

# The Lords of the Ring

## Citadel cadet inspired by uncle's legacy

BY ROB YOUNG  
The Post and Courier

Jim Tarkenton, Citadel Class of 1964, guitarist, soldier, friend, strong and true, would be 64 this year.

He died in Vietnam instead, leaving behind a mother who couldn't stop crying, a father who blamed himself and a 16-year-old kid who simply missed his brother.

His class ring left a legacy.

A yearbook photo shows him in uniform, the band protruding beneath a white glove.

Another wears it now as a vestige, a tribute to the man, his service, their blood.

Truly, the decoration is an unnecessary reminder. A mirror suffices.

Check the hairline, eyes, complexion and attire. Chase Tarkenton resembles his uncle, right down to the ring.

"When you're wearing your uniform, you're representing not just your school, but you're representing a lineage of people before you," Chase says. "Wearing his ring adds to that."

Chase, 23, graduates from The Citadel today, though he considers himself a member of the junior class. He attended another university as a freshman before transferring to the school, where he endured the rigors of knob year with the Class of 2007.

Stripped of comfort and identity, Chase sweated and struggled beside this crew. Upperclassmen broke them, then built them. They grew up together, like other knob classes.

Most cadets get class rings their final year at the school. Chase chose not to wear a 2006 ring because it lacks meaning. His loyalty lies with his class.

"It's a symbol of going through four years of hell, especially the freshman year," says Eason Chapman, who graduated with Jim Tarkenton. "You had to work together to get through it. The only friends you had were your freshman friends."

Still, in keeping with Citadel tradition, Chase wanted a ring. His father, Scott Tarkenton, understood, and made an offer. Wear Jim's, he said.

### 'Tark'

Jim's ring serves as more than an heirloom; it's a gift.

It allows Chase to negotiate the distance between them.

He gives campus tours as a public affairs officer, showing visitors the ring, describing his uncle.

He speaks to Jim's old friends and classmates, searching them out at Citadel functions. They'll tell him about "Tark," a fun-loving, handsome cadet, about the Corvette he drove, how he loved his guitar, Elvis Presley and folk songs.

They'll tell him about the time a few classmates dragged a 12-foot alligator into the barracks, how it crept near Jim's door.

"Jim started playing guitar," Chapman recalls. "He hoped the noise would get him to leave."

Sometimes, like his father, they might even tell Chase about 1st Lt. James C. Tarkenton III.

He fulfilled a two-year commitment to the Army, serving



Chase Tarkenton has honored his uncle, a soldier who died in Vietnam, by wearing his 1964 Citadel class ring.

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Chase Tarkenton points out his uncle's name on a Summerall Chapel plaque, which is reserved for cadets killed in action.

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some in Korea, then volunteered for Vietnam. Jim felt obliged, his brother Scott remembers, because so many others tried to avoid service.

In his last letter home, Jim wrote that if a soldier survived the first six weeks, his chances of surviving the tour were pretty good.

He died March 19, 1967, roughly 1½ months after arriving in Vietnam. Jim's company commander had taken leave, placing Jim in charge. His troops came under sniper fire, and Jim accompanied a foot patrol to flush out their attackers. It was an ambush. A command-detonated Claymore mine exploded, killing many in the group.

Jim was 25. His death left their mother distraught and led their father to question himself. Jim came from a military family. His dad fought in World War II and Korea, eventually retiring as a colonel.

Scott, too, would go on to attend Texas A&M and spend seven years in the Army.

Their father had encouraged Jim to stay in the service until he



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Jim Tarkenton's nephew now wears his ring.

settled on a career.

"That took a toll on him," Scott says.

### Postponement

Scott calls to mind his brother and family from his home in Raleigh. Jim's senior year portrait hangs on a wall. His engraved lighter, recovered incredibly enough nearly two years after his death by one of his pallbearers, an Army major who found it on a dead North Vietnamese soldier,

rests among the keepsakes.

Chase grew up with the memories and stories, visiting The Citadel as an eighth-grader with his family. He watched a military dress parade and traced his uncle's name on a Summerall Chapel plaque, reserved for cadets killed in action. The school, and the challenge of attending, compelled him.

"It's like being that little kid. You're standing on the edge of the deep end on the diving board," Chase says. "You're scared to death, but you still want to jump."

He started preparing for The Citadel in high school, playing lacrosse and football, doing push-ups and sit-ups nightly. The summer following his senior year, he went on five- and six-mile runs, waking up early to avoid the heat. He wore combat boots in the evenings for other jogs, emulating cadet training.

Pain developed in his left leg, but Chase persevered until it grew unbearable. A scan revealed a crack in his bone where blood had begun to pool. The verdict: a stress fracture. If he continued to run, doctors told him, the leg would snap.

His injury forced The Citadel to deny him admission for liability concerns just days before enrollment. Chase broke down.

"I was in hysterics. I had Citadel flags, pennants up in my room," he says. "I ripped everything off the walls, flipped over chairs in my room. I was about to put a hole in the wall."

Chase attended East Carolina University in Greenville, N.C., as a last recourse, enjoying surroundings different from The Citadel's spartan environment. He walked to Krispy Kreme and Wendy's, and went out in the evenings to bars and clubs.

He gained 20 pounds. "I was a complete slug," he says. "But he still thought of The Cita-



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Jim Tarkenton's relatives and classmates knew him as a handsome, diligent young man. He died in Vietnam at age 25, three years after graduating from The Citadel.

del. He placed a school sticker on his car to remind him and set his computer's desktop background to show cadets marching in a dress parade.

He wanted to return, making arrangements to transfer after his freshman year. He started training again, and once more, he felt familiar pain. A visit to an orthopedist exposed the cause — a collapsing arch, which caused the fracture.

Overweight and out of shape, Chase faced a decision. He realized if he told The Citadel of his injury, it would again refuse him admittance. He never made the call.

"I said let's do it," he recalls. "If it breaks, it's not meant to be."

He wore custom orthotics, breaking them in during what cadets call Hell Week, a brutal indoctrination to knob year. He shed his excessive weight within the month.

"I was getting yelled at. I was sweating my guts out," Chase says. "This was what I'd been waiting for."

He was the ultimate ghost knob, a nickname given to first-year, gung-ho cadets, the ones who blend in seamlessly. His company thought the same, rewarding Chase by selecting him as its top knob.

### An honor

The Citadel ring has scarcely changed through the years. Like the institution, its symbolism endures.

It forms a circle, attaching the school, its graduates — both young and old, and in this instance, one family.

Jim died before his brother married; the uncle never knew his nephew, though his former classmates mind the gap.

They make yearly donations to the school in Jim's memory, and Chapman even visited Chase his first year at The Citadel, arriving from his home in Florence.

"When I heard Chase was there, I had to go see him," Chapman says. "Jim was a special person, a special friend of mine. I still think about him a lot."

Through Chase, his father also connects with his brother's friends, discovering new details and stories, combining their recollections with his.

"They're not bad memories," Scott says. "They're just sad memories."

Chase will return to the school in October to get his own ring in a ceremony alongside the 2007 class. But unlike his uncle, he chose not to go into the military, opting instead for a career in real estate.

No matter. Jim's ring completes a link begun a generation past.

"He took pride in his uniform. He did his job," Chase says. "I feel like I'm the same way. It's been a real honor to wear it."

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## Van Zandt, 'The Sopranos' consigliere, out to save garage rock

BY FRAZIER MOORE  
Associated Press

NEW YORK — Steven Van Zandt, who plays Tony's pompadoured consigliere on "The Sopranos," prepared for the role back when the series began with knowingness remarkable for a first-time actor.

"Little Steven," of course, was a career rock 'n' roller: a performer and recording artist in his own right as well as a member of boyhood chum Bruce Springsteen's E Street Band.

But he transformed himself into Silvio Dante with the knack of a seasoned thespian. On his head he swapped out his signature bandanna for a full-out coifed hairpiece. Clad himself in mob-certified finery. Packed on 50 pounds. "All the outside stuff," Van Zandt sums up.

"Then I wrote a biography of

Silvio: Lifelong friend of Tony ... probably the only person who's not afraid of him and can be honest with him ... kind of the ambassador and diplomat of the family."

Along the way, Van Zandt nailed down a theory of acting: "We all have every single personality trait inside of us," he says. "The craft of acting is finding it, awakening it and giving it off — inhabiting the particular characteristics in the script."

It could have been intimidating. "But I am this OTHER guy," Van Zandt chortles, "and I am interacting with guys in THEIR characters. That made me fearless!"

Though seldom front-and-center, Silvio has been a cornerstone of "The Sopranos" since it premiered on HBO in January 1999. For viewers as well as for Tony, he's a trusty companion and truth-teller. Somehow, Silvio helps normalize

Tony for the audience. For a series where characters are painfully dispensable, Silvio is as vital as anyone in Tony's world. And especially now. Alliances are eroding and tensions are mounting as the series barrels toward its finish next season. ("The Sopranos" airs Sundays at 9 p.m.)

"Silvio has a certain clarity that I admire and envy, and wish I had more of in real life," Van Zandt, 55, says with obvious affection, then confides, "It's easier to play him than to be me. It's a mental vacation. It's my meditation. God, am I gonna miss that!"

Escape on the "Sopranos" set is welcome, he explains, as a respite from what he calls his real, 10-hour-a-day job. Or should he call it his sacred mission? Turns out, Little Steven is a way-cool zealot, a wavy-gravy crusader bent on saving rock 'n' roll.

His two-hour weekly radio ministry is "Little Steven's Underground Garage," which he programs, hosts and syndicates to 200 markets for a flock of more than a million. (It airs in the Lowcountry on WRFQ 104.5 from 10 p.m. to midnight Sundays.)

His overarching gospel: Radio today makes no room for garage rock. Constrictive formats squeeze out promising rookies, and bands that made their bones decades ago.

What does Van Zandt mean by garage rock? "The Rolling Stones are the archetype," he says. "Classic singles? 'Louie Louie' by the Kingsmen, 'Gloria' by Them. Just

picture that in your mind and you got it."

"Underground Garage" reflects Van Zandt's unified field theory as he celebrates Cream, Gene Vincent, The Yardbirds, the New York Dolls, the Ramones, Bo Diddley — all part of rock's standard repertoire — plus up-and-comers you never heard of until Little Steven's show.

"We've introduced 120 new bands in the last four years," he says proudly, counting among them Jet, the Hives and the Strokes.

Cool and avuncular, Little Steven is a man who knows rock inside and out. On "Underground Garage," he throws a weekly rock seminar and dance party.

"After 'The Sopranos' first season, and the Springsteen E Street Band reunion, I figured I had some celebrity capital for a minute, and I said, 'Let me use it to put rock

'n' roll back on the radio.' And, sure enough, everybody turned me down."

"We fought for a year, then started out with 25 stations" in April 2002. Even now, with a robust audience (plus two networks he programs for Sirius satellite radio), "it's still a war," he says. "An absolute revolution. And we could use another couple of sponsors."

Rock is our common cultural heritage, he argues, meant for savoring and nourishing and passing along.

"You got to cover the essentials, what's cool, and what you want the next generation to get a chance to hear. This isn't being nostalgic. You get an 11-year-old and play 'Well-Respected Man' by the Kinks or 'Satisfaction' by the Stones, and guess what? That kid feels the same way WE did. Nothing changes!"