office until he retired in 1973, with the rank of master sergeant.

But his federal government service was only half over. Jim joined the Cheyenne VA Medical Center's police department, eventually becoming its chief before his retirement in 1994. Many of his friends in Cheyenne knew him as "Chief," both for his VA service and his Indian heritage. It was a nickname Jim wore proudly, as he had several Native American tattoos on both arms. One of Jim's favorite stories was about a hand-to-hand combat class he took at a VA training school. The instructor chose Jim to help show the class how to get out of a chokehold. As Jim took his place behind the officer, he whispered, "Do you want me to just go through the motions or put it on you?" "Put it on me," the instructor confidently replied, so Jim did. The next thing he knew, the officer was on the ground and then taken to the hospital, where he was OK but chagrined. That was the end of the class for good! Years later, when the officer came to Cheyenne to inspect Jim's security team, he recalled their encounter. "Why on earth did I choose you that day?" he laughed.

Jim had also always wanted to be a cowboy, and living in Cheyenne finally afforded him the chance to own a horse. He fell in love with Lady when he picked her out at a Colorado horse auction, and they enjoyed the next 20 years together. Jim joined the Cheyenne Saddle Tramps and enjoyed showing off Lady at the Frontier Days parade and rodeo events. When she died, Jim buried Lady at a pet cemetery east of Cheyenne. Jim's love of horses led him to learn horseshoeing at Central Wyoming Community College in Riverton.

It was back-breaking work, as well as being kicked and stomped on, but he was a farrier throughout Laramie County for many years.

In addition to his cowboying, Jim renewed his interest in another pursuit he had dreamed of since growing up in Slate Lick: motorcycle riding. Despite the protestations of Bernice, who worried about his safety, Jim bought his first Harley and didn't quit riding until the age of 80. He only had to put the bike down once on the road, he told his family, and he escaped injury.

Jim co-founded a motorcycle group, Brothers Vietnam, with other veterans. He particularly enjoyed helping organize charity motorcycle rides for local organizations like the STRIDE Learning Center. Bernice died after a long illness on July 25, 2008. Her passing left Jim with a void that was never filled. "A day never went by without me thinking about her," Jim often told his family and friends. "I missed her terribly."

Jim is survived by his son, Kerry, daughter-in-law Corryne, and grandson Dylan Drake, all of Cheyenne; a brother, Ray Drake of Hendersonville, Tennessee, and a sister Margie Goodwin of Winter Haven, Florida, and several nieces and nephews. "Dad was a great role model," says his son. "He was the bravest person I've ever known, and his values never wavered." "Jim acted tough, but he was really a teddy bear: kind and generous with a great sense of humor," says Corryne. "He was the best father-in-law anyone could have."

One of Jim's proudest moments came in December 1987, when his only grandson, Dylan, was born. Kerry snapped a photo of their first meeting in Corry's hospital room and it remains a family favorite, because it showed him beaming with love for the newest Drake. Another shows Jim, dressed in his biker duds, and Dylan astride a toy motorcycle in Holiday Park. "Granddad taught me so much," says Dylan. "I'll never forget his laugh, or the kindness he showed everyone. He treated everybody equally, and wherever we went, you could just see how much respect people had for him."

Comments



“ I will be always remember coming home to my Grands' house from college on the weekends and seeing him. We had many great conversations and laughs. I'll miss him and Bernie very much.

Kristen Donovan - February 28, 2021 at 08:33 PM



“ Always enjoyed our talks every night on his porch. Was a true good man.rip good friend

linda fisher - February 25, 2021 at 06:07 PM



“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



WRC - February 24, 2021 at 07:21 PM



“ James Drake with son Kerry and daughter-in-law Corryne.

Kerry Drake - February 27, 2021 at 05:30 PM



“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



WRC - February 24, 2021 at 07:21 PM



“ James Drake visited the Custer Battlefield memorial in Montana in 2008 with his sister Margie Goodwin, grandson Dylan and son Kerry.

Kerry Drake - February 27, 2021 at 05:32 PM



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WRC - February 24, 2021 at 07:21 PM



“ Grandfather Jim Drake sharing a ride on a toy motorcycle with grandson Dylan.

Kerry Drake - February 27, 2021 at 05:34 PM



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WRC - February 24, 2021 at 07:20 PM



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WRC - February 24, 2021 at 07:20 PM



“ Jim Drake on the last motorcycle. He rode until he was 80!

Kerry Drake - February 27, 2021 at 05:35 PM



“ 1 file added to the tribute wall



vclark - February 24, 2021 at 07:19 PM



“ Remember Jim well! I worked at VA for 26 yrs and always enjoyed his dry humor and honesty.

Ann Enlow

Ann C Enlow - February 24, 2021 at 09:44 AM



“ Randall Martin is following this tribute.

Randall Martin - February 21, 2021 at 03:47 PM