

GOLD M BROWN

# THE SONS OF BARDSTOWN

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25 YEARS OF VIETNAM  
IN AN AMERICAN TOWN

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JIM WILSON

JAMES T MOOR

VID B COLLINS

JIM A VERA

## THE SONS OF BARDSTOWN

"The whole town, the entire area, was very upset about what had happened to the boys over there, to our boys," Ronnie's father remembers, "and the telephones were very, very busy."

"This was a bad time for Bardstown. It was a bad time for anyone to wear a uniform here. It meant they were from Fort Knox and bringing bad news. If you heard a knock on your door, it meant someone was hurt or had been killed," Tom Raisor's wife, Mozena, says.

"It was a time when no one wanted to go to the door, or pick up the telephone. I guess a lot of us thought this would keep the bad news from us. It didn't.

"The mood in this town then was one of fear, worry, great concern, fear of what we would find out next. The entire town was very upset," she continues.

"Once we found out something for certain, then we would go to that person's house to see what they needed, to help where we could, to bring a shoulder to cry on, or just listen to them," Mozena adds.

"We were all just beginning to make a life for each other, raise families, to plan our futures, then this had to happen. All of a sudden, these people are gone out of our lives, some never to come back," she says. "It was a horrible time.

"People almost fainted at the sight of a uniform then," she recalls.

"I remember that when Tommy came home, he went to Bucky Ice's house to talk to his mom and dad about what happened on the hill," Mozena says. "He was in uniform when he knocked on the door, and Mrs. Ice almost fainted, until she realized who it was. She thought it was the army bringing her bad news."

Deanna Simpson also read that very brief account of the attack on Fire Base Tomahawk. But even before she read that news story, the night before the assault by North Vietnamese commandos, she had a strong feeling, a premonition, that her husband, Ronnie, was in trouble. Then, Friday morning, she heard a little more about the attack on the radio, but no names, no casualties were mentioned. Later that day, she received a letter from her husband in which he told her that he was fine, that he was in no danger. Like the rest of the wives, she heard nothing about the

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attack on Saturday or Sunday. Nevertheless, she had the feeling that something bad had taken place, that something was not right.

"I was laying down on the bed Monday morning, looking out the window," she remembers. "I had a clear view of the road leading up to the house. Then I saw the army car coming around the corner.

"I knew they were coming to see me," Deanna says. "Then two men got out, knocked, and came in and told me that Ronnie was missing in action.

"I couldn't figure out why they told me he was missing, because I knew he was dead, I could feel it," she remembers. "I just felt that he was dead. I knew it the night before I read about the attack in the paper.

"Sometimes I know that something has happened even before it happens," she explains. "It happened once, later, with my daughter. I knew of an incident even before she told me about it. It's happened a few other times, too.

"I found out Monday morning that David Collins had been killed even before they came to see me. Afterward, I found out about Jim Moore, that he had been burned," she continues. Later, she found out that Jim Moore had died.

"I was pregnant at the time, I was overdue, I was upset. So I didn't go anywhere, I couldn't go anywhere, I couldn't go see the other wives, but I did talk to Patsy Collins on the phone," Deanna Simpson explains.

At that time, she was living with relatives in Bardstown. Her family lived several miles from town, the road was hilly, there were many curves, so her husband felt that it would be best if she stayed in town until the baby was born.

It was, by far, the most traumatic period in her life, and her grief ran very deep. "My mother-in-law told me that my hurt in losing Ronnie was never as bad as hers, because he was her son," Deanna recalls. "Maybe she was right.

"I felt like they [the army] knew that he was dead," she says. "As far as my condition was concerned, being pregnant, what difference would it make if they told me then or waited one day, or two days? Did they think I would be stronger?

"On Wednesday, the two army men came back and told me

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that Ronnie had been killed," she says. "I didn't say anything. I just listened.

"Later, this nice young soldier from Fort Knox came over to help me with paperwork, social security, GI insurance, Ronnie's personal belongings," she relates. "This went on for a few days, then one day he was killed in an automobile accident, so they had to send someone else over."

Pat Allender, who married her husband, Donnie, while Charlie Battery was in Texas, first heard about the attack on Monday, three days after it occurred. Pat, who is Deanna Simpson's sister, heard first that Ronnie Simpson had been killed.

"I called Carol Simpson, Deanna's sister-in-law, and she told me that he was reported as missing in action," Pat Allender remembers. "By this time, I had already heard that David Collins had been killed, and I had heard that several others had been wounded." Now, Pat was very concerned because she had not heard from her husband, who was in one of the gun crews in Charlie Battery. It was several days before she received a letter from him.

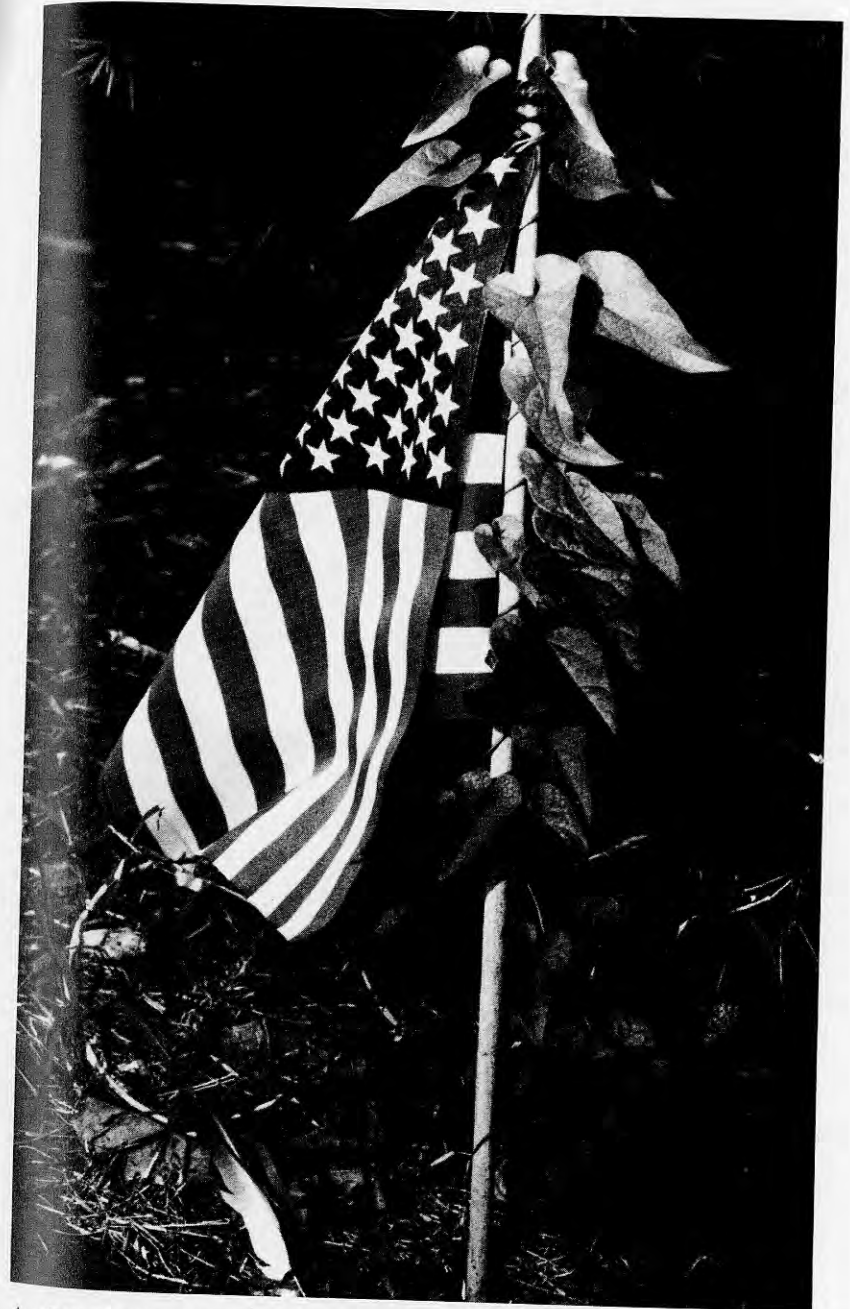
But when he called home Monday morning to talk to his parents, she did find out that he was not injured.

"I was canning green beans when I got a call from Donnie's mother, who wanted to talk to me. She said she was at the cleaner's, which was within walking distance, so I went there," Pat Allender remembers. "She said that Donnie had called, he was okay, and that he wanted to come home with Ronnie's body. At that time, we didn't even know if Ronnie was dead."

"Donnie Allender called home on Monday via the Red Cross and asked if he could escort Ronnie's body home," Deanna Simpson remembers. "That was the first time I knew for sure that Ronnie had been killed. The army said no, that they had trained body escorts for this."

"I was calling Mother and Dad, but they weren't home," Donnie Allender remembers, "so I talked to Sandy, my sister, who was fifteen at the time, and told her that I could escort Ronnie's body home but someone would have to go through the Red Cross with a request for me to do this.

"But it never did pan out, and three days later, I was transferred to another unit," he says.



A vine plant grows around a small American flag planted among the military monuments outside the courthouse.  
(PHOTO BY MARY ANN LYONS)



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"Everyone here knew who was on that hill and the entire town was greatly concerned," Mozena Raisor remembers. "I would say that if you brought up the Vietnam war at this time, you would get a very negative response, certainly not like the response would have been a few years ago."

"It seemed like the whole town went into mourning, it seemed like everyone was in a daze," Mary Collins says. "The wives that had not heard about their husbands were in total fear."

"Every minute seemed like a lifetime for those women as they waited to hear something, yet [were] afraid to pick up the phone, or answer a knock on the door," Mary adds.

"I could put myself in their position, because had I not heard about Wayne, I would be just as fearful as they were," Mary continues, "and I was very worried who the next one would be that had been killed."

"Remember, we were all close friends, we had all grown up together, all the guys were close, the wives had gotten very close, we were just like a family," Mary says.

Libby Hibbs was at home when she heard on the radio Monday morning that the unit had been attacked. "I didn't know what to do. Then friends began calling. They wanted information. I had none. Nothing." Then she called a close friend, Mary Collins, but no one answered. "I found out later that she had gone to her mother-in-law's house to be with them."

"Then I called Betty Stone, and she told me about David and Wayne," Libby says.

"Why don't you come over here and stay with me for a while," said Betty Stone, who was worried about her husband, Charles.

"I'll be there as soon as I can," Libby said. She took her baby to her mother, and she and Betty were together until the early morning hours, calling other wives, talking to friends, trying to find out if there were others who had been killed or wounded. Some could add a little information, others had not heard of the attack. As the hours passed that Monday, the town became aware of the tragedy atop Fire Base Tomahawk.

"Then we began to find out the names of the others who had



Memorial at Tomahawk to those from Bardstown killed during June and July of 1969.

(PHOTO COURTESY OF JERRY JANES)

Twenty year reunion of those from Bardstown who survived the war.

(PHOTO COURTESY OF DON PARRISH)



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been killed or wounded," Libby says. "It was awful. Dreadful. I couldn't believe this was really happening to us.

"The mood of the town was one of sadness. Everyone was so depressed. It seemed like everyone was waiting for the next bit of bad news, for the name of the next one of our boys who had died or been wounded," she continues. "People would stop you on the street and ask you if you had any news, if there was anything they could do to help you."

It was almost two weeks before Libby learned of the fate of her husband, Ronnie. She never received any word from the army as to his status—was he wounded? missing? perhaps dead?

"My husband's uncle, A. V. Hibbs, called the Red Cross and told them about the attack, that my husband hadn't written or called, that we didn't know what had happened to him," Libby remembers. The Red Cross quickly located her husband in a hospital in Japan undergoing treatment for burns on his back and arms.

"His mom and dad, the whole family, came over to my house, and his uncle called Japan and we all got to talk to him," Libby remembers.

"I thought I was in heaven when I heard his voice," she says.

"How are you?" she asked.

"I'm fine, I'm not hurt bad," he answered. Then everyone talked to him for more than an hour.

Libby asked him why he hadn't written to her.

"I wrote you every day," he told her. He had. The letters all arrived a few days later in one big bundle.

Ronnie Hibbs never returned to Charlie Battery. When he left the hospital, his enlistment was just about up, so he was sent home.

Linda Blanford and her thirteen-month-old son lived with her parents in St. Francis, Kentucky, about eighteen miles from Bardstown. They didn't have a telephone, so there was no way to reach her and tell her about the attack on Charlie Battery. She heard two days later on television that the unit had been overrun, but she did not know if her husband, Louis T. Blanford, was safe. "I didn't know if he was alive, hurt, or if he was still there at the time, because he was scheduled to leave the unit on June 22, and maybe he left early," she remembers.

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"His mother came over to my parents' house and told me he had called, that he had been wounded and that he was in the hospital," she relates. "She told me he'd call back as soon as he could, so I packed my clothes, took the baby, and stayed with his parents, waiting for him to call." About a week later, the telephone rang.

"How are you? Are you badly hurt?" she asked.

"I'm okay, I'm okay. I got hit in both legs, the back, and one shoulder, but I'm all right," he reassured his wife.

"How are you? How's the baby?" he wanted to know.

"We're both fine," she told him. "I'm so happy to hear your voice."

Then he gave her the names of those who had died, who were seriously wounded, who had suffered lesser wounds.

"He sounded pretty good to me, under the circumstances," Linda remembers.

"I was so worried," says his mother, Mrs. Twyman Blanford, "but I felt better after I talked to him. He sounded wonderful." She didn't know how badly he had been injured. "He just kept saying he would be all right," his mother says.

A few days after the attack, Betty McClure, whose husband was the battery commanding officer when the unit went overseas, and Nina Cundiff, wife of the battalion commander, Robert, talked to some of the wives and parents.

"We talked to Patsy Collins, we went to see her parents. We tried to talk to everyone," she remembers. "It was one of the hardest things I've ever had to do. It's very hard to extend condolences to someone whose husband has been killed, and your husband is still living."

By Tuesday, grief was everywhere. The people were numb, in shock.

"That was the saddest day that will ever hit Bardstown, or Nelson County," says Bill Jones, owner of a restaurant and a motel in Bardstown, and a resident of many years.

"I think at that moment, a whole lot of people wished the United States had never gotten into the war in Vietnam," Jones adds, "and I think a lot of 'em still feel that way today."



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"The people here were pretty upset back then, and I think that's when the mood changed against the war," he continues. "And then, when the bodies started to come back, this was a pretty sad town," he says.

"I think it was a terrible war, but like I said before, when it started, I was all for it. But then it dragged on, and the way it was fought, I really did get bitter about it," he continues.

On Wednesday, June 25, Betty Stone and three other wives went to the funeral home to pay their respects to Sgt. Harold M. Brown, who had been killed on June 11. With Betty, whose husband, Charles, was in one of the gun crews that was attacked on Fire Base Tomahawk, were Patsy Collins, whose husband, David, had been killed; Mary Collins, whose husband, Wayne, had been critically wounded; and Patsy Moore, whose husband, Jim, had been burned over much of his body and later died.

David Collins, Ronnie Simpson, Ronnie McIlvoy, Jim Moore, Luther Chappel. This brought to eleven the number of young men from Bardstown, the local Guard unit, or close by who were killed in Vietnam. And the grief was far from over.

That same day, June 25, Barry Neal Thompson was killed by enemy gunfire near the Cambodian border. His mother, Veneta Thompson, never received a telegram from the army notifying her of her son's death, which is customary. Nor did she ever receive a telephone call. She found out about his death three days later, on Saturday, when an army sedan, by now an accustomed but not accepted sight along the streets and rural roads of this small farming community, showed up at her house at noon.

"A chaplain said simply that my son had died in action," Mrs. Thompson remembers, "and a few minutes later, he was gone.

"I was in shock, I was numb, very numb. There's no way to explain to you my grief," she adds. "You just had to experience it.

"It wasn't until much later that I found out through a telegram that the army sent me that he died of wounds to his head and neck near the Cambodian border," she continues.

She did, however, receive the following letter about three weeks after her son's death:

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DEPARTMENT OF THE ARMY  
COMPANY B, 1ST BATTALION, 28TH INFANTRY

(Lions of Cantigny)

APO San Francisco 96345

12 July 1969

Mr. and Mrs. Emmett B. Thompson

Route 2

Cox's Creek, Kentucky 40013

Dear Mr. and Mrs. Thompson:

I extend to you my most profound sympathy on the recent loss of your son, Specialist Fourth Class Barry N. Thompson, Company B, 1st Battalion, 28th Infantry. At approximately 2120 hours on 25 June 1969 at Delta Medical Hospital, your son died as a result of fragmentation wounds sustained in action against the enemy. He was fatally wounded earlier on this date while on an ambush patrol with his company.

News of your son's death comes as a great shock to all who knew him, and his loss will be felt deeply within this organization. I sincerely hope the knowledge that Barry was an exemplary soldier and died while serving his country will comfort you during your hours of sorrow.

Memorial services for Barry were not held at this time due to the tactical commitment of the unit. However, I can assure you that Memorial services will be held as soon as possible.

If we can be of any assistance, please do not hesitate to write. Once again, personally and for the officers and enlisted men of this command, please accept this letter as a symbol of our sympathy.

Sincerely yours,

FRANK S. DAVERSO

CPT, Infantry

Commanding