

## LIVINGSTON SOLDIER FIRST CASUALTY OF VIETNAM

Herald-Citizen, Cookeville, TN:

Sunday, 6 November 2011, front page &

**SP4 James Thomas Davis**

b. 1 June 1936, Livingston, Overton Co., TN

d. 22 December 1961, Dong Nai, Vietnam

Buried: Good Hope Cemetery, Livingston, Overton Co., TN

Wife: **Geraldine (Martin) Davis**

Children: **Cindy Davis**

Father: **James Clarence Davis** (1914-1982)

Mother: **Mary Blanche Lansden** (1914-2001)

Buried: Good Hope Cemetery, Livingston, Overton Co., TN

**LIVINGSTON** – On a dark December night in 1961, a cab driver made his way toward the Davis residence on East Cedar Street in Livingston.

The merry feeling of Christmas was in the air, but on this cold, wintry evening, the Davis family was celebrating another happy occasion. It was Dec. 22 – the 15<sup>th</sup> birthday of Janie, the fourth of five children born to Clarence and Blanche Davis.

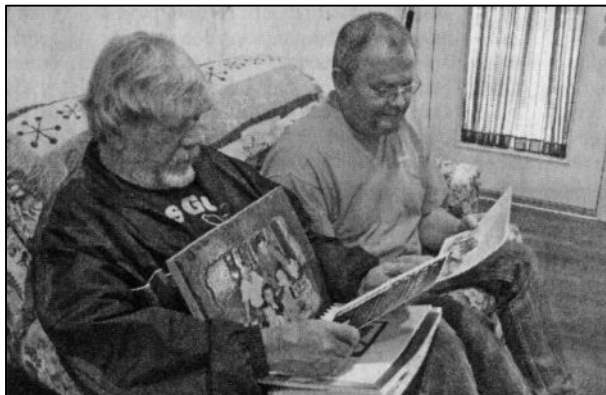


(Pictured: SP4 **James Thomas Davis**).

Adding to the festive mood was the anticipated return of eldest son Tom, who was serving in the Army and due home any time from Vietnam, a faraway place none of them had ever heard of before. They even had to get out a map to figure out where it was.

As best they could tell from photos and letters Tom had sent home over the past nine months, the 25-year-old soldier seemed to be in a tropical paradise.

“He loved it,” recalled younger brother Joe Davis. “He liked the outdoors, loved hunting and fishing, and it just made you think he was in a tropical place having a big adventure.”



(Pictured: Joe Davis and Jack Davis, both of Livingston, look at photos of their brother Tom Davis).

But lately, the tone of Tom’s letters had changed, indicating a growing sense of uneasiness. In one particular letter, he had asked his father to send him a .38

Special, as he and fellow comrades had yet to be issued military weapons.

“He didn’t even have a uniform,” youngest brother Jack Davis said of the then-undercover U. S. operation. “They were required to wear civilian clothes because they weren’t supposed to be over there. It wasn’t actually a war at that time.”



Tom was one of 100 or so members of the American Security Agency’s 3<sup>rd</sup> Radio Research unit first deployed in Vietnam in May 1961. His particular job was to comb the countryside, using specialized equipment to intercept enemy radio transmissions so as to pinpoint the precise location of Viet Cong forces.

(Picture: Specialist 4 James Thomas Davis served with the 3<sup>rd</sup> Radio Research Unit in

Vietnam in 1961. His job on the field was to monitor Viet Cong radio broadcasts using a directional finder, so as to aid the South Vietnamese Army in pinpointing the exact location of the enemy).

But the job was nearing completion, and Tom’s family – including wife Gerrie and baby daughter Cindy – were waiting anxiously for his return from the Southeast Asian jungle.

And such was the feeling on this particular December day 50 years ago as evening fell and Janie’s birthday party came to an end.

Then the taxi cab pulled up its driver carrying a telegram.

He knocked on the door.

#### LEADING UP TO VIETNAM:

James Thomas Davis was born June 1, 1936, Overton Co., TN. He was the eldest son of World War II veteran James “Clarence” Davis, a pharmacist at Davis and Norris Drug Store in Livingston, and Blanche Davis.

Both his grandfathers were pharmacists as well.

Clarence’s father, Dr. James W. Davis, ran the Live and Let Live Drug Store during the 1920s, and Blanche’s father, James Lansden, had the Lansden and Coward Drug Store.

Growing up, Tom spent many a day hunting and fishing and also enjoyed playing for the Livingston Academy football team. He spent three years as an engineering student at Tennessee Tech University before joining up with the Army.

After basic training, he was selected to join the Army Security Agency and took off for Fort Devens, MA, where he was trained as a radio direction finding intercept operator.

It wasn't long before his services were needed in Vietnam – wherever that was.

On the way there, he got to know a 19-year-old Mike Byrne.

“I met Tom on the plane going from the Philippines to Vietnam,” said Mike, who is now almost 70 and living in Gibbstown, NJ. “He was like an older brother.”



Both were part of the Army Security Agency's 3<sup>rd</sup> Radio Research unit, which arrived at the Tan Son Nhut Air Base on the outskirts of Saigon in May of 1961. It was one of America's first acts of commitment in supporting South Vietnam against the Viet Cong communist insurgency.

(Pictured: Tom Davis, second from left, takes time out for a Vietnamese meal during his service there in 1961. This photo was sent home to his family after his death).

While Tom's job was to get out in the field and monitor enemy communications, Mike worked in the operations center, where messages were copied and radio transmission schedules deciphered.

“We had different jobs on different shifts,” Mike said. Mike said, “I worked the night shift and saw Tom probably a couple of times a week when he was going out.

“His job was to determine exactly where the Viet Cong were. He rode in a truck and operated a directional finder.”

Once an enemy's location was discovered, the information was given to the South Vietnamese Army.

In the beginning, American forces operated in secret.

“We arrived in civilian clothes with regular U.S. passports, and our cover story was that we were ionospheric technicians,” Mike said. “Supposedly, we were bouncing radio signals off the ionosphere – that's why we had all our radio equipment. It was a silly story. Of course, we were basically spies.”

But pretty soon, the Viet Cong caught on to the disruption of their guerilla operations – and decided to retaliate.

“I remember Tom saying it’s getting nasty out there,” Mike said. “And that was maybe a month or six weeks before he died. We arrived in May, and I’d say by the end of October, the Viet Cong started to realize that every time one of our trucks went by that their guys on the radio were attacked.”

Then came Dec. 22, 1961.

“I went to work at 11 that night, and when I walked in, it was obvious that something had happened,” Mike said.

Earlier that day, Tom was returning from his work in a truck along with 10 South Vietnamese soldiers. He was in the front passenger seat, 12 miles west of Saigon, when a remote-controlled land mine detonated beneath the tailgate. Viet Cong forces proceeded to ambush the occupants, killing the nine Vietnamese troops in the back of the truck as they tried to escape. Tom had succeeded in pulling his injured driver to the safety of a water-filled culvert beneath the truck.

But Tom was unable to save himself.

He ran up the road, turning and firing as he went, before taking a bullet to the head about 50 feet in front of the truck.

He was the first American killed in combat in Vietnam.

**THE SHOCK:**

Upon hearing the news of Tom’s death, Mike said he was “flabbergasted.”

And attitudes began to change.

“Did you ever hear the expression ‘Ugly American’?” he said. “I think as a group that’s what we became. We pretty much withdrew.

When we first got to Vietnam we were trying to assimilate and help the people, but when Tom died, I don’t think many of us felt like it was worth it anymore. It was a difficult time.

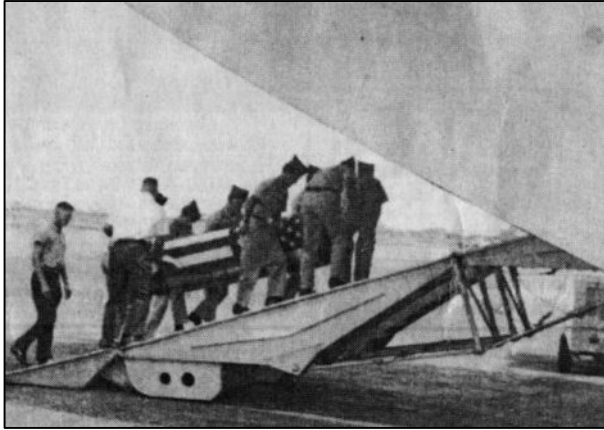
“And being so close to the holidays...Tom should have been home. We went to Vietnam for six months for temporary duty, but around September or October, everybody got extended for at least three more months. Tom should have been home with his wife and daughter before he died.”

Back home in Livingston, family members of Tom endured unspeakable shock and grief on the night of Dec. 22, 1961.

Jack Davis, who was 11 going on 12, remembers when the taxi cab arrived.

“The taxi driver brought a telegram and knocked on the door. It was the last day of school before Christmas vacation, and I was sitting at the dining room table.

“Dad went to the door, and he mumbled something and turned around. Then (he called Mother ‘Booger’) he said, ‘Booger, something bad ahs happed.’ Mother was in the kitchen cooking, and she ran in there, and that’s about the last thing I remember.”



Joe Davis, who had just started a family of his own and lived down the street, remembers getting a phone call from his other older brother, Bill.

(Pictured: The body of Specialist 4 James T. Davis is taken onto a plane headed back to the United States from Vietnam. The young Livingston native

was killed 50 years ago on Dec. 22, 1961).

“The phone rang, and he said you need to come up to Mom and Dad’s. Tom was killed.”

It was a tragedy no one had expected.

“We were waiting for him to be home,” Joe said.

After all, America wasn’t at war at the time.

Not yet.

“We didn’t have any reason to think he was going to get shot, you know?” Joe said. “We just didn’t think that way.”

And nothing much about the conflict had been on the news – but that changed soon enough.

#### A CHANGE OF THE TIMES:

Following the death of Tom Davis, tens of thousands of families across American experience the same horror of loss over the next decade and a half.

Out of the 2.7 million who served in Vietnam, more than 57,000 were killed, and almost three times that number wounded.

And, unlike the time when Tom served, Americans were continually bombarded with the latest news from Vietnam.

“It was on the news every night, something about Vietnam” Joe said. “Of course, all the protesters and young people were saying, ‘Who wants to go over there and be shot?’ So that’s when they went to Canada and burned their draft cards and ran and hid. National Guard shooting college kids—that’s not normal.

“But it just shows you the mood of the country, and that was due to TV. People saw that night after night after night while eating super, and it was just mass slaughter. It tore the whole country up. It was a very unpopular war.”

A war that changed America.

“That’s when we lost our innocence,” Joe said. “Music changed, clothes changed, food changed, people’s ways of thinking changed...everything changed. Living through the ‘60s was something.”

Even Tom’s comrade Mike, who continued serving in Vietnam through September 1962, ended up with mixed feelings about the war.

“When we were young, we believed in what we were doing,” he said. “We thought we were doing the right thing. I’m not so sure I feel that way today.”

When visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington D. C., he said he gets an empty feeling – especially when he see Tom’s name.

“I can never understand why the rest of us got to come home and live our normal lives and Tom had to die,” Mike said. “It just doesn’t make any sense. He didn’t deserve that.”

Fifty years have now passed, but the memory of the young soldier from Livingston refuses to fade away.

“Not a Christmas goes by that I don’t think about Tom,” said Mike.

And he’s not the only one.

Joe said, “Every year around this time, his name pops up, and people want to know what happened.

Then the Davis family simply explains that, like so many before and after him, Tom as a young man who served his country – and died in the process.

But, most importantly – just like all the other fallen soldiers – Tom Davis lived.

\*Read more about the History of Putnam Co., TN and surrounding areas at:  
<http://www.ajlambert.com>

### **James Thomas Davis – The Virtual Wall**

Specialist Four  
3RD RADIO RESEARCH UNIT, MAAGV  
Army of the United States  
01 June 1936 - 22 December 1961  
Livingston, Tennessee  
Panel 01E Line 004

#### Notes from The Virtual Wall

President Johnson was sadly misinformed if he identified SP4 Davis as the first American lost to hostile action in Vietnam. Fifteen servicemen - 6 Air Force, 5 Army, and 4 Navy - had been killed or listed as missing in action by the time SP4 Davis' team was wiped out, and nine others had died of illness or non-hostile injury.

For the record, the first "official" Vietnam loss is Air Force Technical Sergeant Richard B. Fitzgibbon on 08 June 1956; regretablely his son, Marine Lance Corporal Richard B. Fitzgibbon 3rd, also appears on the Wall - he was killed in action on 07 Sep 1965 while serving with H&S Company, 1/4 Marines.

The first hostile action losses were two members of an Army advisory team, Major Dale R. Buis of Pender, Nevada, and [Master Sergeant Chester M. Ovnand](#), of Copperas Cove, Texas, who were killed (along with two ARVN security guards) in a VC raid on the team's Bien Hoa headquarters on 08 July 1959.

None of which, of course, detracts in any way from SP4 Davis' service to our country.