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Someone Special Once Lived There

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I never took LSD, but I certainly flashbacked to February 2, 1972 while reading Tim O'Brien's fictitious book, **"The Things They Carried."** This was the featured book in last year's city-wide Big Read program. Passages made me vividly remember that I was in the basement of the Phi Delt house at Centre College with approximately twenty pledge brothers. As we watched on national TV each of us realized the moment at hand had the potential to change our lives forever. Each of us nervously waited for our birthday to be drawn from a lottery barrel to determine our draft number. As aptly described in the contemporary song by Country Joe and the Fish, a low draft number possibly meant " . . . the next stop is Viet Nam." I remember wondering whether I would soon be leaving my new college friends and how long a college deferment lasted? I specifically remember that Craig Johnson's draft number, a pledge brother and fellow swimmer sitting beside me, was # 8. I remember holding my breath and relaxing when my birthday was drawn with # 146. I remember thinking, "Maybe Nixon will end this war soon and # 146 will not be needed." (As fate would have it, my draft number would have been # 4 in 1971 and # 222 in 1973.) Selfishly relieved, I remember thinking, "Poor Craig, I hope he can make it through the swim season and semester." With a fateful turn of the barrel, thanks to a relatively high lottery number and the war ending in 1973, I avoided Viet Nam. Over the past forty-seven years, other than briefly thinking what might have been, my life moved on. My intense exposure to military service and its consequences had lasted all of one hour.

But O'Brien's book made me think of the many soldiers who served and whose lives were forever changed, both mentally and physically. For those of you under age forty-six, the draft was never an option, in 1973 the United States moved to a voluntary military. As one who faced the draft but never served, I tremendously admire each of you and your family members who served. Truly, thank you for your service and the many personal sacrifices known only to you and your family.

But for purposes of this paper, to better appreciate the life-changing impact of military service, this paper is divided into two parts: 1. Why O'Brien's book made me flashback to 1972, and 2., To remember nine men with Hopkinsville connections who faced combat. Hopefully, as we drive by their Hopkinsville homes in the future, we will better appreciate that someone special lived in that house. Although we only know a small portion of their military story, each has left behind a proud legacy. All but one has now passed, with two dying in combat. Like O'Brien, each soldier must have asked himself before enlisting, "What am I getting myself into?" With an intensity only war can provide, each man had no choice but to confront their personal philosophies with real-world consequences.

When I first began reading the book I immediately thought of a song-writer/musician named Jesse Winchester. Winchester was an honor graduate from Williams College who became a conscientious objector due to his opposition to the Viet Nam war. Winchester moved to Canada in 1967 and did not return to the United States full-time until 2012. In a *Rolling Stone* interview Winchester later noted, "I was so offended by someone coming up to me and presuming to tell me

who I should kill and what my life was worth." Although there were 171,000 conscientious objectors in Viet Nam, Winchester is the only conscientious objector of which I am aware.

In comparison, this is how O'Brien's main character decided whether to avoid the draft and move to Canada:

> This is one story I've never told before. Not to anyone. Not to my parents, not to my brother or sister, not even to my wife. To go into it, I've always thought, would only cause embarrassment for all of us, a sudden need to be elsewhere, which is a natural response to a confession. . . . All of us, I suppose, like to believe that in a moral emergency we will behave like the heroes of our youth, bravely and forthrightly, without thought of personal loss or discredit. Certainly that was my conviction back in the summer of 1968. Tim O'Brien: a secret hero. **The Lone Ranger**. If the stakes ever became high enough---if the evil were evil enough, if the good were good enough—I would simply tap a secret reservoir of courage that had been accumulating inside me over the years.

When O'Brien's draft notice arrived in the mail, he thought a mistake had been made:

> A mistake—a foul-up in the paperwork. I was no soldier. I hated Boy Scouts. I hated camping out. I hated dirt and tents and mosquitoes. The sight of blood made me queasy, and I couldn't tolerate authority, and I didn't know a rifle from a slingshot. I was a *liberal*, for Christ-sake.

Having graduated college and before he had to report, O'Brien's character worked through many thoughts, including:

> All around me the options seemed to be narrowing, as if I were hurtling down a huge black funnel, the whole world squeezing in tight. There was no happy way out. . . . Moreover, I could not claim to be opposed to war as a matter of general principle. . . . Beyond all this, or at the very center, was the raw fact of terror. I did not want to die. Not ever. But certainly not then, not there, not in a wrong war. . . . At some point in mid-July I began thinking seriously about Canada. . . . Both my conscience and instincts were telling me to make a break for it, just take off and run like hell and never stop. . . . It was a moral split. I couldn't make up my mind. I feared the war, yes, but I also feared exile. I was afraid of walking away from my own life, my friends and my family, my whole history, everything that mattered to me. I feared losing the respect of my parents. I feared the law. I feared ridicule and censure. . . .

Ultimately, O'Brien's character "cracked," and he drove to within a mile of the Canadian border where for six days he pondered his options at the Tip Top Lodge. With Canada in clear sight across the lake, O'Brien's character realized:

> . . . Canada had become a pitiful fantasy. . . . And right then I submitted. I would go to the war—I would kill and maybe die—because I was embarrassed not to. That was the sad thing. And so I sat in the bow of the boat and cried.

At this point in O'Brien's book what I find interesting is the protagonist does not attempt to rationalize his decision based upon religious, philosophical, or political grounds. Instead, his reluctance to serve is grounded upon an emotional response, the terror of getting shot and the embarrassment of disappointing his family and hometown. But as you can imagine, O'Brien's main character did his duty, served with honor, lost several friends in the war, and returned home to live as normal a life as possible. As indicated by the book's title, his Viet Nam experiences and his life upon returning home involved more than simply carrying items in his knapsack. When push comes to shove, I imagine all soldiers experience similar thoughts before leaving the safety of their hometown and family. With that perspective in mind, let us now remember nine Hopkinsville men who also remained in O'Brien's proverbial boat and served with distinction.

Our first soldier is Sergeant Joseph Caskey Sr., an American Revolutionary soldier who lived in this house at 4205 Pembroke Road and is buried in the nearby family cemetery. The home, originally a log house, is now owned by Henry and Lisa Gould. Born in Tyronne, Ireland, Caskey deserted from the British Army under General Howe at age eighteen and voluntarily enlisted in the 7th Pennsylvania Regiment. The Declaration of Independence had been signed just three months earlier. Caskey crossed the Delaware "on the ice" on Christmas Day, 1776 and spent the 1777-78 winter with General Washington at Valley Forge. In a family letter, family members recount Caskey's memory of seeing General George Washington for the first time:

> Arriving near the American lines, he was conducted by a soldier of the outpost into camp. As he marched along he was stuck with the appearance of an officer on horseback and the soldier pointed to him and said, "Caskey, did you ever see God Almighty?" No said Caskey, "Well there he is," replied his companion. This officer, the god of the soldier's idolatry, was Washington.

Caskey's 1829 pension request indicates he served under General Washington at the battles of Trenton, Princeton, Brandywine, Monmouth, and Yorktown. After serving over five years and receiving an honorable discharge, Caskey was furloughed in December, 1781, moved to Christian County in 1802, and died in Christian County at age eighty-nine in 1847.

Although accounts differ, Caskey applied for military pensions in 1829 and 1836. Caskey's obituary in the *Hopkinsville Gazette in* 1847 eulogized him as follows:

> Joseph Caskey was an upright, honest man, a good citizen. Has left behind him a large and respectable family of children and grandchildren. Was a pure and devoted patriot. Firmly attached to the institutions of his adopted country, and to the day of his death was a Whig good and true. May the brave old soldier rest in peace.

Our second soldier is Benjamin Helm Bristow, Jr, a young attorney from Elkton who practiced law in Hopkinsville from 1858-1861. Although I could not confirm the address of his Hopkinsville home or law office, a Kentucky historical plaque in Elkton marks Bristow's family homeplace. Bristow's service in the Union

Army distinguished him from the great majority of local soldiers who enlisted with the Confederacy. Bristow, a Republican, served as a Lieutenant Colonel in the Union's 25th Kentucky Infantry and was injured at Shiloh early in the war. Following the war, Bristow's fascinating life is an example of how military service often provides career opportunities that perhaps would not have otherwise existed. Immediately following the Civil War Bristow moved to Louisville to become the United States Attorney for the Western District of Kentucky. For his effective prosecution of the newly passed 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments involving civil rights, Bristow moved to Washington D. C. to become the nation's first Solicitor General. (The Solicitor General serves as the government's lead attorney when arguing cases before the United States Supreme Court.) Bristow was then chosen by President Grant to become the first Secretary of Treasury, was instrumental in prosecuting those involved in the Whisky Ring, ran for president on the Republican ticket in 1876, and was the second president of the American Bar Association. Bristow died in New York City in 1896 at age 64. (Bristow's Kentucky law partner, John Marshall Harlan, later served as a United States Supreme Court Justice and wrote the famous dissent in *Plessey v. Ferguson.)*

A third soldier with an amazing story is First Sargent John H. W. Collins, an African American soldier buried in the 5.3 acre Union Benevolent Cemetery # 5 on Vine Street. As indicated on his headstone, First Sergeant Collins fought in the Civil War with the 54th Massachusetts, Company H, made famous in the Denzel Washington and Morgan Freeman movie, *Glory.* As you may recall the 54th

Massachusetts was the first "colored troop" regiment that experienced combat during the Civil War. Collins was born in Fayetteville, North Carolina, was a printer or painter in Chicago before the war, enlisted as a private at age twenty-two, and enlisted in Readville, Massachusetts (near Boston) in 1863. (My personal belief is that Collins was a printer and not a painter before the war.)

The 54th's military records indicate there were only two Master Sergeants (same as a First Sergeant) in the 54th. Remarkably, Collins was one of these two First Sergeants and was promoted on May 13, 1863 at Fort Meigs, Massachusetts. Two months later Collins was wounded in the main assault on Fort Wagner, South Carolina (near Charleston) and mustered out in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina two years later on July 18, 1865.

In addition to serving as a regimental leader, historians have described Collins as " . . . a strong advocate for the black soldier's rights. Indeed, a belief in racial equality formed an integral element of his concept of military service." Collins has been further described as " . . . an intelligent and politically active noncommissioned officer . . . who served as the actual editor of *The Swamp Angel,* the 54th's regimental newspaper." During the war Collins was also a regular contributor to *The Christian Recorder*, the well-respected newspaper based in Philadelphia associated with the African Methodist Episcopal Church. Collin's advocacy for social equity is evident in this one sentence written by Collins, "We have got rights that white men are bound to respect." Regrettably, Collins died in 1880 at the young age of 38-39. What remains unknown is how an articulate

regimental leader in the 54th, ended up in Hopkinsville following the war? (In the movie, Morgan Freeman plays the role of a private promoted to Master Sergeant based upon his leadership skills and character; possibly Collins?)

A distinguished World War I soldier from Hopkinsville who almost became the Commandant of the Marine Corps was Major General Logan Feland. Feland was born in Hopkinsville in 1869. Feland was one of the many local young men who graduated from Ferrell's Military Academy between 1873 and 1903. Ferrell's Academy was located " . . . near the river at the foot of Thirteenth Street," adjacent to the Pioneer Cemetery and now overlooking Little River and the Hall of Justice. Led by Major J. O. Ferrell, a former Confederate officer, Ferrell's Military Academy was one of the many southern schools organized after the Civil War whose primary goal was to rebuild the leadership hierarchy of the South. After graduating from MIT with a degree in architecture, Feland served as the commanding general of the Department of the Pacific, served in the Spanish-American War, the occupation of Veracruz, and commanded all troops in World War I at the Battle of Belleau Wood. A side story is that Feland was in line to become the Commandant of the United States Marine Corps but was opposed by Brigadier General Cyrus Radford, who coincidently was also from Hopkinsville (no family connection). Apparently, Radford's primary reason for opposing Feland was that General Radford's family had supported the Confederacy whereas Feland's family had supported the Union. Feland retired from the Marines in 1933, died in 1936 at age 66, and is buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

(As an aside, it is interesting to imagine the leadership and vision that individuals like Bristow, Feland, and their progeny might have brought to Hopkinsville had they remained in Hopkinsville following the Civil War. Arguably, some Republicans and Unionists believed their life would be better elsewhere following the Civil War.)

A memorable World War II soldier from Hopkinsville is Colonel Gilmer Merriwether Bell, born in 1892 and died at age 87 in 1979. Colonel Bell and his family lived at 1724 South Virginia Street, now the law office of James Bruce. Colonel Bell served in the military from 1915 until 1948. Colonel Bell served in France, Hawaii and Panama and survived the Bataan "Death March." As a direct consequence, Colonel Bell lost his voice and for the rest of his life could never speak above a whisper. Captured on Bataan in the Philippines in 1942 Colonel Bell remained a prisoner until 1945 when he was freed by a Russian tank outfit. During this period he was imprisoned in the Philippines, Formosa, Siberia, and Manchuria. Colonel Bell weighed only ninety pounds when liberated, compared to one-hundred-eighty pounds when the war started. When the Japanese surrendered in 1945, Colonel Bell was the senior American officer in the Japanese prison camp. But to me, as a nine year old, Colonel Bell will always be remembered as my grandfather's best friend who could not talk above a whisper when the three of us fished on Lake Barkley. (In fact, I still have some of Colonel Bell's fishing lures.) In retrospect, Colonel Bell represents that rare individual we wish we could now sit down with and respectfully ask "Please, tell me the rest of your story." As Colonel Bell's

grandfather was born near Bell Station and served in the Confederacy, I would ask Colonel Bell if family pride motivated him to serve in World War I and II? How did he lose his voice? What was it like to live in numerous Japanese prison camps? I would ask if it was really true, as told by my grandfather, that Colonel Bell accepted a samurai sword from the Japanese prison commander and to the cheers of the prisoners of war surrounding the parade ground slugged the prison commander?

And yet, as an example of when life is sometimes stranger than fiction, I know this story is true for the following reason. Several years ago I was in a local office and saw a Japanese samurai sword mounted on the wall. I asked the owner and he confirmed the sword was given to him by Colonel Bell as a gift. Taped inside the frame is this note:

> Colonel Gilmer Bell gave me this Japanese war sword at Christmas, 1975, and gave me the following information pertaining to this sword.
>
> Genji Matsuda, Taisa (colonel), Commander of all prisoners of war camps and prisoners in Manchuria. Colonel Bell was liberated in 1945 and on liberation made Matsuda Hikira bow with the dorsum parallel to the floor (reserved for royalty), and then Colonel Bell gave him a slap in the "pus". He then took the sword from him.

The current owner obtained an expert's appraisal and the sword was deemed to be produced in about 1550 in Mino Province by Kanetoki. Although the business owner has now retired, the sword continues to hang in the owner's home, with Colonel Bell's legacy respectfully remembered every day.

Another World War II soldier is Captain Clayton J. Mansfield, a soldier stationed at Fort Campbell during the mid-1940's. Captain Mansfield and his family lived at 2612 South Virginia Street, the house now owned by Tony and Margaret Prim. Although Captain Mansfield was not originally from Hopkinsville he was featured on the front page of the July 22, 1940 edition of *Life* magazine. *Life* described Mansfield as:

> Most Americans would sleep better these nights if there were more men in the nation's service like Captain Clayton J. Mansfield, 34, shown standing in the turret of what everybody else calls a tank but what the Cavalry, by law, must call a "combat car." A quiet spoken expert in mechanized war, he currently commands Troop E of the 1st Cavalry, and is busy training tank recruits at Fort Knox. The hawk on his shoulder strap and on the tank is the insignia of the 1st Cavalry which is to become part of a U.S. Armored Force.

Mansfield, a Pennsylvania native and 1928 West Point graduate, finished thirteenth in the modern pentathlon in the 1932 Los Angeles Olympics. Regrettably, Mansfield died on January 9, 1945 fighting in Belgium during the last days of the Battle of the Bulge. Captain Mansfield was awarded the Silver Star and Purple Heart, and is buried in the Henri-Chapelle American Cemetery and Memorial in Belgium.

I first became aware of Captain Mansfield as my father lived across the street from Mansfield's family on Tandy Lane. My father remembered oftentimes talking with Captain Mansfield as a ten-year old about the war. Following such conversations, my father would update the wall map he kept as a young boy with

pins that illustrated the progress of the war in Europe. (As fate would have it, Mansfield's son, Captain Clayton John Mansfield, Jr., also a West Point graduate, died at age 27 in Viet Nam in 1965. His name is listed on the Viet Nam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington D.C.)

Our third World War II soldier is Marine Corps Private Benjamin H. Gore, who grew up with four brothers and one sister in this house on Lafayette Road across from the Stadium of Champions. While in high school Gore played on the 1941 HHS championship football team that won twenty-three straight games. After graduating from high school Gore drove to Nashville and enlisted in the Marines. While serving in the Pacific Theatre Gore survived the initial landing on "Bloody Tarawa" after wading through four-hundred-yards of "chest deep water." Tragically, Private Gore was killed in the last days of the battle as the Marines cleared the last pockets of Japanese resistance from the tiny atoll. Gore was killed on Thanksgiving Day 1943, twenty years old, four months shy of his twenty-first birthday. On January 3, 1944 Gore's mother and father received a telegram that their son's remains were "not recoverable." Even more tragically, Gore's remains remained unrecoverable for seventy-three years. The graves of Gore and approximately thirty other Marines had been buried immediately following the battle but not re-discovered until 2015. By this time all of Gore's immediate family had died, never knowing Gore's true fate. Thankfully, through the efforts of History Flight, the remains of Private Gore and others who died on Tarawa were identified through DNA in 2015. Thanks to History Flight, on November 2, 2016 surviving family members like his niece Betsy

Bond and over thirty-five family members were able to honor Private Gore with full military honors. Gore's return home included a solemn flight from Honolulu to the Nashville airport and a continuous Tennessee and Kentucky police escort. Gore's journey home was respectfully recorded by the *Kentucky New Era*, Channel Four, and other local media. Gore's final resting place is now dutifully marked by a headstone in the Gore family gravesite in Riverside Cemetery.

Our eighth soldier is Colonel Peter K. Nicolos; a former Athenaeum member and former Viet Nam fighter pilot in the United States Air Force. "Nick" and my Aunt Mary retired to this house at 1333 Shallow Lake Circle. Many of you remember Peter or "Nick" as a quiet man with an inquisitive mind and a passion for history. Prior to Nick's death, the little I knew about Nick was he was born in California and his boyhood goal was to play baseball for the Los Angeles Dodgers. After enlisting in the Air Force at an early age, Nick served as a jet fighter pilot during the Cuban Missile Crisis, served three tours in Viet Nam, and was stationed overseas in England and South Korea. However, Colonel Nicolos is included not because he was my uncle but as an example of a soldier who respectfully declines to discuss his military service or accomplishments. Until Nick's passing in 2015 at age eighty, I never knew Nick three times had been awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. The Distinguished Flying Cross is awarded for, " . . . extraordinary heroism while engaged in action against an enemy of the United States, in military operations involving conflict with a foreign force . . ."

After reading each of Nick's three citations, all three involved flying his jet directly into intense military fire while protecting ground troops. What I find humbling is Nick kept the citations in a box in the bottom of his bedroom closet. Typical of many soldiers who experience combat, Nick returned to civilian life and attempted to quietly move on with his life.

The last soldier discussed is thirty-three old Army Captain Chris Mahre, a 2008 West Point graduate who grew up in this house at 153 Alumni Drive. Captain Mahre is representative of America's new volunteer soldier, one of the top 20% of applicants, now both male and female, deemed eligible for military service. No longer conscripted by the draft or threatened by local law enforcement officers to "join the military or go to jail," all current soldiers must survive an extremely competitive selection process. As an infantry officer, Mahre led approximately 120 men and women during two combat tours in Afghanistan. Following his four years at West Point and eight years of active service, Mahre leveraged his military benefits to graduate from Georgetown Law School in Washington D. C. Having recently passed the Texas bar examination, Mahre has begun a promising legal career in Houston at one of the nation's largest law firms.

In closing, a soldier's attempt to reconcile his/her personal beliefs with combat will always exist. But thankfully, tonight, as I stand here tonight fat, dumb, and happy, my life has been much easier because these nine men and many others served their country. In the future, whenever I drive by their Hopkinsville homes,

and I encourage you to do the same, let each of us offer a silent salute and remember, someone special once lived there.

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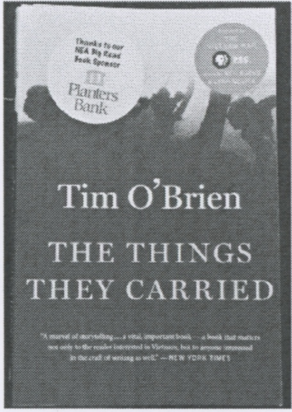

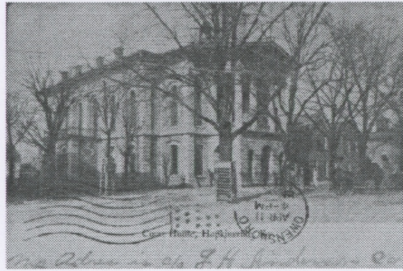

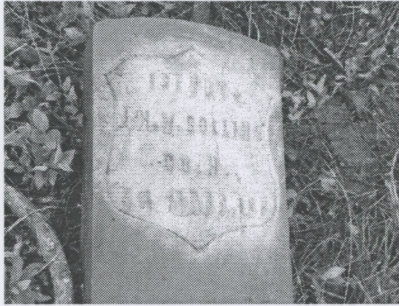

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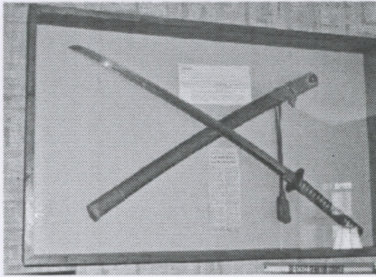

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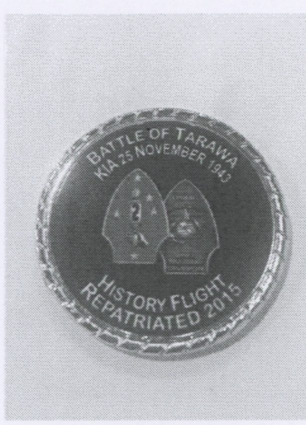
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