Genevieve Bride Mann didn’t want her children to play in the Mortimer Cemetery, but there was no playground or park in the Middletown, Connecticut neighborhood where the Manns lived in the 1930s. And their house didn’t have much of a back yard. So, despite their mother’s protests, Jim and his younger sister, Genevieve, scaled the wall separating the cemetery and the Mann’s property and invaded the ancient burying ground. They had cobbled together a ladder from scrap wood and concealed it behind their garage. Once they had climbed over the wall, they would spend hours racing through the cemetery, ducking behind headstones, re-enacting scenes from the books and movies Jim loved to read and watch. In those games were evident themes that would, in many respects, define his life.

A tall, good-looking boy, gifted with athletic prowess, he was a natural leader. The graveyard games were often based on his growing knowledge of military history. Inevitably he was the hero, fleet of foot, smart, and fearless.

“I want to be a paratrooper.”

Jim Mann was born in 1933 and grew up in a solid, middle class family where service to country, community, and church was highly regarded. His dad, Edward, was comptroller at Holy Apostles Seminary in Cromwell and, later, when the family moved to Cromwell, became a selectman.

Like all Americans then, the Manns were encumbered by the Great Depression. But their home was filled with love, and there was always room for other relatives. Jim and Genevieve and their older brother Bill grew up with their maternal grandparents ever present.

Grandfather Bride listened to the radio incessantly, Genevieve (now Genevieve Mann Dickinson) recalls. She, Jim, and Bill were exposed to news about Europe and the gathering clouds of war every day.

Genevieve vividly remembers the evening of September 1, 1939, when the entire Mann family gathered around the radio to learn that just before dawn Germany had invaded Poland. The Manns listened intently as reporters described how the Polish cities were being heavily bombarded.

Little more than two years later, the family convened around the radio once more to hear the news that Pearl Harbor had been attacked. “No one said anything,” Genevieve remembers. “We just sat there, quiet.”

Bill Mann was 16 then. Three years later he joined the Marines and then, discharged because of a vision problem, signed up with the Army in time to take part in the D-Day invasion. Young Jim, Bill recalls, “was fascinated with the war, and especially with the paratroopers. He’d say ‘I want to be a paratrooper.’ He talked about that almost every night.”

An Effective Leader

But World War II was over long before Jim had an opportunity to serve. He was a student at Middletown High School by the time Bill completed his military service and came home. Active in cross-country, rifle, track, and football, Jim proved to be every bit the athlete he had looked during those childhood games. Captain of the track team, he won second place in the 880-yard dash at the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference (CIAC) Indoor Championship his junior year, 1949. Later that year, at the Hartford Invitational Meet, he set a new record at the same distance.

That was the year he lied about his age and joined the National Guard. When the falsehood was found out, he was discharged. But he was undeterred. In 1951, the year he enrolled in Teachers College of Connecticut, he enlisted in the Army Reserves.

“Jim was a terrific athlete,” recalls Francis
It’s an opinion shared by Mike Beebe, also a first lieutenant under Mann. All the men who served with him."

He spoke well and he was very meticulous in his presentation," recalls John, quick reaction team that relieved or reinforced units during battles. Officer of the 5th Special Forces Group’s 3rd Mobile Strike Force, B-36, a trained, yet he graduated first in his Special Forces class of 220.

Friends and family alike were taken aback by the decision. Even more surprised was his decision to enter Special Forces and become an airborne ranger. At 33, he was much older than most of the soldiers with whom he trained, yet he graduated first in his Special Forces class of 220.

On November 3, 1967 he began a year of service in Vietnam as operations officer of the 5th Special Forces Group’s 3rd Mobile Strike Force, B-36, a quick reaction team that relieved or reinforced units during battles.

Mann quickly earned a positive reputation. “He was older than most of us. He spoke well and he was very meticulous in his presentation,” recalls John Deacy, who served as a first lieutenant under Mann. “He was respected by all the men who served with him.”

It’s an opinion shared by Mike Beebe, also a first lieutenant under Mann. “He was a good soldier,” says Beebe. “He was an amiable and funny guy and well liked, but also respected.”

Patricia Mann recalls that her husband was exhausted when she joined him in Hawaii for two weeks of richly deserved leave in the summer of 1968. But when the leave ended and he returned to Vietnam he was just a couple months away from completing his year of service.

“His Team Was in Trouble”

Only it was not to be. October 3, 1968 dawned, hot, and humid at B-36. With less than a month left “in country,” Jim Mann had begun pulling his gear together. But he still had a team to support. And that morning he got his opportunity.

Soldiers on a reconnaissance mission had encountered North Vietnamese forces in jungle terrain about eight miles southwest of Thien Ngon, near the Cambodian border. They were pinned down in a fierce fire fight and sent an emergency request for more ammunition.

The 117th Assault Helicopter Company dispatched a Huey – the workhorse of military helicopters during the war – in response. No one knows why Mann volunteered to accompany the chopper’s four-man crew. But his sister believes he was motivated by the same instincts that had made him a successful athlete. “His team was in trouble,” she says. “He had to be there for them.”

The crew’s objective seemed simple. They were to locate the ground forces, swoop in low, and kick the boxes of ammo out the door. But as the chopper near the site, it was hit by enemy fire, collided with trees and crashed upside down and ablaze. Four of the men aboard were killed. Only the pilot survived and was rescued. The ammunition they were delivering, however, helped to turn the tide of the battle, and the North Vietnamese forces eventually retreated into the dense jungle.

The next day lieutenant Deacy volunteered to join the team sent to recover the bodies. Mann’s remains, mostly destroyed by the intense fire, were found under the burned helicopter’s fuselage.

On Thursday, October 24, 1968, Fran Monnes eulogized his friend for the student body of Cromwell High School. Jim Mann’s funeral was held at the Coughlin Funeral Home in Middletown the next morning, followed by a requiem at St. John’s Church in Cromwell. Then Mann was laid to rest in St. John’s Cemetery.

Not Forgotten

Jim Mann’s story did not end there, however. On May 29, 1969, a street at Cromwell High School was named in his memory. At the dedication ceremony Monnes, who was instrumental in getting the street named and marked with monuments, once again recalled his old friend.

Twenty-seven years after Mann’s death, a portrait of him was unveiled during a Cromwell High School Veteran’s Day ceremony in 1995. Veterans who had known Mann were astonished when his son, Jim, who bears a striking resemblance to his father, walked into the gymnasium with his mother and brother. The portrait now hangs permanently in the school, where Mann’s niece, Barbara O’Rourke, has taught for many years.

In early June 1999, several hundred bone fragments excavated from the crash site were positively identified as belonging to Mann and another member of the crew. And on the morning of July 13, 1999, following a funeral at Memorial Chapel, Fort Myer, VA, a horse-drawn carriage brought the remains to Arlington, where a 21-gun salute honored the heroes who had been away from home for too long. “It was a very emotional ceremony,” says Bill Mann. “It was a day that brought final closure for all of us.”

Jim Mann lived on in the memories of his family and friends and former colleagues, and in the memories of the veterans who served with him in Vietnam and recall the man and his sacrifice.

“I think of Jim often,” says Falafia, Mann’s friend and colleague at Cromwell High. “He was a great friend, and it was a big shock when he went to Vietnam. He left a big hole.”