

Tidwell first responder at 1944 troop train wreck

By: D. Ray Smith | *Historically Speaking* | The Oak Ridger | June 26, 2007

Editor's note: Following is part of an ongoing series about the 1944 troop train wreck in Highcliff, Tenn.

Over the last few weeks we have explored in detail the military reports of the response from the military personnel stationed at the Clinton Engineer Works in Oak Ridge. We saw wholesale involvement from Oak Ridge military personnel and strong leadership taken at the site of the troop train wreck — so much so that a second military detachment sent up from Georgia literally turned around and went back home, leaving the Oak Ridge military in charge.

This week I would like to tell you the rest of the story regarding the 16-year-old boy who was the first to respond to the wreck, Jim Tidwell. I think you will find the story as told by Tidwell's son, Mark Tidwell, an impelling saga of a man whose life was devoted to the memory of fellow military comrades and whose entire life may well have been altered by what he experienced as a 16-year-old from Highcliff, Tenn. — in the middle of the night, at the scene of a horrible train wreck, in the boulder-strewn bed of the Clear Fork River.

James (Jim) Tidwell, Jr. lived from 1927 until 1999. On Nov. 6, 1993, a large stone veteran's memorial was dedicated in downtown Jellico, Tenn. Tidwell had chaired the committee that created the memorial. Prominently positioned on the face of the monument is written "Jellico Troop Train Accident July 6, 1944" and 34 names are listed there. Note that there is one more name than included in reference materials I have located regarding this train wreck.

There is also a stone placed near the veterans' monument that states, "This monument honoring Jellico area veterans who gave their lives in service to our country, is an enduring testament to the dedication and hard work of James (Jim) Tidwell, Jr. His efforts as Chairman of the Veterans Monument Committee were untiring and inspired countless others to contribute to its erection and dedication. His rescue efforts following the Jellico Troop Train disaster in 1944 resulted in saving lives and the relieving of suffering. Extremely patriotic, he joined the U. S. Navy at age 17 and served in the Pacific theater during World War II. He later performed additional hazardous duty as a member of the allied occupational force and as a volunteer during the early testing of the atomic bomb. His experiences under fire left him determined to honor and remember those comrades at arms who served honorably and selflessly to insure the continuance of our liberty. This monument is largely the result of his determination. — Placed by Jellico area veterans, November 11, 1999."

As mentioned earlier, Jim Tidwell, 16, a Highcliff resident, was likely the first person to arrive at the wreck scene. He immediately went to work freeing men from the wreckage. Jim helped injured men up the cliff to Highway 25W using a lift rope. The steep slope, over 45 degrees, required six to eight men to hoist the injured up the slope. The first dead men were placed on rocks at the base of the slope on the bank of the river.

Jim also accompanied the first doctor to arrive as they sought to provide some aid to the trapped soldiers. Presumably Dr. Ned Watts of Jellico was the doctor that Jim assisted. Jim told of "much pitiful agony" as the doctor moved from one trapped soldier to another, administering syringes of painkiller to help ease the suffering. About 4 a.m. on Friday, July 7, 1944, Jim rested and slept in a friend's car parked on the highway.

When he awoke at around 9 a.m., military police from Oak Ridge had taken control of the wreck site. That's when he sat on the rock and was captured there by Ed Westcott's photograph of the wreck scene that was featured in last week's column.

Now read the rest of the story of Jim Tidwell, written by Mark Tidwell, Jim Tidwell's son.

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“James ‘Little Jim’ Tidwell Jr. was born in Highcliff on Nov. 3, 1927, and grew up in the same community. The Great Depression years were tough for the family, not unlike the hardships imposed upon millions of others of the same generation.



Jim Tidwell is shown along with USS Swenson, on which he served during World War II

“The outbreak of World War II, for the United States, on Dec. 7, 1941, ensured more hard times to come for our nation. Junior’s father, James ‘Big Jim’ Tidwell Sr., was already far away from home. He was in Panama helping to build the Trans-Isthmus Highway, which parallels the Panama Canal. Speculation was rampant just after Pearl Harbor was bombed. Junior’s mother had to console the crying kids because it was feared the Canal Zone might be attacked next to block any transfer of U.S. Naval assets from the Atlantic to the Pacific. There are still family photos today of ‘Big Jim,’ and the men of the unit he was a part of, with their gas masks and .45 automatics, issued shortly thereafter.

“Junior, like all young boys of that era, experienced a ‘going forth’ of droves of men to the ‘Service.’ The little community of Highcliff ended up sending around 40 men to serve in all theaters of World War II. Four paid the ultimate price, never seeing the prominent overlooks the community is named for again. Today, there probably aren’t 50 people living in the community.

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"Apart from living in the grips of a world war and hearing the daily dispatches about the war effort, Highcliff residents were well accustomed to seeing troop train after troop train of men pass through on the L&N Railroad. 'We all liked to get out and wave at the boys a-passin' through,' Junior liked to say. That helped to instill a sense of longing to do one's part in even more young men. There could be great adventure out there in the Pacific or in Europe... there could be a Gold Star for your mother to mournfully hang up as well.

"Thursday evening, July 6, 1944, brought Junior scenes of death and destruction akin to any battlefield. Having seen the infamous 'Troop Train #47' lay down smoke through Highcliff, and hearing of its crash just minutes later, as a curious young boy wanting to do what he could to help, he dashed up the tracks and was one of the first on the scene.

"My dad used to tell me lots of details about what he saw that night, particularly when we would be fishing in the Clear Fork River near, or at the actual scene, of the tragic derailment. He said those scenes made him all the more eager to do something for the war effort everyone was so fervently backing.

"When he turned 17, through his incessant nagging of his parents, they signed for him to join the U.S. Navy. Then it was off to San Diego for basic training, culture shock for sure for a fellow who had never strayed far from little old Highcliff. Soon afterwards, he was sailing across the Pacific on a destroyer, DD 729, USS Lyman K. Swenson. His diary tells of seeing whales, crossing the International Date Line, dodging floating mines, plucking downed pilots, and steaming out of Tokyo Bay during the occupation to dodge a tsunami. The Swenson saw extensive post-occupation-of-Japan duties around China and was there during the tumultuous actions of the communists. Later, Junior volunteered for hazardous duty and served in Operation Sandstone, in which he participated in the detonation of three atomic bombs in the Pacific Proving Grounds, serving on the Destroyer Escort DE 700, USS Currier.

"After discharge, James Jr. came home to work in surface coal mines and various construction jobs. No more, or no less, than the millions of other veterans and workers, both male and female, of this era, he came back to do his small part into building this nation into the juggernaut she became after World War II.

"He married Wilma Roberts on October 15, 1949. They had three children, Susan Jane Tidwell Brown, guidance counselor at Williamsburg, Ky., Independent School, William Ray Tidwell, rural route carrier, US Postal Service, Jellico, and Mark J. Tidwell, director of Jellico Public Library.

"James Jr. later worked at Westinghouse Electric in



Veteran's Memorial in the center of Jellico, Tennessee – placed there by a committee led by Jim Tidwell

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Cincinnati, Ohio, where he was second shift crew leader. He was a valued employee and was the 'highest paid man on the floor.' But, as with many natives of this area, the hills continually called his heart home. He gave up that promising position to come home and operate a bulldozer during the construction of I-75. Later, he went to work for the US Postal Service at Jellico, from where he would retire.

"James Jr. always thought highly of his fellow servicemen. He was chairman of the Jellico Area Veterans Memorial Committee. This committee raised the funds, and did all of the research to build the monument to area veterans, which now stands in Veterans Park, downtown (dedicated on Nov. 6, 1993). The committee fully agreed to include the names of those killed in the '1944 Troop Train Disaster' on the downtown monument.

"James Jr. passed away on July 28, 1999, leaving behind his wife of 49 years, three children, their spouses and 6 grandchildren, two sisters, Marjorie Johnson of Habersham, and Dorothy Powers of Clinton. Soon after his death, the city honored James Jr. with a granite marker placed at the downtown Veterans Monument. (Note from Ray: words on this marker were cited in the opening paragraphs of this column.)

"Jellico boasts a wealth of military history among its citizenry and the monument is always a place of pride, particularly during Memorial Day and Veterans Day. Jellico has lost two men in the Iraq War and I know dad would be saddened that names have had to be added to the monument ... but he'd be proud of their service! He worked hard to see that veterans that had their lives snuffed out not be forgotten, especially some of those he saw mangled, torn and dying, strewn among the boulders of the Clear Fork River less than a mile from his home."

Next week I would like to share with you a first-hand account of the bus driver, Leon Hatcher, who drove the first bus from Oak Ridge to the train wreck site and picked up "dead and alive" soldiers and took them to Oak Ridge hospital. Even today, remembering that bus trip is hard; Hatcher says, "I wish I had never made that bus trip! The memory has stayed with me all my life."