

Rev. Robert R. Brett, SM

U.S. Navy Chaplain

During his time in Vietnam, Lt. Robert Raymond Brett, SM, always stood firm – firm in his faith, firm in his duty, and firm in his devotion to his men. He would be there to provide whatever care his Marines needed, whether it be physical, emotional, or spiritual, regardless of what was going on around him. That was why he had joined the Navy: to be where the men in combat needed him most.

According to his family, Bob had always wanted to be a priest. Born in 1936, Bob and his four siblings, Joseph, Francis, Rosemary, and Anastasia, grew up in the Philadelphia area, where he attended Catholic schools before entering the seminary at St. Mary's Manor in Pennsylvania. He made his profession in the Society of Mary in 1956 and then went on to study at Catholic University in Washington, D.C. He graduated with a bachelor's in philosophy in 1958 and was ordained at the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in 1962. Shortly thereafter, he earned a master's degree in Latin.

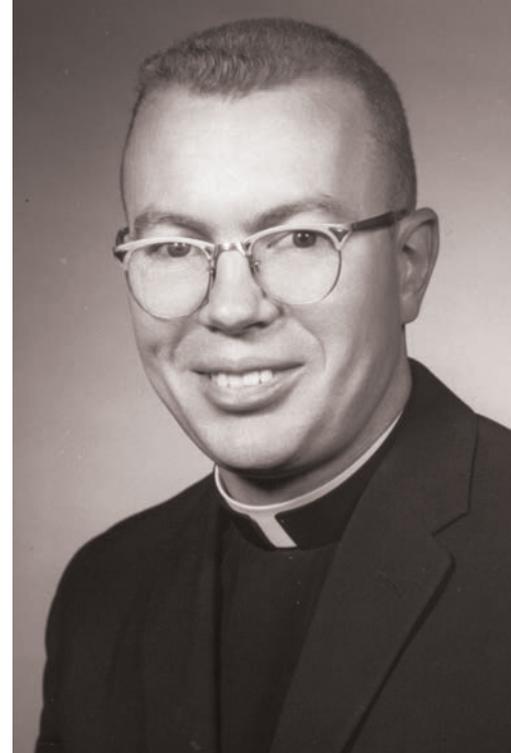
Five years after his ordination, he realized that he needed to do more to support the men and women serving in Vietnam. He joined the Navy as a chaplain. After chaplaincy training in Newport, Rhode Island and Marine training at Camp Pendleton, the now Lt. Robert Brett requested overseas duty and assignment to a Marine unit in Vietnam.

It was customary for each infantry battalion to be assigned a chaplain, and Father Brett was assigned to the 26th Marine Regiment stationed at Phu Bai. He arrived in Vietnam in September 1967 and moved to Khe Sanh with the 26th Regiment in January 1968. He was well-liked and highly regarded by the men he served. The men respected him because they saw him wherever they were, not only at the Masses he performed every Sunday. While his base was at Hill 558, where the 26th Regiment had their command post, it was common for Father

Bob, as the Marines called him, to be out at the Marine positions, regardless of weather or enemy fire. In his book *Walk With Me: A Vietnam Experience*, Lt. Col. Jerry Kurth remembered the risks that Father Bob was willing to take to minister to the men of the 26th Regiment after they had suffered an attack that caused many casualties: "Around 7 a.m. a couple of choppers arrive at Hill 558 to pick up the replacements. Just as the last replacements board, Father Brett runs up to a chopper and tells the pilot that he will be accompanying the replacements. He never bothers to ask permission or seek approval; he just feels he is needed on Hill 861A after their ordeal."

For most of Father Bob's time in Vietnam, Private First Class (Pfc) Alexander Chin could often be found right next to him. Chin was a 24-year old Pfc Marine from Maryland who, because of his religious beliefs, had transferred to a non-combatant post. He was not willing to take another life, but he stood by Father Bob and together they risked their lives ministering to their Marines. The two performed every conceivable religious duty, from baptisms and communions to confessions and last rites. As the base was being attacked, Father Bob would have to perform multiple Masses to make sure all could attend. He sometimes said Mass ten times a day, and each service was always packed. Kurth called him "utterly tireless as well as utterly fearless." Before his death in 2011, Kurth told Father Bob's family that Father Bob moved around to be with his troops, regardless of what any commanding officer ordered.

The Siege of Khe Sanh began in January 1968, just after Father Bob and the 26th Regiment had arrived in the area. North Vietnamese Army (NVA) forces attacked the Marine base on January 21, beginning a massive coordinated attack that would last for 77 days and take the lives of more than 200 American troops. As always, Father Bob was in the thick of the action, ministering to his Marines.



On February 22, Father Bob and Pfc. Chin were at the Khe Sanh Combat Base awaiting helicopter transport back to the command post at Hill 558. Kurth had not wanted Father Bob to leave Hill 558 but relented when Father Bob accused him of "preventing him from doing his duty as a priest." As the chopper landed and Father Bob and the others made their way to it, NVA rockets began hitting the base. As the rocket fire increased, Father Bob told the helicopter to take off. He headed back to the trenches, with Chin at his side. Almost immediately upon their arrival at the trench, a rocket struck directly on the trench. When the smoke of the rocket attack cleared, eight men lay dead in the trench, including Father Bob and Chin.

Father Bob was buried on the grounds of the seminary he had attended, and Chin was laid to rest in a family plot in Princess Anne, Maryland. In 1998, the Brett family moved Father Bob to Chaplain's Hill in Arlington National Cemetery. As a sign of their gratitude for the faith, devotion, and courage of Chin, they petitioned to have him buried right beside the chaplain. In 1999, Chin was buried with full military honors on Chaplain's Hill. Father Bob and Chin are side by side, just as they were so often in Vietnam.

Article adapted from : Lark, Lisa A. *All They Left Behind: Legacies of the Men and Women on the Wall*. M.T. Publishing Company, Inc., 2012