

# NORMAN LANE JR. MEMORIAL PROJECT

"FOR THOSE WHO FIGHT FOR IT, LIFE HAS A  
FLAVOR THE PROTECTED NEVER KNOW."

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Aboard the battleship USS *New Jersey*, Christmas Eve 1968. Army captains Roger Bounds, left, and Charles Finch, right, from 1st Platoon, 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company, confer with Captain Edward Snyder, skipper of the *New Jersey*. Originally commissioned in 1943, she had been on station off the coast of South Vietnam since September 1968.

December 21, 2021

To Friends of Norman Lane,

It was Thursday night, December 19, 1968. In Brownsville, Tennessee, the finale of the triumphant Haywood High School (HHS) Tomcat football season would come that night at the annual banquet, held in the school cafeteria. The team had completed a perfect 11-0 season, had won the Big Ten Conference championship, and had been ranked #3 in the state in the final Associated Press prep football poll. As HHS senior Camille Gaffron wrote in her weekly column for the December 20 issue of the *Brownsville States-Graphic*, the banquet would

<http://www.normanlanejrmemorialproject.org/>

honor the varsity boys and cheerleaders and their dates, the freshman squad and cheerleaders, the parents of the seniors, the coaches and their wives, and all the men who work with the team.



Awards ceremony, HHS football banquet, December 19, 1968. From left to right: Harry Baddour (1952-2012), David Stewart (1950-2017), Robert Rooks, Steve Stoots (wearing glasses, 1951-2010), Bobby Garland, Rocky Felker, and Randy Pendergrast (1951-2010). All except Rocky Felker played with the 1965 “Baby Toms.”

massive Saturn V rocket, which would send Apollo 8 astronauts Frank Borman, Jim Lovell, and Bill Anders on mankind’s first journey to the Moon, began to move.

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About 9,300 miles from Cape Kennedy, it is Monday, December 23, 1968. Local time in Dong Ha, Quang Tri Province, South Vietnam is twelve hours ahead of Eastern Standard Time. Army Capt. Charles Finch, leader of 1st Platoon, 220th Reconnaissance Airplane Company (RAC), better known as the Catkillers, has been flying forward air controller (FAC) missions in the Cessna O-1 “Bird Dog” since July. Capt. Finch, call sign Catkiller 19, and his colleagues fly in support of infantry units, including those of the 3rd Marine Division, operating just south of the Demilitarized Zone (DMZ). Over July-October, those missions included flights across the DMZ, locating targets in North Vietnam. But President Johnson’s November 1 bombing halt had ended that aspect of the mission. In Jim Hooper’s *A Hundred Feet Over Hell*, published in 2021, Finch recalled that day in Dong Ha, two days before Christmas 1968, and a sort of deus ex machina that delivered him from a dreary holiday:

Of the many real characters in the 220th RAC, Stanford graduate Roger “Outta” Bounds was certainly one of the most meticulous, organized and best connected. A couple of days before Christmas we were at Dong Ha watching the rain. I wasn’t complaining about the break.

Most, if not all of those Tomcat seniors had played with the “Baby Toms,” the freshman team, in the fall of 1965. That group had also gone undefeated and had won the Jeff Davis League championship. HHS English and French teacher Norman Lane had assisted Coach Russell Lindsey with the 1965 Tomcat freshmen, but “Mr. Lane, Sir,” as his HHS students knew him, would never know of the successes of the 1968 varsity squad. Since early April of that year, 1st Lt. Norman Lane, USMCR, had been a “townsman of a stiller town,” resting among the dead in Tabernacle Cemetery just outside Brownsville.

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On Saturday morning, December 21, Jack King, NASA’s “voice of launch control,” had called it, at 7:51 a.m. EST: “We have lift-off.” The



Official NASA photo ID S68-56001. “Launch of Apollo 8 lunar orbit mission.” A thin sliver of the crescent Moon appears on the horizon.



In the last week I'd taken eight hits, four of them when I'd been down low chasing a tiger. Out of the blue, Bounds mentioned that he had a relative on the USS *New Jersey* and we might fly out there the next day. In Vietnam there were always helicopters going somewhere and, knowing Roger, I figured it just might happen.

\* \* \*

In the early predawn hours of Christmas Eve, December 24, in Dong Ha, which serves as the forward operating base for the Catkillers' 1st

Platoon, it is now 3:29 a.m. local time. Captains Roger Bounds and Charles Finch will be flying a two-ship mission later this morning. But at this moment, the Apollo 8 crew are being informed that they have just become the first humans to travel to a place where the pull of Earth's gravity is less than that of another body. Their spacecraft is 176,250 nautical miles from Earth, and 33,800 nautical miles from the Moon. Their velocity has slowed to 3,261 feet per second, but they will now gradually pick up speed, as their vehicle moves deeper into the Moon's gravitational field.

\* \* \*

Charles Finch continued his recollection of that Christmas Eve:

The next morning [December 24] we flew a two-ship mission, but after less than two hours and no targets we landed. Half an hour later, Roger's helicopter arrived. I was 1st Platoon leader, the responsible officer, but figured what the hell. Without a pass or permission we climbed on board and lifted off for the *New Jersey* for what I thought might be a two-hour visit. Roger had his fatigues, I was in my Marine flight suit, both of us with two days' growth of beard when we stepped onto the deck and were escorted down to the captain's mess by the battleship's skipper, Captain Edward Snyder.

I couldn't believe the spread. A few hours earlier we'd been pawing through our collection of C-rations. Now we were in heaven, with real china, real linen napkins, real cooks and about twenty spic-and-span naval officers watching us like we were aliens from Mars. The perfect host, Captain Snyder said, "You will stay for the Bob Hope show tomorrow, won't you?" Roger winked at me. No one in Phu Bai [220th RAC headquarters] knew where we were and this ship was steaming south. I smiled, "Yes, sir," and dived back into the food.

We were given quarters near the Bull Halsey Memorial Suite and after a shower, shave and a change into fresh Navy khakis, toured the ship. We spent most of it in the ultra-sophisticated fire-control center, amazed that we were allowed to direct such a weapon from our Bird Dog cockpits.



Still in his Marine flight suit, Capt. Finch poses beside the Huey chopper that had delivered him, with Capt. Bounds, from Dong Ha on Christmas Eve.



The National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) maintains a collection titled, "After Action Reports and Other Records Relating to the Bob Hope Christmas Tours, 1968-1972." There are four digital folders for "Operation Holly 1968," which refers to those shows staged within Vietnam. I have viewed the contents of one folder, which contains 156 pages of material. This gives you some idea of the logistics and planning involved. For the 1968 Vietnam tour the show troupe, including technical crew and escorts, totaled around 70 people. The tour began on Sunday, December 22, and continued through the 28th. But prior to arriving at their staging location, Bangkok, the group made appearances or performed in Japan, South Korea, and Okinawa. There would also be a final performance on Guam. The entire itinerary, from their departure from Los Angeles until their return, would cover fifteen days. Their first performance in Vietnam would come on day eight of the journey.

DECLASSIFIED		UNCLASSIFIED		<del>CONFIDENTIAL</del>		
Authority <u>NND 968137</u>						
App 1 (Time Schedule) to Anx A (Plan of Events) to OPOD 3-68--USARV Reference: Map, CAMBODIA AND SOUTH VIETNAM, 1:1,250,000 Sheet 2						
25 Dec - Plan FOXTROT (U)						
LOCATION	ITEM	TECHNICIAN		ITEM	CAST TIME	
		BKK	SGN		BKK	SGN
Depart carrier	1	0930		1a	1100	
Arrive USS New Jersey	2	1000		2a	1130	
Show time - USS NJ	3	<u>1200</u>		3a	1200	
Strike	4	1330		4a	1330	
Depart USS NJ	5	1430		5a	1430	
25 Dec - Plan GOLF						
Arrive Phu Cat AFB	1	1500		1a	1515	
Show time - Phu Cat AFB	2	<u>1600</u>		2a	1600	
Strike and load	3	1730		3a	1730	
Depart Phu Cat AFB	4	1900		4a	1815	
Arrive Don Muang	5	2030	2130	5a	1945	2045
Arrive hotel	6	2115	2215	6a	2030	2130
26 Dec - No Show						

"Operation Holly" time schedule for Christmas Day, 1968. "SGN," Saigon time. "BKK," Bangkok time. Phu Cat AFB was near Qui Nhon, Binh Dinh Province, South Vietnam. Don Muang was a Royal Thai AFB used heavily by the USAF, located near Bangkok.

Capt. Edward Snyder's battleship, and the entire Operation Holly group was scheduled to depart for Phu Cat AFB, at 2:30 p.m., using six CH-46s. By this schedule, Bob Hope and the cast would be aboard the *New Jersey* for about three hours. The post-event cable referred to previously states that the last helicopter departed the ship at 3:30 p.m. There could possibly have been some deviation between the scheduled and actual performance time, etc.

Early that Christmas morning, aboard both the USS *Hancock* and the USS *New Jersey*, it is approaching 5:00 a.m., Saigon time. At 4:48 a.m., the Apollo 8 capsule communicator, Jerry Carr, notifies his crew

that loss-of-signal (LOS), the logical result of the spacecraft's passing behind the Moon, is one minute away. Jim Lovell somewhat famously replies, "We'll see you on the other side." Ignition for lunar orbit insertion commences 40 seconds before 5:00 a.m. As the space travelers emerge from the darkness of the Moon's other side, about 25 minutes later, Carr tells them, "Roger . . . good to hear your voice."

\* \* \*

As excerpted from *A Hundred Feet Over Hell*, Charles Finch recalled his Christmas Day, 1968:

On Christmas Day I was up at 0630 to see the Bob Hope entourage arrive. Ann-Margret and the Goldiggers stepped off the chopper with him. She and her husband stayed in the stateroom next to ours. She was young and stunning, but Roger Smith never left her side. Before the show, I sat next to Hope while he rehearsed his cue cards as Bounds was eyeing all the gorgeous girls and making deposits in his fantasy bank.



*Left*, Bob Hope, golf club in hand, is greeted by Capt. Edward Snyder aboard the *New Jersey*. *Right*, Ann-Margret and husband, Roger Smith, likely nearing the time of their departure from the *New Jersey*.

An 11-minute color video (no audio) recording from the Christmas Day 1968 Bob Hope show aboard the USS *New Jersey* can be viewed here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e3BxqnLtFMU&list=PLSjCINZaQziWCaWIAEFm5VXtXR89tRnDS&index=2>

In his official after-action cable, Capt. Snyder estimated that 1,400 Navy and 81 Army, Air Force, and Marine Corps personnel had seen the show. The video captures performances by the Goldiggers, singer/actress Linda Bennett, former NFL All-Pro defensive tackle Roosevelt Grier, who released more than 20 singles during his recording career, and Ann-Margret, with Bob Hope as host. Grier had become acquainted with Senator Robert Kennedy and his family and served as a bodyguard during the senator's ill-fated campaign for the 1968 Democratic presidential nomination. Of the events of that very early Wednesday morning, June 5, 1968, in the kitchen of the Ambassador Hotel in Los Angeles, Kennedy biographer Evan Thomas wrote:

Barry [Kennedy's devoted bodyguard, Bill Barry] left Sirhan struggling with Roosevelt Grier, the massive former lineman of the Los Angeles Rams, and knelt down beside Kennedy. He put his jacket under his head.



Left, Roosevelt Grier takes a break from his performance on the *New Jersey* to speak with Bob Hope. Right, Ann-Margret talks golf with the show's host.

Almost seven months had passed since that tragedy, and Charles Finch's recollection of his Christmas Day aboard the *New Jersey* continued:

That night we were up till 0200 with Captain Snyder, discussing the *New Jersey's* role in the DMZ and North Vietnam and listening to tapes they'd made of us firing her big guns.

After breakfast we briefed part of the ship's company on our mission in the DMZ and the effect of their guns on NVA targets. Their eyes were like saucers by the time we finished. We finally boarded a Navy helicopter to Tuy Hoa.

\* \* \*

Recently, Charles Finch shared a personal note from his Christmas 1968 visit to the *New Jersey* with fellow Catkiller, Roger Bounds. But this memory has little to do with the Bob Hope show, and it is reproduced below, with his permission:

That Christmas was special for Roger Bounds and myself. When we did the radio broadcast from the *New Jersey* that night while they were firing the 16 inch guns was most memorable. I still have that recording that was sent throughout the Navy and replayed several times as Captain Snyder was so proud of his ship. Got letters from so many about that interview, many from a Naval Academy class. Those letters were so special.

Charles shared a digital copy of that recording (almost 21 minutes) with me, and you can listen to his and Roger's thoughts from the war zone, on Christmas night 1968, by following this link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jwclFKv1jHI&list=PLSjCINZaQziWCaWIAEFm5VXtXR89tRnDS>

The loud distortions you hear from time to time in the recording are the ship's 16-inch guns being fired.

\* \* \*

Earlier that Christmas morning, Saigon time, about the time that the technical crew, staff, and equipment for the Bob Hope show were completing the move to the *New Jersey*, the crew of *Apollo 8* had ended their nearly 30-minute television transmission from orbit around the Moon. Over the final 100 seconds of

the broadcast, they read the first ten verses from the book of Genesis. In closing, Frank Borman spoke to his live audience, thought to have included as many as one billion people in 64 countries:

And from the crew of Apollo 8, we close with good night, good luck, a Merry Christmas, and God bless all of you—all of you on the good Earth.

\* \* \*



So it was for Christmas 1968—in Vietnam, aboard the *New Jersey*, in orbit around the Moon, and in Brownsville, Tennessee. And after six more days, the calendar year 1968 came to a close.

Earthrise, as photographed by Bill Anders on Christmas Eve, 1968. Fifty-three years later, this photograph remains among the most influential and impactful of all time.