Above: Left, 1931 HHS Tomcats (partial). Front row; John Thornton, Jr., Italo Sellari, Van Berson. Middle row; Robert Claiborne, David Stewart, Joe Kelso, Dan Mann. Back row; James Hooper, Leslie Cain, Alex Claiborne, Clifford Dinwiddie, Norman Mockbee. Thirty players suited up for the 1931 team, which went 2-5-2. The Claiborne brothers played as freshmen. Center and right, Sunday afternoon, December 31, 1967. Bart Starr (15) follows Jerry Kramer's (64) block on Jethro Pugh to win the Ice Bowl with 13 seconds left in the game. Chuck Howley (54) and Chuck Mercein (30) are on top of Starr at the end of the play. Temperature at game time was -13 degrees F; temperature at game's end was -20 degrees F. See a 1997 NFL Films retrospective on the game at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vGjg7j-qTvw
Below: Monday night, January 1, 1968. Left, With 14 seconds left in the game, Tennessee field goal kicker Karl Kremser (98) checks the turf before the attempt that would have won the Orange Bowl. Kremser was one of the early soccer-style kickers in college football and had never kicked an American football before February, 1967. Center, The ball is snapped for the 43-yard attempt, and right, Kremser and quarterback/holder Dewey Warren (16) process the missed attempt, the loss of the game, and the end of the season. See the full game video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1b-H_CY3VjY

Author's note: The images above notwithstanding, this is not a story about football. As 1968 began, Richard Carlton and I were fifteen years old and sophomores in high school. Our perspectives, today, on that time are a combination of the people, places, and events that were important to us then – and of the historical context that only reveals itself to us with the passing of time, fifty years, to be exact. In addition, there is a homefront perspective, and there is a national and international, and for 1968, even an Earth-Moon system perspective. In this case, the homefront was the small Southern community of Brownsville, Tennessee, sixty miles northeast of Memphis. The 1970 US census reported a population of 7,011, forty-three percent of whom were either African-American or from other racial categories. There were still two public high schools, the predominantly white Haywood High School (HHS) and the historically black Carver High School.

http://www.normanlanejrmemorialproject.org/
January 16, 2018

To Friends of Norman Lane,

My father, Alex Claiborne, and his younger brother Robert had played as captain and alternate captain, respectively, for the 1934 HHS Tomcat football team (see the 1931 team photo, page 1, top left). Both were seniors and would graduate in the spring of 1935. Alex had delayed entering the first grade for a year, so that he and Robert could attend school together. Robert "Ick" Dixon was a junior tailback on that team and would serve as captain the following (1935) season. The 1934 Tomcats suffered through a tough year (their record was 3-7-1), but Dixon and the Claiborne brothers were repeatedly noted for their standout performances, as for example, in the final game of the season against Byars-Hall:

The stars were backs Robert Dixon, Sr. and Richard Smith, and linemen Alex Claiborne, Robert Claiborne, Edmund Crawford, and Edwin Williams.


Shortly after Robert "Ick" Dixon, Sr. graduated from high school [in 1936], General Robert R. Neyland ([legendary; see photo, left] University of Tennessee football coach [1926-1934, 1936-1940, 1946-1952; since 1962 the Vols have played in Neyland Stadium, current seating capacity 102,037]) came to visit friends in Brownsville. On Neyland’s stay here, he met Alex Claiborne and Dixon, and offered them both football scholarships at the Knoxville campus. After much deliberation, Claiborne declined the offer, but Dixon went. Claiborne was working at Martin’s Department Store at the time, and his parents thought it was more important for him to have meaningful employment and not get hurt, than it was for him to run up to the "Hill" to play ball.

Fourteen years later, after the war, in December, 1950, Alex Claiborne graduated from the University of Tennessee (UT). Gen. Neyland was still coaching the Vols. I joined the family in 1952. For as long as I can recall, there was only one college football team, ever, for my father – the Tennessee Vols. On Saturdays in the fall, in the mid-1960s, long before the days of cable television, I can well remember sitting next to an AM-FM transistor radio, glued to the "Voice of the Vols," John Ward, calling the play-by-play for Tennessee. But the strongest indication of Alex Claiborne's passion for football, and Tennessee football, came on a Wednesday afternoon in late May, 2007 – it would be one of our last heart-to-heart conversations, and I put my recollection of it in writing less than two months later:

I’ve had a good life. I can remember a time when I would rather play football than eat. I remember George Cafego . . .

Cafego was a star running back at UT over 1937-1939 and in 1943, he played for both the Brooklyn Dodgers (five games) and Washington Redskins (four games) of the NFL. My father wrote in his memoir of his World War II experiences that while he was based temporarily at Fort Dix, New Jersey, before shipping out across the Atlantic for North Africa in late 1943-early 1944, he went into New York to see a game because George Cafego was playing (The 1943 schedules show that the Redskins played the New York Giants at the Polo Grounds on December 5, and the Dodgers played all four of their November games in New York).
The next afternoon, my father and I were again sitting on the screen porch. Again he was taken by some external spirit or muse, and he spoke these words to me. I was somewhat surprised when, given the fact of his serious diagnosis and other factors, he decided to go back to UT football:

Tell Pete [a great friend and colleague of mine for over thirty years, and a rabid Vols fan] that Tennessee will have a very strong team this fall.

This of course referred only to UT football and not to any pressing matters of state, etc. Again I was a bit floored at this comment, but I nodded my head and assured him that I would relay the word to Pete.

* * *

As a boy, I have some recollection of following (with my father) Charlie Conerly and Y.A. Tittle with the New York Giants, and I clearly remember paying Ray Powell a dime for his Johnny Unitas football card in the early 1960s (The morning that I left my father for the last time, he was reading the 2006 Tom Callahan biography, Johnny U). But Alex Claiborne's NFL team allegiance shifted in those years, to a new franchise whose team was being coached by Tom Landry – the Dallas Cowboys. The Holy Trilogy in sports in Alex Claiborne's world became simple and steadfast – the Tennessee Vols, the Dallas Cowboys, and the New York Yankees. I once asked him in his later years how he had come to be a Yankees fan. The answer was a simple one that went back to the 1932 World Series, when he had been sixteen years old. He was with some friends listening to a game on the radio in Mr. C.T. Hooper's Esso station; it so happened this was the game in which Babe Ruth hit the famed "Called Shot" home run. The story, "The Babe's Called Shot," on the National Baseball Hall of Fame website describes the scene at Wrigley Field as follows:

With the count two balls and two strikes, Ruth seemed to point two fingers toward center field. Then he belted the next pitch deep in the center field seats.

I do not remember the specifics of what was said, but the associate pastor of the First Methodist Church in Brownsville placed a New York Yankees baseball cap on the lectern when he spoke about Alex Claiborne at his funeral service on June 16, 2007.

* * *

I have three clear memories from the eight-day period of Monday, December 25, 1967, through Monday, January 1, 1968. The first memory is the silver Wittnauer wristwatch that my parents gave me for Christmas. I am looking at it now (January, 2018; see photos, left, and below right), with its date display and inset second hand, and with the two-line engraving on the back: "AL CLAIBORNE 1967." The second memory I have is watching the "Ice Bowl" (with my father, I am certain; see photos, page 1, top center and right) between the Dallas Cowboys and the Green Bay Packers, on the Sunday afternoon, December 31, 1967. The temperature at kickoff for the NFL Championship game was -13 degrees. The third memory is from New Year's night, January 1, 1968, when we watched the Tennessee Vols play the Oklahoma Sooners in the Orange Bowl (see photos, page 1, bottom). Tennessee had beaten Bear Bryant and the Alabama Crimson Tide, for the first time since 1960, back on October 21. The victory had made the cover of Sports Illustrated the following week. The team's only loss had come in their first game of the season, when they had been defeated 20-16 by quarterback Gary Beban and the UCLA Bruins in the Los Angeles Memorial Coliseum. Beban had gone on to win the Heisman Trophy that season, and UCLA had been ranked one spot ahead of Tennessee in the preseason AP poll. UCLA went on to receive the top weekly ranking in that poll, just before meeting the USC Trojans and a junior running back named O.J. Simpson on November 18, 1967. Norman Lane was on the fourth day of his tour in Vietnam, presumably still at Cam Lo Bridge (http://tinyurl.com/Dec-1967-Washout).

To make a long story short, after January 1, 1968 (see legend to photos, page 1), my one positive outcome from those three experiences was the new hand-wound Wittnauer wristwatch with the Speidel Twist-O-Flex band. . . .

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Time present and time past
Are both perhaps present in time future,
And the future contained in time past.
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The first stanza concludes with,

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Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.
```

And the little second hand continued to tick, counting down the moments to the end of 1967 and the beginning of the New Year. . . .

* * *

In Norman Lane's small, adopted Southern hometown of Brownsville, Tennessee, it had been just over two years since the weekly *States-Graphic* had announced (Friday, November 26, 1965),

Capt. Samuel Spencer Sanford spent four days last week visiting with his family here.

Capt. Sanford [see photo, left] is en route to the West Coast, from where he will go to Viet Nam, to serve with special forces for a year.

Then-Capt. Sanford had grown up in Brownsville and had graduated from HHS in 1951. He had entered the Army as a private that same year but had completed Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning in 1958. Then-Lt. Sanford attended airborne and Ranger schools and, after being promoted to Captain, completed infantry officer advanced training. He was then assigned as a company commander with the 82nd Airborne Division at Fort Bragg. In the spring of 1965, then-Capt. Sanford deployed with the division to the Dominican Republic, where he served as battalion operations officer. Following that assignment, he graduated from Special Forces training, also at Fort Bragg, prior to his November, 1965, deployment to Vietnam. During that twelve-month tour he commanded a Special Forces A team and also served as a B team operations officer. He returned to Fort Bragg in 1966, but then-Major Sanford would deploy for a second tour in Vietnam in June, 1968, during which he would work with the Special Forces Studies and Observation Group (SOG).

For Christmas, 1967, Maj. Sanford was able to enjoy the holiday with his wife and their three children, on the base at Fort Bragg. . . .

* * *

But six days later, on the afternoon of New Year's Eve, tragedy would strike the family of Maj. Sanford's brother, Jim, back in Brownsville. As reported in the January 5, 1968, *States-Graphic*,

Special Forces Capt. Sam Sanford, on duty in Da Nang, June, 1966. Photo courtesy of LtCol. Sam S. Sanford (US Army Special Forces, retired).
A tragic accident took the life of 19-year old Samuel Walker Sanford [see photo, left; Sam was the oldest son of Mr. and Mrs. Jim Tipton Sanford] here Dec. 31. The U-T Martin student [Sam had graduated with the HHS Class of 1967] died at 3 p.m. at Haywood County Memorial hospital where he had been carried following the accident on Highway 19.

The young student was driving a pickup truck when the accident occurred.

He was spending the Christmas holidays here with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. Jim Tipton Sanford. . . .

Mr. Sanford was a member of First Presbyterian Church.

Funeral services were conducted Tuesday, Jan. 2 at 10 at Brownsville Funeral Home with the Rev. E.M. Williamson and the Rev. J. Kenneth Stuart officiating. Burial was in Trinity Cemetery, at Nut Bush.

He leaves, besides his parents, three brothers, Tom Tipton Sanford, Ben Owen Sanford, and Jack Goodman Sanford.

Ben Sanford was a classmate of Richard's and mine, and we had been good friends since the first grade.

As editor Owen Burgess (see page 6, http://tinyurl.com/Dec-1967-Washout) added in his "Local News Briefs" column for that first issue of the newspaper in 1968,

As always, there is sadness to mar all occasions. The tragic death of young Sam Sanford cast a gloom over the community, and then the serious injury to Suzanne Bott has caused much concern to all.

A second front-page story reported on Suzanne Bott's grave injury:

Miss Suzanne Bott, 20-year old Southwestern at Memphis [now Rhodes College] student, was injured gravely in an accident Jan. 1, near the Mississippi state line.

A graduate with the HHS Class of 1965, Suzanne (see photos, below) had been voted "Miss Haywood High" in her senior year, she had served as coeditor for the 1965 HHS yearbook, she had been selected Homecoming Queen for the 1964 Tomcat football season, and she had been a cheerleader for both varsity football and basketball teams. She had signed the 1965 high school yearbook for one young man who had been her close friend and classmate,

I can't believe we're signing annuals for the last time – These yrs have really flown by – I'll sure miss you next year – Please don't forget me – Love you, S.B.
The *States-Graphic* story continued:

Miss Bott, daughter of Mrs. Ida Wilma Bott, 843 West Main, was visiting friends in Tunica. They had attended a party in Memphis and were en route to Tunica when the accident occurred.

She is in the intensive care unit [ICU] at Memphis Methodist Hospital, but is believed to be improving a little at press time.


ALL OF us are praying that Suzanne Bott will gain strength each day. She was hurt seriously in an automobile accident. She is in Memphis Methodist hospital.

* * *

"*Spes anchora vitae*" – "Hope is the anchor of life." So read the motto for the US Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in the spring of 1968 ([http://tinyurl.com/may-15-1968](http://tinyurl.com/may-15-1968)). If you have a Social Security card from that era, you will find the Latin phrase printed on a white scroll within the official departmental seal.

The phrase would hold special meaning in the ICU at Memphis Methodist Hospital over the long days and nights of Monday, January 1, through Saturday, January 6, 1968. But at 9:30 that Saturday evening, the last vestige of hope was lost, and the all-too-short life of Suzanne Alison Bott came to an end. The front page of the next week's *States-Graphic* carried her photo below the three-column headline in large, bold type:

**Popular Southwestern Student Dies From Injuries In Wreck**

Funeral services for Suzanne Bott were held at Brownsville Baptist Church on Monday, January 8, with burial in Oakwood Cemetery. As a junior at Southwestern, she had been chosen a Lynx beauty, to be featured in the 1968 yearbook.

Attending the funeral services were members of Chi Omega Sorority, many Southwestern students, the University's president, Dr. David Alexander, and its dean of women, Miss Anne Caldwell.

At least ten of Suzanne's former HHS classmates attended the services from out-of-town. Doris Burgess, whose daughter Janice had been a close friend and classmate of Suzanne's, composed a beautiful tribute in her weekly column for the January 12 issue of the Brownsville newspaper:

LIFE is composed of hills and valleys – each of which can bring us immeasurable degrees of happiness or sorrow. This week, a young woman died and from last week's unlimited joy when she was a bridesmaid in the wedding of one of her dear friends, her family and friends now find themselves plummeted into the depths of a grief which only time and immense faith in God can heal. . . . When a life of such promise, a life of such beauty is snuffed out, we call on our deepest spiritual resources for strength. Her friendship, so valued by my daughter, and a group of girls who have loved each other for almost all their years, will be remembered as one of perfection, for never will time nor trouble mar it. It is perhaps the first deep sorrow in their young lives and it will give to each of them a greater measure of understanding and maturity. Each of them is richer for having known and loved Suzanne. Each of us who was privileged to be a tiny part of her life can treasure the memory of her as a loyal, dutiful daughter, a Christian, a good student, a popular girl and our loving friend.

As T.S. Eliot had written,

Time past and time future
What might have been and what has been
Point to one end, which is always present.

And so it was, in Brownsville, Tennessee, over the first days of January, 1968 . . . and the inset second hand on the new silver Wittnauer wristwatch continued to tick . . .
Six hundred students were enrolled at HHS for the 1967-1968 school year; many of the 119 students who would be graduating with the Class of 1968 (see pages 6-8, http://tinyurl.com/part-three-1968) had been students in Norman Lane's English and French classes just two years before. One of these seniors was Bill Sorrell, who wrote a column, "Tomcat Tale," for the weekly States-Graphic. As published in the January 5, 1968, issue,

The doors of Haywood High were reopened January 3 as students returned from Christmas vacation. School was scheduled to begin January 2 but icy road conditions gave students another day of fun. . . . The most unpopular word in the Haywood High dictionary will be heard the next two weeks. Exams are scheduled for January 18 and 19, only two weeks away. The word exams always brings a groan from everybody and groans will probably be heard the next couple of weeks.

Later in January, a significant shift in the societal fabric of Brownsville was confirmed in the States-Graphic. Passenger business at the Brownsville Louisville & Nashville (L&N) railroad station had dropped to about one percent of that twenty-five years before (early 1943), during the heyday of rail passenger service. The railroad disclosed its plan to discontinue passenger service to Brownsville, effective the end of February. An L&N official was quoted for the story:

Passenger business has almost vanished from these trains, and particularly all of the mail and express traffic has been diverted to other modes of transportation.

Travel of quite a different kind was a topic of Doris Burgess' January 12, 1968, column:

One of the big thrills which our stewardess daughter [Janice, then with Delta Airlines] has experienced was seeing the "moon shot" leave Cape Canaveral, Sunday night, Jan. 7. They were en route to Miami, and the captain pointed out the moonshot for the passengers.

The "moon shot" was the launch, from Cape Kennedy [the new name for Cape Canaveral was in effect from 1963-1973], at 1:30 a.m. EST on Sunday, January 7, 1968, of the unmanned Surveyor 7 spacecraft. Surveyor 7 successfully performed a soft lunar landing at 8:05 p.m. EST on January 9. The collection of data on lunar surface conditions and the additional scientific knowledge on the Moon, thus gathered, would be critical for the support of the coming manned Apollo landings.

And, then there was a truly happy story in the January 12 issue of the newspaper:

Mike Turner Home From War

Cpl. Mike Turner of the U.S. Marine Corps, arrived home Saturday [January 6] from service in Vietnam. The son of Mr. and Mrs. John R. Turner, of the Covington Highway, Cpl. Turner flew from Da Nang to Okinawa and on into El Toro, Calif. His parents had been "sitting by" the telephone for days, awaiting his call, and when it came, they immediately drove to Memphis Metropolitan Airport to welcome their son.

Mike says "It's so good to be home" and will spend 20 days here resting, eating and relaxing before reporting to San Diego, Calif., where he will serve the rest of his tour of duty. He expects to be discharged about May 10.

Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary defines hope as,

desire accompanied by expectation of or belief in fulfillment

Hopes had been high for fans of the Dallas Cowboys and the Tennessee Volunteers . . .
We all hoped and prayed that Suzanne would overcome her injuries . . .

Mr. and Mrs. Turner had hoped and prayed for their son Mike's safe return . . .


Robert Kennedy, speaking on June 6, 1966, in South Africa: "he sends a tiny ripple of hope . . ."

the Department of Health, Education and Welfare motto: "Hope is the anchor of life . . ."

in 1968: "In New Hampshire, George Romney, the presidential hope of GOP moderates, . . ."

Robert Kennedy, speaking at Vanderbilt: "living without hope or future amid the despair on Indian reservations, with no jobs and little hope. . . ."

Frye Gaillard, referencing Robert Kennedy's presidential campaign: "a lot of people held grimly to that hope, . . ."

in Lyndon Johnson's televised address, March 31, 1968, announcing his shocking decision not to seek reelection: "our hopes and the world's hopes for peace . . ."

in 1968: "Humphrey's wisest course was to stay out of the presidential primaries in hopes . . ."

for the May 7, 1968, Indiana primary, referencing Robert Kennedy: "A solid win, but not the knockout blow Kennedy had hoped for. . . ."

at the Vanderbilt University commencement: "Heard Sees Hope in Grads' Future"

referencing an early stage in the Paris peace talks: "But recent developments provide a glimmer of hope . . ."

Robert Kennedy: "I hope that after the California primary . . ."

Robert Kennedy: "and I hope that Sen. McCarthy looks at it that way too, . . ."

Robert Kennedy: "He stated . . . and expressed the hope that the feeling is mutual. . . ."

"Spes anchora vitae," . . . Hope is the anchor of life . . . and the little second hand on the silver Wittnauer wristwatch continued to tick . . .

*   *   *

On December 31, 1967, there were 485,600 US military personnel in South Vietnam. Of these, 78,000 were Marines. For December, 1967, the average monthly strength for LtCol. Lee Bendell's 3rd Battalion, 4th Marines, was reported as just over 1,200 men, with over 1,100 enlisted Marines and 43 officers. There were 56 enlisted Navy personnel [there should have been 32 Corpsmen for the four rifle companies, plus those Corpsmen who served with the BAS (Battalion Aid Station) staff] and 3 Navy officers. Lts. Craig "Doc" Wilson and Kevin Anderson (http://tinyurl.com/Dec-1967-Washout) were two of the three officers. There were four rifle companies (India, Kilo, Lima, and Mike) plus H&S company. Norman Lane (H&S) and Allen Willyerd (Kilo), two friends from Brownsville, Tennessee (see pages 10-11, http://tinyurl.com/Dec-1967-Washout), were with the Marines in the battalion.
Washout with Major Mead, the 3/4 XO in command. Mike and India were south of us holding C-2 where Lt. Col. Bendell had the 3/4 CP [Command Post].

We had a religious service that morning about 1030hrs, and the Chaplain [presumably Navy Chaplain Kevin Anderson, see page 14, http://tinyurl.com/Dec-1967-Washout] gave a service, and then Captain Carr [Capt. John Carr, who had been CO of Lima 3/4 since early August] talked to us after the service. He told us how proud he was of us and how he was honored to be our CO.
That afternoon we had a squad patrol out to the east. I was the radioman on that patrol and Cpl. David Urrutia was the squad leader. There was a truce for Christmas, and in the briefing Lieutenant Hoare [Lt. Thomas Hoare, commander of 1st Platoon, Lima 3/4] told us that we had to follow the truce. "If you see any NVA and they see you and don't fire, you hold your fire and then back away."

I started laughing, and Urrutia grinned. "If we see any Gooks, Lieutenant, we're going to start shooting," I told him. The patrol didn't encounter any enemy, and in the afternoon I spent some time with my buddies. My bootcamp buddy, LCpl. Ted Ovall, had just been made a team leader, and I congratulated him. Kmiec [PFC John Kmiec] and I hung out for awhile and swapped stories of our days on Okinawa with some of the new replacements.

We all knew that we were leaving The Washout the next day. We were heading up to a small hill [Hill 28, see map, page 9] above the trace north of the new artillery base Alpha-3 . . . Only a few hundred meters south of the DMZ . . . The Dead Marine Zone. That's what we called it, because every time we went there, Marines got killed. We'd been at The Washout for almost two months, and it had been great duty. My favorite time and location for my entire tour.

But the good times were over.
Storm clouds were on the horizon.
The heaviest fighting of the entire war was just around the corner.

* * *

Lt. Jack Solitario had been the artillery forward observer for Mike 3/4 since September, 1967. In his Vietnam War memoir, One Avenue of Approach, he describes a Christmas visit to Cam Lo Village:

We took a Christmas excursion into Cam Lo Village [from Charlie 2] . . . to do a little winning of hearts and minds . . . Our battalion CO [LtCol. Lee Bendell] had arranged for us to visit Father Co, who had a Catholic parish consisting of a church, convent, orphanage, and school . . . This was the first sign of permanency that I witnessed in Vietnam on the village level. Everything was stucco with tile roofs and very neat . . .

The boys were all turned out in what looked like Boy Scout uniforms, and the girls were all in white traditional dress . . .

I was talking with a boy who seemed to be very precocious for the eleven-year-old he claimed to be. His English was perfect; he was very emphatic about calling himself Vietnamese. Not South or North, just Vietnamese. Hmmm, was it true? Was Father Co Viet cong? Who did he want to be running things around here? They were in a place where the prevailing winds swept in both directions, and his compound was very much intact. For me, it was very easy to imagine the good father as a partisan, leading the boys in black pajamas out to meet the NVA . . . Escort them through and pass on information . . .

On the night before Christmas, 1967, the 3/4 Command Chronology had recorded the following:


One of those H&S Corpsmen, Ron Smith (see photo, page 12, http://tinyurl.com/Dec-1967-Washout) added this recollection in December of 2017:

A few things I do remember . . . was the bunker the corpsmen were in burned up with all our gear at C-2 on Christmas Eve, December 24, 1967. Including mine. Not sure if it was a short outgoing or an incoming. We were all standing on top of the bunker. I had just recently transferred to H&S company from the Washout to the BAS at C-2 . . .

From there we moved up to A-3 . . . Another really bad "s--- hole". I was . . . there with a couple of other corpsmen to man a forward BAS. Jan 68.

That was a joke. Lots of sniper and mortar fire. Really not much there but a bunch of fighting holes . . .
1stLt. Bill Willett (see pages 3ff, http://tinyurl.com/Dec-1967-Washout) was H&S Co. CO at that time, and in December, 2017, he provided the following recollection:

On Dec. 26, 1967, we (our Battalion, 3/4) took a long hike as we moved out on our way to the Gio Linh [see map, page 9] area. We walked through the Washout [from C-3] and then continued north to Con Thien. From Con Thien we turned east and marched to the vicinity of Gio Linh. We set up a perimeter on the south edge of the "trace" [see map, left, page 1, http://tinyurl.com/Dec-1967-Washout] which was created by almost daily planes flying over spraying Agent Orange, which continued while [we] were positioned there running patrols and night ambushes. We could see for miles to the west, east and north. We were there to provide security for the engineers as they were building, as I recall A-3, another forward position with dyemarker bunkers, etc.

In a post to the 3/4 Association Yahoo Group titled, "'Hill 28' 26 December '67-11 Jan '68," dated December 26, 2015, Mr. John Hudson (see page 9) added:

We were headed for Hill 28 which was northeast of Con Thien about halfway to Gio Linh.

Our route that day would take us just east of Con Thien and then eastward just south of The Trace until we reached Alpha 3 and from there north to Hill 28. A distance of around 10 klicks [kilometers].

We were fully loaded down with all of our gear (and we had gathered a lot of stuff in the last few months including rain gear and sweat shirts) and I recall it as a very tough hump.

Hill 28 was on the north side of The Trace and was the commanding terrain overlooking the new firebase Alpha Three.

Hill 28 was just a few hundred meters south of the DMZ and was by far the most isolated and vulnerable Marine position in the DMZ area. . . .

Lima was the rear company of the column made up of one other rifle company (India I think), the Bravo CP Group under Major Mead and half of the 81mm mortars and various other parts of our outfit like engineers, scouts etc.

I looked back at The Washout as we departed and thought fondly about the good times we had there. Ahead of us lay Hill 28, An Dinh, The Marketplace and Mike's Hill.

We had been cut some slack for quite a while but that was now over.

The bloodiest month in 3/4's history awaited us.

In his Vietnam War memoir, Jack Solitario (see page 10) describes the battalion's late-December move to Hill 28:

On Christmas Day we sat down to steak with all the fixings . . . As we finished up, the grunts got restless . . . Marine arithmetic said, "I don't care whose birthday it is"; if we just finished chomping on steak and all the fixin's in the middle of the day at Charlie II [the fire support base] . . . that meant a month-long operation begins tomorrow . . . There was no messing with grunt intuition . . . It was a hundred percent!

And much less chance in containing what the skipper [Captain Raymond Kalm, Mike 3/4 CO] told us that morning . . . Word got out that we were going to a place called Alpha III . . . "Draw a full day's C rats and pack your gear . . . Tomorrow is Z day." And that stands for DMZ . . . "Where the f--- is Alpha III?" was the big question in everyone's head . . . They would know that when their squad leaders told them . . . And the squad leaders told them, "You'll know where it is when I tell you to dig in!" . . .

The day after Christmas we left Charlie II for Alpha III, on the trace between Gio Linh and Con Thien . . . The initial location selected was an elevated finger of ground surrounded on its northern three sides by abandoned rice paddies . . . There were unobstructed views along the trace to both Gio Linh and Con Thien . . . For all intent and purpose, from a visual perspective, it was an ideal location . . . on everyone's map . . . Defensewise, it didn't present the elevation that marines liked . . . but we did have great fields of fire . . .

Our mission was to patrol north of the trace while a new Dye-Marker installation was built . . .

Although there weren't any sightings or contacts reported, there was an uneasy calmness about the place . . . Johnston was PM’ing [preventive maintenance] his radio, and I was digging my share of our hole . . . A volley of fifty rounds dropped in on us . . . I never heard the usual warning pop that I had become so accustomed to hearing from the tower at Gio Linh [Lt. Solitario and Mike 3/4 had been in a defensive position at Gio Linh for six weeks in November and December]. . . They caught us by surprise . . .
And all of a sudden, the incoming stopped... just as quickly as it started... and for that split second, I felt the miracle of the sound of nothing all around us... We didn't suffer any casualties...

* * *

Over Tuesday and Wednesday, December 26 and 27, 1967, the 3/4 Command Chronology (pages IV-5 and IV-13) reports that all four rifle companies (see page 8) and both Battalion CP groups had taken up the new defensive position at "YD 173733" – Hill 28 (see map, page 9).

At the defensive position forward of A-3 [see map, page 9, YD 178718], the battalion was dispersed with three companies on the perimeter and one in reserve.

The New Year would arrive on Hill 28 thirteen hours before it would come to Brownsville. Norman Lane's most recent letter to Sarah Shepard had been written on December 10 (http://tinyurl.com/Dec-1967-Washout), from the cozy, dry confines of his Dyemarker bunker, with electric lights. Three weeks later, from the primitive setting at Hill 28, Norman again wrote to Sarah (see images, above and on page 13). From this point forward, over the last three months of his life, Lt. Lane's letters will reveal three personalities: 1) an almost jocular character, as in this letter (Vietnam: "where the action is"), 2) a very sobering report, as in a January 24 letter to Sarah, and 3) as Norman Lane, the tragic romanticist, as later in March. But for now, we continue with Norman's New Year's Eve missive to Sarah:

Dec 31, 1967

Well, sweetness, here it is New Year's Eve and I'm thinking about you. It is cold, windy, and wet. I sleep on the ground in a sort of tent. It is so cold at night. What I need is you to snuggle up next to me and keep me warm. What I've got is my tough old gunnery sergeant, and I don't do much snuggling with him. Ah, Sarah, where are you when I need you so? Did I tell you about our new location?

For December 30 and 31, the Command Chronology had reported significant enemy contact. A Mike company patrol on the 30th led to an engagement with an estimated 5-10 NVA that lasted over an hour. Mike Co. sustained one KIA and four medevac casualties. On the 31st, an India company patrol engaged two similar-sized groups of NVA. Small arms, artillery, and 60mm mortar fire were directed against the enemy force, coordinated with air strikes by Huey gunships. At least one India Co. sniper was wounded. Lt. Lane, commanding the 81mm mortar platoon, gives a brief perspective from his position, which he admits is "a pretty safe job:"

It is definitely out in the field. I bathe in a bomb crater, eat only C-rations, drink Kool-Aid. The rifle companies go out on patrols every day and kill people. From my positions I can here [sic] the shooting, about ½ mile away, and I see the planes circling and diving, helicopters bringing out our casualties. But it's like being on the outside of a football stadium while the game is going on. My mortars sometimes get to poop a few rounds out there. I have a pretty safe job.

Then Norman returns to other lines of thought:

I got a note from Cindy [Sarah's sister] the other day, and from Morton [Morton Holbrook, page 11, http://tinyurl.com/Nov-13-1967] yesterday. Mail comes in by helicopter, on good days. Sarah, you are so dear to me. Just seeing your handwriting on the envelope
gets me all excited and your letters make me feel all warm and cuddly. The part I like best is when you say, "Love, Sarah". My friend Morton says he may spend the summer in Japan, in which case I could probably join him there on my R&R. I love to go places. On the way home from Vietnam I think I may go through Asia & Europe. I'd like to visit Africa, South America, and Australia.

He then turns to his plans, post-Vietnam and the Marine Corps, and film and literature:

There are so many things I want to do. I think I will try to get into Oxford or Cambridge for an M.A. when I get out of the Marines. Seriously. It would be kind of fun. Have you ever read Brideshead Revisited? Very good book. In fact, I recommend all of Evelyn Waugh's novels. I've read six of them. Sarah, please go see a movie called Elvira Madigan and tell me about it. I've heard it's great. You old folk-singer, you.

Much love,

Normie.

Your man in the Orient.

* * *

Then-Capt. Ned LeRoy had taken over as CO of Kilo Co. at Con Thien (http://tinyurl.com/Sept-7-1967) on September 7, 1967. From notes, letters, and photos, Ned LeRoy put together a timeline in January, 2016:

Sometime mid Nov. went to Wash-Out until just after Christmas
To A-3 along the trace until 1/14 [1968]
Gio Linh 1/14-2/23 [1968]

The Command Chronology for Sunday, January 14, reported:

At 141035H, 3/3 (S-3) [at 10:35 a.m. on the 14th, the operations officer for 3rd Battalion, 3rd Marines] informed 3/4 that Co "K" was chopped to 12th Marines and had departed for Gio Linh [see map, page 9].

Norman Lane and Allen Willyerd had been friends back in Brownsville, and as Marines, they had met at Travis Air Force Base back in November and then again at Charlie 2 (http://tinyurl.com/Dec-1967-Washout). Allen was a machine gunner with weapons platoon, Kilo Co., and he had moved to Hill 28 with Capt. LeRoy and the rest of Kilo Co. after Christmas. On January 14, Allen would leave with Kilo Co. for Gio Linh – but until then, he and Kilo Co. were at Hill 28, in proximity to Norman Lane and H&S Co.

Rita English Hathcock had been a student (see photo, page 14) in Norman's sophomore English class at HHS, back in Brownsville, over that 1965-1966 school year. Once in the Marine Corps, the former teacher wrote to the former student – from places like Quantico, Guantanamo Bay, Quang Tri Province, and C3. A letter from "Quang Tri Province" (at least one other letter from Hill 28 gives this location) was dated Saturday, January 6, 1968. Norman tells Rita,

We (meaning 3rd Battalion, 4th Marine Regiment, known for short as "three-four") are now living on an unnamed hill between Con Thien and Gio Linh. This is the northernmost U.S. base in Vietnam. The DMZ is a couple of hundred yards north of us.
As paraphrased by Rita in January of 2015, forty-seven years after she had received that letter,

Later in the letter, he [Norman] mentions seeing Allen Willyerd every other day. He says Allen is a machine gun squad leader in this battalion. He said they swap news about Brownsville.

* * *

Lt. Lane had written that letter to Rita English on Saturday, January 6, 1968, from Hill 28. In a series of five posts to the 3/4 Marines Yahoo Group, dated January 4-6, 2014, then-LCpl. John Hudson of Lima Co. gave his recollection of the events of the following day, Sunday, January 7. Titled, "Turning Point: 7 January 1968," part one begins the story at 1:30 a.m., on Hill 28 that very early Sunday morning.

Following the move to Hill 28, the battalion had lost one Marine to sniper fire on December 30. As Mr. Hudson had written (see page 11), "The bloodiest month in 3/4's history awaited us." For January, 1968, the Command Chronology reports the loss of thirty-six enlisted Marines, three Marine officers, and six Navy Corpsmen. Thirty-one of the enlisted Marines, all three of the officers, and four Corpsmen were lost in three engagements with the NVA – on January 7, January 18, and January 27. These battles had nothing, directly, to do with the Tet Offensive, which would not begin until the end of the month.

For January 7, the 3/4 CP had devised a plan to eliminate NVA sniper(s) who had been operating from a ridge line just on the edge of the DMZ (see map, page 15), taking shots at battalion positions on Hill 28. From Lima Co., 1st Platoon would sweep the ridge line, dropping off one squad, reinforced with a machine gun team and a sniper team. A second three-man "Killer Team," including LCpl. Hudson, would be dropped off 400 meters from that reinforced squad. As Mr. Hudson's account continues (part two),

It was clear, bright and cool as we departed the Darting Star perimeter at 0945. . . .

There were probably nearly 50 men on the patrol, and we were expecting trouble.

We swept northeast along the ridge front maybe 100 meters below the crest, which was the southern boundary of the DMZ [see map, page 15].

The three sources on the events of January 7 are Mr. Hudson's post, the Command Chronology, and the Coffelt Database. There is no name, village or otherwise, for the engagement that day. The Coffelt Database simply refers to "Hill 28, 6 km W-NW of Gio Linh village . . ." From the first two sources, most of the fighting appears to be focused on a set of coordinates in the range YD 170742 to YD 170738 and 172740. From Mr. Hudson's account,

About 1300 the sniper opened fire on the 3/4 perimeter . . . He fired twice more, and the shots were to our west, maybe 200 or 300 meters away.

The Killer Team was ordered to link up with the reinforced squad and to sweep west in the direction of the sniper(s). As Mr. Hudson then reports,

I looked and could not believe my eyes. Instead of some Marines I saw a single NVA soldier walking along parallel to us no more than 75 meters away. He was wearing khakis and had a sand-colored pith helmet on his gourd. . . . He was carrying an AK47.
The NVA soldier was killed as he tried to run away. In succession, three more NVA popped up. One fled, one was killed, and the third wounded a Marine radioman before being killed.

Within seconds we began receiving heavy small arms fire from our front and right flank. Guys were yelling about NVA everywhere it seemed . . .

The shout of "Corpsman up, Monkman's hit!" rang out . . .

PFC Donald Monkman, a twenty-year-old Marine from Bloomington, Illinois, was dead. From the Command Chronology, the time was approximately 2:00 in the afternoon.

Eventually we were completely surrounded, NVA on all sides. Every third Marine was facing to the rear as we fought it out with more and more NVA . . .

Following an afternoon filled with accurate NVA automatic weapons and sniper fire, combined with American small arms, grenades, and 60mm mortar fires, as well as excellent artillery, napalm and snake-eye bomb (bombs equipped with pop-out braking fins to slow their descent, thus avoiding blast damage and allowing low-altitude bomb runs by jet aircraft) strikes, topped off with Huey gunship coverage . . . a symphony of death on a clear, bright, and cool January afternoon . . .

It was 2100 hours and I [LCpl. Hudson] was the first to arrive at the Lima 1 CP. I'd brought back a group of wounded and become separated from the rest of the wounded, . . .

That night on radio watch I thought about what had happened. Even with Captain Carr telling us not to "get suckerized into anything," we had stupidly followed the NVA into an ambush. It was the oldest trick in warfare and we'd fallen for it hook, line and sinker . . .

I woke up Doc Cecil Belt for his watch and lay down to sleep. We'd made a stupid mistake, and we'd been lucky to have gotten out alive. Lima Company had paid a terrible price, with 7 KIAs and over three dozen wounded.

Worse yet somehow Donald Monkman's body had been left behind. Captain Carr had already ordered a patrol in the morning to recover the body [It would be January 11 before PFC Monkman's body was recovered].

I had the feeling that if I went up on that ridge again I would not make it out alive.

* * *

On the day following Lima Co.'s engagement with the NVA, Lt. Lane wrote again to Sarah Shepard. As 81mm mortar platoon commander, Norman had remained in the battalion perimeter during the fighting. His thoughts on January 8, 1968, were not tempered with the experiences of those Marines and Corpsmen, such as LCpl. Hudson, from the day before. This would change, dramatically, on January 27. But on that Monday, fifty years ago now, Norman wrote of other thoughts:

Quang Tri province
Jan 8, 1968.

Sarah my sweet, your package of Christmas goodies came yesterday. It was so nice—you know how much I like bright colored paper and ribbons and bows. The poetry book is just what I needed. Even out here in the field I have pretty much time for reading, and I get an urge to read poetry every so often. The little book on Friendship was cool, too. And the clown so far hasn't helped much—it is raining today.
To an extent, it is possible that Norman wrote to some of his friends and family with an intent to reassure, more than to give a realistic assessment of the combat situation. We will see an example of this in a later story that includes a letter to his Vanderbilt Law School friend, John Russell, then serving as a Marine Corps officer in Vietnam. The next part of Norman's January 8 letter to Sarah reinforces this impression:

Sarah, dear, why do you keep telling me to be good? What sort of bad can I do over here? I don't do much of anything except sleep, eat, & read.

His limited perspective on the January 7 fighting that had led to the deaths of seven Lima Co. Marines follows:

There was a big battle yesterday about ¾ mile [about 1.2 km] from here between one of our rifle companies and the gooks. Many casualties on both sides. All my platoon does, though, is support them from our battalion perimeter. We can fire over 4 kilometers when needed. I have it easy, as usual. On clear nights I teach the troops about the stars.

Norman's letter then turns to his real passion, literature:

The other night I read A Midsummer Night's Dream while on watch, and when I got off watch my dreams were even wilder than usual. Am currently reading a couple of books by Hemingway. In Our Time is mostly worthless, but A Moveable Feast is great. One problem about reading is that after 7 pm it is too dark to read. We just go to bed. And some nights it is so cold. That's when I wish you were here (or I were there) because I know you'd snuggle up to me to keep me warm. Sweet girl.

And then, there is travel:

Morton [see page 12] is thinking of spending this summer in Japan, which is nice because I could join him there on R&R. I love to go places. Like Vietnam, for instance.

Norman then closes the letter with his description of a New Year's Day event:

On New Years' Day I exploded a great pile of defective mortar rounds, which was spectacular; but it scared the daylights out of our Regimental CO.

Love
Uncle Norm.

The January 1 Command Chronology (page IV-5) reads:

1Jan: The CO of 9th Marines visited this position from 011645H to 011720H.

There was no official mention of the New Year's Day fireworks display.

* * *

As LCpl. Hudson had returned to the perimeter on the evening of January 7, back in America – in small Southern towns like Kosciusko, Mississippi, and larger Northern cities like Jersey City, New Jersey – the first Sunday morning of 1968 was beginning. Many, maybe most, families in those towns and cities would be attending church services that morning, and some would be offering special prayers for their sons, serving with the Marine Corps in Vietnam. Norman Lane's letter to Sarah Shepard would begin its trek to Denver over the next day or two. In the same time frame, the commanding officer of Lima Company would also sit down to write letters, to families in small Southern towns like Kosciusko, Mississippi, and larger Northern cities like Jersey City, New Jersey. His letters might have said something like this:
My dear Mr. and Mrs. . . .:

The untimely death of your son, . . . on 7 January 1968 at Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam, is a source of great sorrow to me and his friends in this company. Please accept our deepest sympathy in your bereavement. . . .

I do hope the knowledge that your son is keenly missed and that we share your sorrow will in some measure alleviate the suffering caused you by your great loss. . . .

But neither he, nor anyone else, could explain to those families why their prayers had not been answered. . . .

Many years later, one of PFC David L. Johnson's high school classmates left this poem as a tribute on his Virtual Wall page:

It is as if a silver chord
Were suddenly grown mute,
And life's song with its rhythm warred
Against a silver lute.

It is as if a silence fell
Where bides the garnered sheaf,
And voices murmuring, "It is well,"
Are stifled by our grief.

It is as if the gloom of night
Had hid a summer's day,
And willows, sighing at their plight,
Bent low beside the way.

For he was part of all the best
That Nature loves and gives,
And ever more on Memory's breast
He lies and laughs and lives.

—Paul Laurence Dunbar, "To A Dead Friend"


* * *

The year 1968 had just begun, and the inset second hand on the silver Wittnauer wristwatch would continue to tick. . . .

Thank you.