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"I wish people would not protest this war," wrote Tommy. "It would be really nice to know that people understood what we're trying to do... The V.C [Vietcong] here are more powerful than where I used to be. Nobody has messed with them and it will take us a while to get them under control, but I guarantee you we will. The sooner we do the sooner I come home."

Despite his pride at serving his country, Tommy nevertheless did not want his friends and family taking part in it. Several times he discouraged his younger brother from enlisting and, when he heard that his best friend (whose nickname was Dollar) had planned to do so, he wrote:

"I sure am sorry to hear about Dollar wanting to come into the Marines. I wish I could talk to him and make him join the reserves or navy or something else. [But] if he wants action, the Marine Corps is the one."

Tommy was killed on April 21, 1967, just three days shy of his 19th birthday. He had been in the country only four months. He wrote a letter home the day before he died:

"Hello family," he wrote, "it's been four days since I've been able to write because we were out on a South Vietnamese soldiers' hill for security. We just got back and are going out on a company operation tonight. It will be hairy because I will have to walk point. Maybe we will have some success. There is supposed to be at least a squad of Vietcong where we are going. I hope everything is OK... I got a birthday card and I appreciate it. I'm still considering myself 18 for four more days. I don't want to get older, really."

PRIVATE CLAUDE MCCAN JR.

Claude McCan joined the army to get away. Get away from rural Fulton County, get away from segregation and, perhaps most importantly, to get away from his uncle. His name is on panel 51E of the wall.

He went to Bailey Johnson High School in Alpharetta – the only black high school in North Fulton – and was among the final graduating class before the school was shut down and merged with the white schools.

Claude had led a tough life. His father had died when Claude was little and his mother a few years later when he was in middle school. Both died of heart attacks. The young McCan grew up in the home of his uncle and cousins who treated him as their own, but Claude always felt like a burden on his family. So he left.

Claude's second cousin is Deborah Robinson, who was the same age as Claude. The two grew up together.

"Back then kids were so much different than they are now," said Robinson. "There was segregation at that time. That was just the way of life. And we knew our place. You can do this, but you can't do that. We thought differently, and the biggest thing we could portray was character. And [Claude] had perfect character. He highly respected people and he was like a leader. Very good-natured. He was a kid that was in everything. Played basketball and an all around good student. Made good grades – but he could have made better."

It was in December of 1967 that Claude left for Vietnam. Being the only surviving member of his family, he was excused from the draft unlike many of his friends, but Claude signed up anyway.

"Joining the army was the best way to get out of here, and young men did it all the time," said Robinson. "Things were just different than they are today. There weren't that many jobs here [in North Fulton]. This was woods and farms and country. There was very little for black people out here. You either moved away to Atlanta or you went to Decatur." Claude went to Vietnam.

Claude was killed April 20, 1968 during operations in the Thua Thien region of Vietnam. It was the most violent area in the war, with more American deaths there than in any other province in the country.

News of his sudden death – just one month into his tour of duty – had a massive impact on the small communities, both black and white, of North Fulton.

"Everybody was devastated," mourned Robinson. "He had just left. Martin Luther King was killed shortly before, so we were all still shocked from that. The whole community was devastated. We were just a small community back then. There was a lot of sadness and mourning. It was a big funeral. People from everywhere turned up. Nobody from the area had been killed [until then]. There were people who had been hurt, but none had been killed."

END NOTE

Tommy and Claude's stories are just two of the many that could have been told. For more about veterans and those who died, contact your local Veterans of Foreign Wars office or American Legion office. For more information about Tommy Holtzclaw and the book about him, visit www.lettersfromtommyj.com.



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