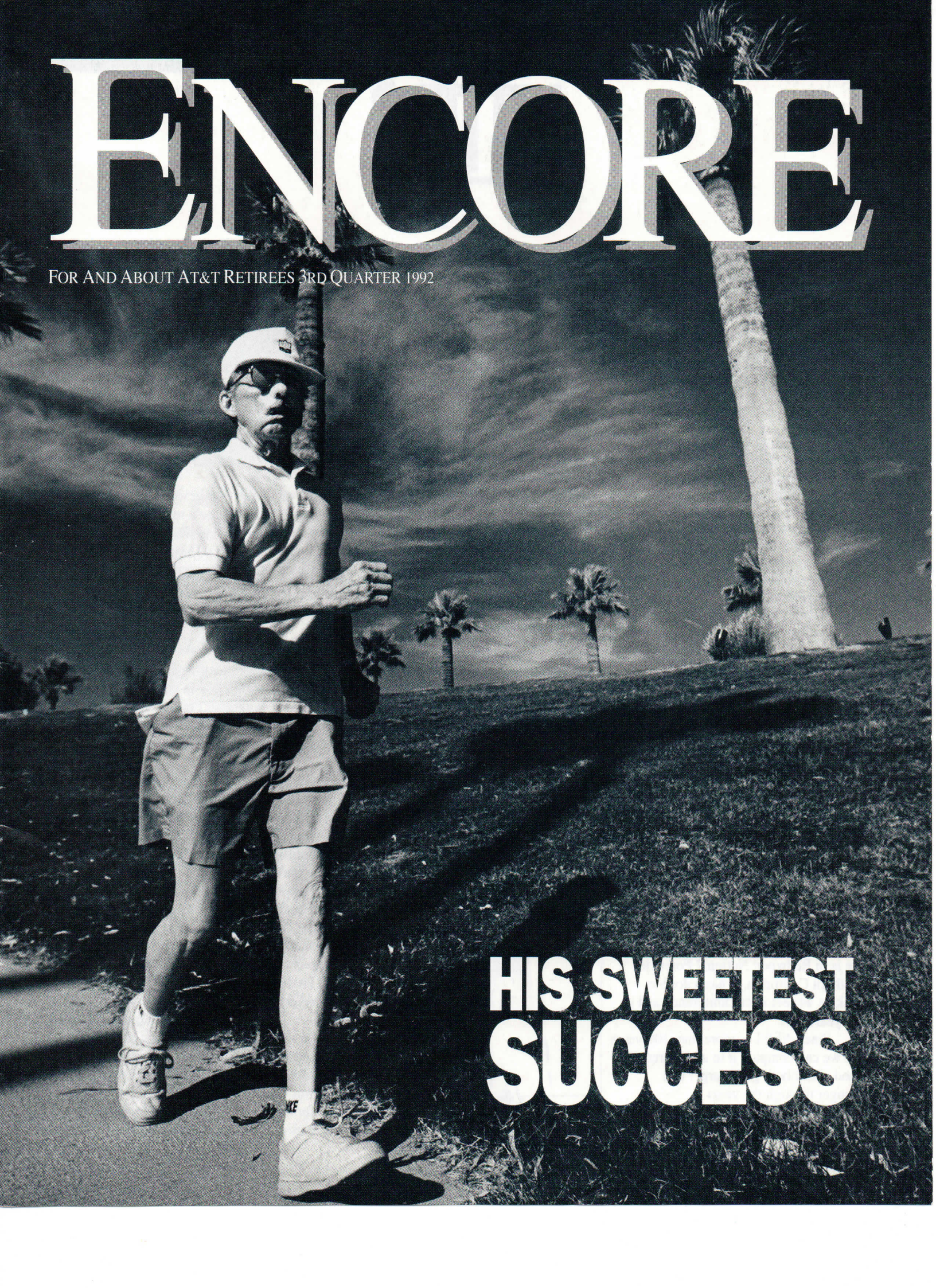


ENCORE



FOR AND ABOUT AT&T RETIREES 3RD QUARTER 1992

**HIS SWEETEST
SUCCESS**

HIS SWEETEST SUCCESS

Bang. The runners lunge forward. No. 911 struggles to put one foot in front of the other. His gait is stiff, jerky. His breath comes hard and even.

Jim McKindles is No. 911 and the race is his first. Within seconds he's certain he hasn't a chance to win. He plods along helplessly through the light drizzle that cools the asphalt of the high school track in Tempe, Ariz. As 16 men, younger and stronger, strut smartly ahead of him to a sweaty victory, Jim wonders, "What am I doing here?"

Eleven minutes and 10 seconds later, breathing heavily, he staggers across the finish line. Dejected, Jim doesn't linger to hear the results. Whoever won the Governor's Cup in the annual Dorothy Garske Fitness Race, it certainly wasn't him. With Norma, his wife, he cuts a quick path to his tan 1992 Buick Century. The drive home is quiet. Jim's brief excursion into race walking is ended. His dream of competing in the Senior Olympics later that month dies. He is a loser.

Two days later, his blisters and ego healing, Jim called the coach to ask for his time. "Where do you want me to send the cup?" asked the coach.

Jim was surprised. "You've got the wrong guy. I didn't win a cup."

Oh, but he did. Jim was so new to race walking he didn't know walkers are grouped by age. He had placed first in the 65-69 age category. Fourteen days after his unexpected victory, Jim put his sneakers to the asphalt again, this time at the Arizona Senior Olympics in Phoenix. The result? An improved time of 11:01 minutes and a bronze medal. Jim was a winner. This time he knew it. And he knew who to thank.

AN INTRIGUING LETTER

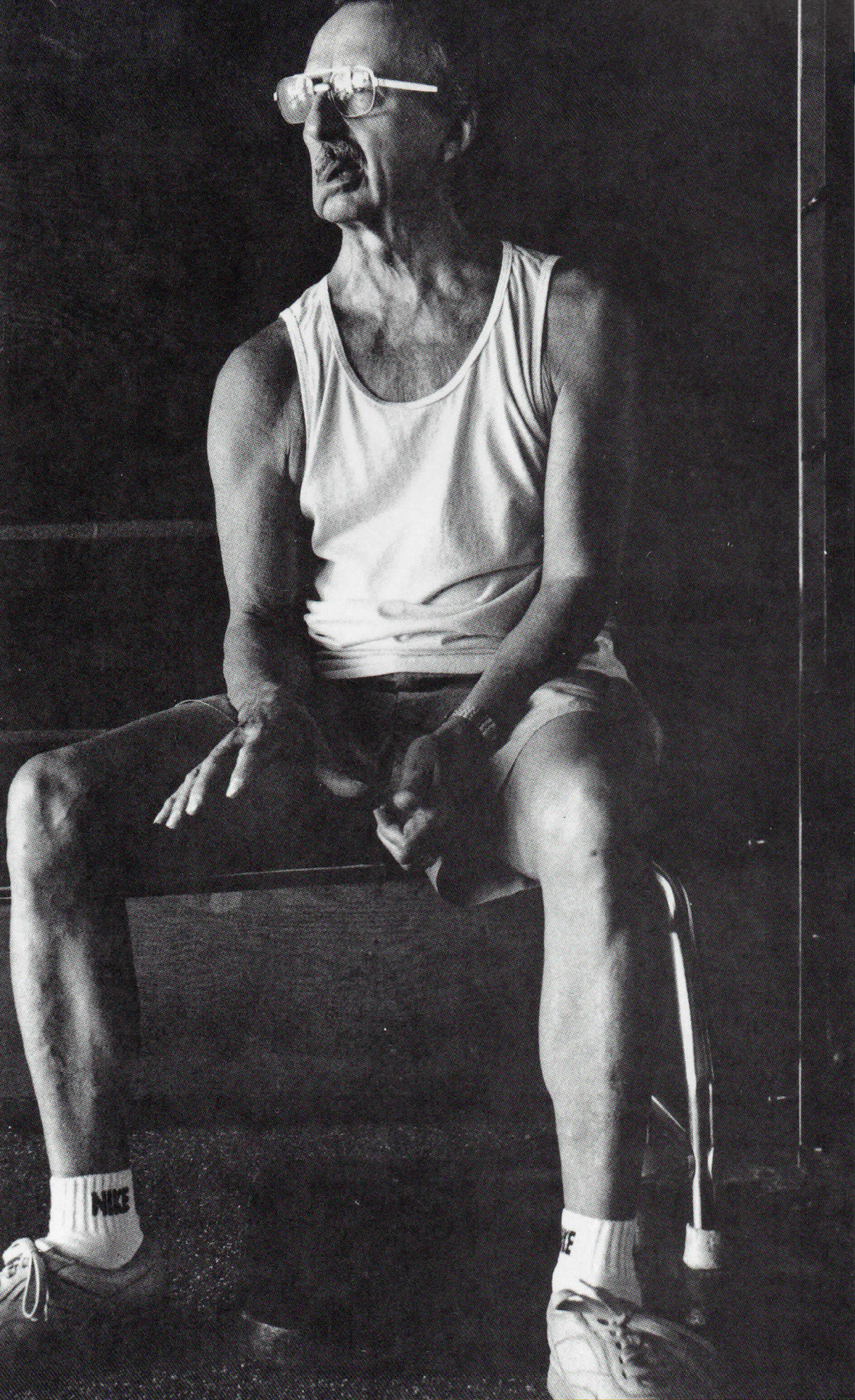
I've never seen Jim race. Never cheered him on. Still, he wrote me. His letter took four days to journey from Arizona to my desk in New Jersey. As editor of *Encore* magazine, I get lots of letters from AT&T retirees. I read them immediately. Jim's was no exception.

"I'm not by nature a braggadocio," he penciled, "but I've just accomplished something that I'm not likely to accomplish again, so I'm blowing my own horn." A brief chronology of Jim's life followed. I got goosebumps reading it. I wanted to know more, so I picked up the phone.

Within minutes, I was intrigued. Within a month, I was on my



Photographs by Peter Vidor



**DISABLED IN HIS
TWENTIES, RETIREE
JIM MCKINDLES
REALIZES HIS BOY-
HOOD DREAM TO
EXCEL IN A SPORT
THROUGH TWO
HARD-WON RACE-
WALKING VICTORIES**



Jim relied on Norma's strength during his long recuperation. "She never babied me," he says.

way to Phoenix. There I was to learn that, even though he raised three kids, still calls his wife of 50 years "sweetie pie" and had an AT&T career that packed a two-inch memory book, a victory on a Phoenix race track brought Jim McKindles his sweetest success. It was, for him, a victory in his older years over a body that let him down in his youth.

I arranged to meet Jim at the outskirts of the retirement community of Sun Lakes where he and Norma have lived for seven years. I drove my rented white LeBaron right past Jim as he flagged me. I almost didn't recognize him. I'd been expecting a cane or some other sign of his disability. Tanned, lean and lively, neatly dressed in gray-blue slacks and a matching knit shirt, Jim didn't appear disabled. Until I saw his

face.

The left side is handsome. The paralyzed right side sags in folds. Special glasses hide a useless eye. Other scars are not so visible. Jim's left ear hasn't heard a pin drop in 40 years. His balance is off and he can't always coordinate both sides of his body.

Jim sidesteps sympathy with quick wit. "Don't step on the grass," he teases as I tiptoe over the tiny white stone "lawn" of his two-bedroom ranch home.

A LOOK BACKWARDS

Inside, it's cool and tidy. Outside, cactus sparrows twitter. Jim and Norma settle on a soft sofa and chair, sipping hot coffee, a bit unsure what to expect. In the next few hours they will relive 50 years of their lives—and

the trauma they've shared.

For me, their story starts in February 1942, on the day they met in Meyer's Rex-all Drug Store in northwest Detroit, Mich. The only crisis Jim and Norma faced then was World War II, which the United States had just entered. Norma, 17, an orphan raised by sister Evelyn Kolak, had dropped out of school to work as a waitress in Meyer's. Jim roomed with the drug store's short-order cook who introduced them. Although they'll celebrate their golden wedding anniversary in October, they still remember the moment. "She was an everlovin' doll. She still is," says Jim. Norma, petite and blonde to this day, recalls his "cute smile and nice eyes." She walks to their bedroom and gets a framed photo of a shyly smiling young man in uniform. "He

was very handsome," she says softly, handing it to me.

In 1942, Jim was new to Detroit—and to cities. His father was a lumberjack and Jim grew up in Upper Peninsula in the far north of Michigan. The year before, with only a high school diploma and youthful optimism, he boarded the Duluth South Shore and Atlantic Railroad and headed 600 miles south to Detroit.

With young men going off to war and industry gearing up for it, jobs were plentiful in the early '40s. Detroit had mobilized to produce war materials. AT&T's Western Electric had expanded, too, to meet the increasing demand for phone service. It had yo-yoed from 87,000 employees in 1929 to 20,000 during the Depression to 94,000 in 1944—and would continue to climb to more than 200,000 in the early '70s. When Jim met Norma he was living a nomadic work life installing equipment to route telephone calls for Western Electric. They got engaged July 3.

"Don't you two get married before he goes in the service," Jim's mother, Minnie, warned when he brought Norma home to visit.

A WARTIME WEDDING

Of course, that's what they did—on Oct. 3, 1942, two weeks short of Norma's 18th birthday. The honeymoon was brief. The groom soon found himself in Fort Sheridan, Ill., in basic training for the Army Signal Corps.

Fifty years later, Jim has few war stories. His job was to establish a moving Teletype communication network for the troops. His unit, the 69th Signal Battalion, moved constantly around Europe—Germany, France, England, Scotland—but it was no tour. "I didn't know where I was half the time."

"It went on and on and on," sighs Norma, who retired her apron to solder wires at an airplane factory.

The war ended in August 1945 and Jim hopped off a train in Detroit in time to celebrate his third wedding anniversary and return to his job. At age 23, he was one of the lucky ones. He survived the war—three years of it. But, back at work with Western Electric, fate was to cast him in another role, one of pain and disability. What a German shell didn't do, a U.S. surgeon's knife would.

Later they would learn that the tumor

had been growing for years. But it hit with little warning. Jim's first clue came in the early spring of 1951 when he was installing wire in a girls' dorm. "I was getting kind of dizzy. If I knelt down and got up fast, my head would swim. Like when you blow up a child's balloon. You blow and blow and blow and all of a sudden you're lightheaded. That's the way it felt."

Doctors did a lot of tests. They shot ice water into Jim's ears. They blindfolded him and had him walk on an air mattress. "Do you realize your right eye is protruding?" they asked. "I looked. I couldn't see it," Jim says.

A tumor was growing in Jim's brain. "You better get that taken care of or you might go insane," warned a doctor at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minn.

Jim and Norma were new parents then. Son James (who works for AT&T as an installer in San Francisco) was 5 years

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old; daughter Catherine, only 2. Jim and Norma worried more about money than illness. "There were no company-paid hospital benefits then," Jim says.

AN INVALID AT AGE 29

On a hot summer day, Jim drove 575 miles north to the Mayo Clinic. He didn't believe the doctor who said he'd need a ride home. "I can drive myself," Jim said.

Doctors cut open the area of Jim's brain behind his right ear. Nine hours later, they removed a tumor the size of a peach. So much for driving himself home. Jim fought for his life for eight days. The leaves would be turning colors by the time Norma pushed his wheelchair out of the clinic.

The severity of the injury stunned them both. The tumor was gone, but doctors

had to cut nerves to remove it. Jim couldn't hear out of one ear. He couldn't see out of one eye. He couldn't walk. His left arm and leg were paralyzed. He couldn't even lift his head. Later, doctors would operate to repair the damage, but it would be too late. At age 29, with two toddlers, Jim McKindles faced life as an invalid.

"Jim was depressed. I was depressed. We were both depressed. It was horrible," Norma remembers.

Jim started physical therapy as soon as he was out of danger. He couldn't pull a 3-pound weight. "I just didn't care," he says. "The doctor chewed me out."

Norma prodded, too. "He's got two kids at home. They need him. He's got to get better," she replied when Minnie urged her to let up.

She never did. "Norma's responsible for a lot of my rehabilitation," says Jim. "She never babied me. She made me do things."

That night Jim squeezed and squeezed on the bars of his hospital bed. "The next day I could pull 30 pounds. The therapist couldn't believe it."

"That's the positive side of him," Norma says. "If it's a challenge, he'll do it." "I like that word positive," Jim jokes. "I've been hearing stubborn all the time."

For two hours, I listened to Norma and Jim, caught up in their past. Only lunch brings us back to the present. Norma suggests the community center. "It's not fancy," she warns.

The food at the center is plain—and good. Forty-five minutes later, we're back in the car for a short tour. Jim points to a golf cart crossing that tunnels under Riggs Road. "That's one place I've got to take my bike." Jim has gained a measure of distinction in the neighborhood tooting around on his tricycle.

Back home, he urges me to try the trike. "You either take to it or you don't," he counsels. I don't. Instead, I opt for a soft seat in the living room.

A TURNING POINT

We had left off Jim's story just after his operation. He and Norma were coping with two youngsters, piles of medical bills and Jim's adjustment. They needed help badly.

In his letter, Jim wrote, "I never could have made it if it weren't for that turning point back in the fall of 1952 when both the Western Electric Co. and the Detroit area

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employees demonstrated their faith in me and set me up so I could prove my performance."

Physical therapy helped. Jim advanced from a wheelchair to crutches to a cane, which he eventually discarded. His "remarkable attitude" helped him cope with stares from strangers. "He had been a real handsome man," Norma says. "People asked what happened. It used to make me mad. But he'd just tell them."

(He even jokes about it—recounting for me a story about the photographer at daughter Catherine's wedding who painted an eye into his picture. "He thought he was doing me a favor. I just laughed.")

Jim and Norma drew strength from others. Jim's co-workers held a benefit to raise money for the hospital bills. Norma's brother-in-law, Bruce Kolak, put money into their checking account. Friends from work mowed their lawn.

Jim was especially buoyed when he returned to work 18 months after his operation. Not to his old job as an installer, but to one he liked even more—a promotion to labor estimator in installation. From there, he moved to Human Resources, hiring handicapped and minority people. Jim and Norma had a third child, Lynn, in 1959. Lynn now lives in nearby Tempe, and is the mother of 18-month-old Joey, the youngest of their nine grandchildren.

A PROUD CAREER

Nothing speaks more eloquently of Jim's AT&T career than the memory book he hands me. Co-workers gave him the book of farewell notes when he retired 12 years ago at age 58. I flip through it.

One message stands out: "You must get tremendous gratification from our trips to McGettigan's office, knocking down the door to make the young disabled Marine vet, John, number one on our hiring list. I still get tears in my eyes when I picture him climbing the stairs on those blown-away stumps, carrying his wheelchair (could have been anyone's son, ruined for a useless war)," wrote George Makara, who worked

with Jim then.

Surely there's a story here. Jim explains that John, a teen-ager who lost both legs in Vietnam, was so determined to apply for a job at Western Electric's Michigan Service Center that he ran up the steps to Jim's employment office, trailing his wheelchair behind him.

"We put John in the shop. When he left the first day, I looked out the window and he was doing wheelies in the parking lot. He was so happy. It was the first job he ever had."

A note from Bill and Dee King reads, "I was always aware of the health problems, especially the big one years ago in 1952. But you never complained and with the wonderful help from your family and friends you battled back. I admired the courage and strength you showed during that period."

AN UNFULFILLED DREAM

Despite his disability, Jim led an almost normal life. But one thing was missing—call it a boyhood dream: Jim always wanted to excel in a sport.

Success on the ski slopes eluded him as a youngster, probably because of the growing tumor. "Every time I'd go off the jump, I'd fall," he says. After the operation, it was impossible for a man who could barely balance himself to grip a golf club, to swim or even to throw a baseball to his son.

Characteristically, Jim channeled his frustration into helping others. He organized the local shinny ice hockey players into Plymouth's first real team.

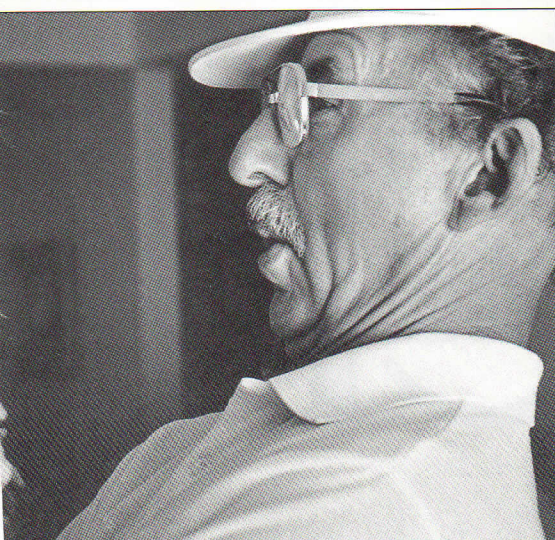
Still, the desire to compete in a sport remained strong, surfacing again when he left Plymouth and retired to a leisure community.

Jim would rise early each day and cycle to the community gym. He'd work out and walk for an hour.

Last year Jim met a coach who encouraged him to race walk. Jim was tired of sitting on the sidelines. He was tired of being a spectator. He accepted the

Race walking is as much a part of Jim's routine as cajoling Joey, his youngest grandchild.





'JIM TOLD ME IT TOOK HIM UNTIL HE WAS 69 TO COMPETE IN A SPORT AND— THEN TO WIN— THAT'S GRAVY.'

challenge.

To appreciate his accomplishment, it helps to understand how hard it is for Jim to balance himself and to coordinate both sides of his body. For example, he can't get his bearings in the dark without a night light.

"At practice sessions I knew I couldn't walk a straight line. I walk very awkwardly. It's like being drunk."

But, he persevered, drawing on his much-repeated motto: "You've got to do the best you can with what you've got." Besides, he's had a 40-year head start on infirmity. "I watch other people. There are an awful lot of awkward walkers. These old people have lots of other ailments." So Jim adopted his own style of race walking, which includes a little skip-jump. "I'm not fluid. I'm very jerky."

His style serves him well. On Feb. 22, Jim stopped being a spectator and became a victor. Like the champagne he celebrated with after the race, victory tasted sweet. Jim hopes to compete again at the state level next year and win a spot in the national Senior Olympics.

"Jim told me it took him until he was 69 to compete in a sport and—then to win—that's gravy," Norma says.

It's almost 5:30 p.m. Outside, the shadows lengthen as the sun sinks into the desert sand. I had asked earlier if their triumph over tragedy had forged a philosophy. Norma struggled for the right word, but it eluded her then.

Now it comes. "Compassion. That's it. We try to put ourselves in somebody else's place and realize what they're going through."

Once, Norma asked her brother-in-law how she could repay all the people who helped them. He told her, "Do things for other people."

Maybe that's why Jim wrote *Encore* hoping for a small article about his race-walking victory. "Most of my fellow employees are retired. They probably would read *Encore*."

"I wanted to thank them," he says. "They stood me on my two feet and they pointed me in the right direction. They gave me my job. I want to get the message to them that I won this medal. That I am still on my own two feet and going in the right direction."

—Cathy Fee