May 27, 2016

To Friends of Norman Lane,

The 1960 United States Census reported the population of Haywood County, Tennessee – including the county seat of Brownsville and the town of Stanton – to be 23,393, of whom 61% were African-American. The population of Brownsville was 5,424, and 458 people lived in Stanton. By 1970, the county population had decreased by over 16%, though more people (7,011, a nearly 30% increase) were now living in Brownsville. Most significantly, the changing African-American population – which decreased by more than 3,600 persons during the decade of 1960-1970 – can account for 95% of the total decrease in population, countywide.

On that demographic background, over the period Wednesday, November 17, 1965, to Monday, August 17, 1970, – exactly four years and nine months – thirteen Haywood County men died in the Vietnam War. The first was Platoon Sergeant William A. Ferrell, age 38, from the Stanton community. As described by retired LtGen. Hal Moore and Joe Galloway on pages 252-253 of their book, We Were Soldiers Once . . . and Young, "Pappy" Ferrell died in the North Vietnamese Army (NVA) ambush at Landing Zone Albany – three days after the airborne assault, led by then-LtCol. Moore, that initiated the battle of the Ia Drang Valley, in Pleiku Province. Essays on PSgt. Ferrell and on Lt. Rick Rescorla, who also fought valiantly in the November, 1965, battle, can be found at http://tinyurl.com/jckvqf8 and http://tinyurl.com/jenyh6j, respectively. The last Haywood County soldier to give his life in Vietnam was Spec/4 Rick Johnston, age 20, a 1968 graduate of Haywood High School in Brownsville. Rick died with five other soldiers in a helicopter crash that occurred near the mouth of the Bong Son River, Binh Dinh Province. Essays that describe Rick and the circumstances that led to the helicopter accident can be found at http://tinyurl.com/junw2sf and http://tinyurl.com/hwx95kg.

http://www.normanlanejrmemorialproject.org/
I have attached a one-page PowerPoint file that summarizes when and where these thirteen lives ended, in Vietnam. You can also view or download the file directly from http://tinyurl.com/h7c3e6a. The map gives the administrative divisions and military regions for South Vietnam that pertained in June of 1967. The family name of each soldier or Marine is given, together with the date on which he was lost. By clicking on each respective link, you can read and learn more about each of these men, from their respective sites on the Virtual Wall. Additional information is available on the Requiem Aeternam page within the Norman Lane Jr. Memorial Project website.

Reflecting the population characteristics for Haywood County over 1960-1970, six of these men were young African-Americans (average age between 21 and 22), and seven were white. The average age for the entire group of thirteen men was between 22 and 23 years. Six were Army soldiers, and seven were Marines. Eight of these men had lost their lives in Vietnam before Rick Johnston graduated from Haywood High School in the spring of 1968. At least four of the thirteen men listed the town of Stanton as their home.

In April, the Memorial Project dedicated to the memory of one of these Haywood County men, 1stLt. Norman Lane Jr., hosted a conference, entitled "Anatomy of a War Experience: Vietnam, 1967-1968 – Tet and the Turning Point," at Virginia Military Institute in Lexington, Virginia. In his scholarly treatment, America's Longest War: The United States and Vietnam, 1950-1975, Professor George Herring describes the Tet Offensive as a massive assault against the major urban areas of South Vietnam, coordinated by the North Vietnamese and the National Liberation Front. In Saigon, the campaign began at 2:45 a.m. on Wednesday, January 31, 1968, with an attack on the U.S. embassy. Within twenty-four hours, the offensive extended from the Ca Mau Peninsula at the southern tip of Vietnam to Quang Tri Province, which bordered the demilitarized zone to the north. Thirty-six of forty-four provincial capitals were assaulted. One of these was Quang Tri City, on the eastern bank of the Thach Han River. Route 1, the national highway that ran from Saigon in the south to Hanoi in the north, crossed the river as it ran through Quang Tri City. The offensive continued until – by one reckoning – February 26, when the battle of Huế was pronounced "over." The events of the Tet Offensive took place over forty-eight years ago and 9,000 miles from Brownsville – and in a country that ceased to exist in 1975. What possible relevance could the February, 1968, Tet Offensive have in present-day Brownsville, Stanton, and Haywood County?

The answer lies in the cool shade of the Stanton, Tennessee, Cemetery (photo on page one, right, and inset), where Billy Lee Wright – a 1966 graduate of Haywood High School – rests eternally. Pfc. Wright (photo on page one, left) died on Thursday, February 1, 1968 – the second day of the Tet Offensive – in the battle of Quang Tri City. Billy Wright and his fellow troopers from D Company, 1st Battalion, 12th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile), had been air-assaulted into position near the Thach Han River, where they were to act as a blocking force against an expected enemy attack on the city's eastern flank. At about 3:00 that afternoon, the entire company came under fire. Heavy fighting continued for an hour – one trooper personally accounted for seven of the North Vietnamese Army soldiers killed in action. As the result of their actions that afternoon, he and another soldier received Silver Star Medals. Two sergeants were awarded Bronze Star Medals with combat "V," for rescuing a wounded soldier under intense enemy fire. Billy Lee Wright, a combat medic with D Company, died that day – 9,000 miles from his Stanton home. He was nineteen years old, and he had been in Vietnam for forty-nine days. Today, and for all time, Billy Lee Wright is Haywood County's connection to – and perpetual reminder of – the Tet Offensive.

In 2005, the late Jan Voogt (1944-2015; see also http://tinyurl.com/voogt) of The Netherlands published his Ph.D. dissertation, which was based in large part on a series of interviews and other research he had conducted in Haywood County, Tennessee, over 1995-1996. Quoting from page 55 of the Voogt
Memorial services honoring soldiers of six wars were planned at the Stanton cemetery for Sunday June 2 (May 31, 1968 [Brownsville (TN) States-Graphic]). The parents of Billy Wright, who had been killed in Vietnam on February 1, were presented with two awards: the Purple Heart and Bronze Star Medal with "V" device. Owen Burgess [then, editor of the Brownsville States-Graphic, World War II B-17 crewman and prisoner of war] added a personal note to the awards ceremony for Billy Wright in his editorial column which I will quote in full here, because it sheds some light on feelings about the Vietnam War in Haywood County at the time:

'Old memories flooded back, almost to tears when the colonel read the orders of commendation, . . . "his display of personal bravery and devotion to duty". We refer, of course, to the awards ceremony when Pvt. Billy L. Wright was honored posthumously at the home of his parents, who live in Stanton. Our memories went back to Hiram C. Skogmo of Milwaukee, Wade Hampton Sneed of Georgia and Merle C. Cloud of Rule, Texas, and many many more comrades and friends of the 390th Bomb Group, whose families surely experienced similar ceremonies a quarter of a century ago. Back then we had a cause. Now, Billy and the thousands of others who will not return from Southern Asia have only an intangible uncertainty as to why they were there. They only knew that their country called. They went. They died. They are honored. The small bits of ribbon and the bronze medals are left. That . . . and the memories.'

In the King James Version of the Bible, Matthew 24:6-8, Jesus begins to answer his disciples, who have asked, "what shall be the sign of thy coming, and of the end of the world?"

6 And ye shall hear of wars and rumours of wars: see that ye be not troubled: for all these things must come to pass, but the end is not yet.
7 For nation shall rise against nation, and kingdom against kingdom: and there shall be famines, and pestilences, and earthquakes, in divers places.
8 All these are the beginning of sorrows.

But verse 13 offers the following:

13 But he that shall endure unto the end, the same shall be saved.

As we approach this Memorial Day, 2016, let us all make a concerted effort, to do what we can, to make certain that our memories of Billy Lee Wright, of Norman Lane Jr., and of the eleven other Haywood County men who died in Vietnam – and our humble appreciation for their service and sacrifice – also endure unto the end.

"They only knew that their country called. They went. They died. They are honored. The small bits of ribbon and the bronze medals are left. That . . . and the memories."

Godspeed, Billy Lee Wright . . .

Thank you.