

## **ROANE TOWNSHIP'S GOLD STAR ROUTE**

Glynn McCalman, June 2016

When World War II ended 71 years ago, travelers from the "Canal" community on Red River to Lafayette County's seat of government at Lewisville could choose between two primary routes across the prairie for the trip's first leg. The southern route via the homes of Homer Allen, Lonnie Blunt, Lewis Thomas, et al was shorter, but its black dirt surface on the western segment often prompted travelers, especially in rainy seasons, to choose the longer, northern route.

The northern route at that time took the traveler along the levee north through Pleasant Valley, then northeast and east by Hackney and Chock City to Dead Man's Curve (Gin City). From there the route was through Walnut Hill, Bradley, Canfield and Mars Hill to Lewisville. That route from Canal to Mars Hill could have appropriately been called "The Gold Star Route".

In 1918, shortly after World War I, 98 years ago, a custom was begun to acknowledge the mothers of children lost in military service. It was more than two decades later in World War II before the custom really became widespread. In World War II there were many homes where windows displayed gold stars.

Eleven such homes in Roane Township that earned such a star have been brought to our attention via the little memorial near the corner of Main and Fourth streets at Bradley. (It also memorializes some who died in other wars.) As a result of some meager research this article attempts to offer a little information about the identified eleven from Roane Township who died in World War II.

Referring to the route described above as "gold star" is based on the observation that to the best of my knowledge, all but one of the eleven homes in the township that lost one of its children in the war stood along the route described above from Canal to Mars Hill. Unfortunately, and with regret, I have been unable to discover as much information on all of the homes/families as they deserve. Nevertheless, here is a very brief commentary about each of them, beginning at the old Canal community.

### **EUGENE RAYFORD ANDREWS**

Rayford was born January 3, 1921, to Edgar Alonzo and Elizabeth Barrington Andrews in Miller County at Bright Star between Doddridge, Arkansas and Bloomburg, Texas. The Andrews family was one of the many that migrated from the west to the east side of Red River in the early part of the twentieth century to farm the rich delta land of Long Prairie. They lived in the Canal Community east of Spring Bank Ferry, where Rayford and his siblings attended Canal School before it was consolidated with the Bradley district.

By coincidence, Rayford was on the same basketball team at Bradley with Harland Bird and Clyde McCalman, who would also lose their lives in the war. Because of the distance from Bradley to Canal and the challenges of transportation in those days, sometimes on a game night, Rayford and his brother Edgar would spend the night with one of their teammates near Bradley. On at least one occasion that I can recall, Rayford and Edgar spent the night with Clyde. More frequently, the west bedroom of the always hospitable Bird home between Walnut Hill and Gin City was shared by teammates Rayford, Harland and Harland's cousin, Clyde. The Bird home was more accessible, and the Birds were known for

their hospitality. No one could have predicted that all three would eventually lose their lives in the struggle to liberate Europe from the Nazis.

Before going to war, Rayford married a neighbor of the Birds, Onie Jane Coker, on March 11, 1943. Her parents were also originally from the west side of Red River. Onie Jane's father had died seven months before she was born, and in the second year of her marriage to Rayford, he died in war.

The 102nd U. S. Infantry Division was activated on September 15, 1942 at Camp Maxey, Texas. Two years later, the 407<sup>th</sup> Regiment of which Rayford was a member, arrived in the bombed out Cherbourg harbor of France. From there they were taken by train to Belgium and Holland. By the end of October they were poised to thrust into the enemy heartland of Central Germany. And in less than a month, he died on November 29, 1944. He was eventually buried in the Macedonia Cemetery near Bright Star (west of Doddridge) where several of his ancestors and other relatives had also been buried.

## **CLEMENTE G. PEREZ**

Clemente was born November 23, 1914, to Jesus O. "Jesse" and Carmen Perez, and was 30 years old, one of the oldest of the Roane Township servicemen to die in World War II. In 1940, the family was living in or near the Canal Community and occupied in farming.

We don't know the exact circumstances surrounding his enlistment in the Marines, but we do know that he was a part of an engineering battalion with the Sixth Marine Division (T6EngBn6MarineDiv) in the final months of war in the Pacific. The Division had been formed on September 7, 1944, on Guadalcanal in the southern Solomon Islands. Many of the men that composed the new division had already seen combat, especially in battles to retake islands that had been captured earlier by the Japanese.

From September to January the Division provided intense training of its troops for the final battles of the Pacific. However, on May 13, 1945, just two weeks before it landed at and began the invasion of Okinawa, Clemente's life was ended. We don't know the specific cause of his death, but we do know that the date of his death was just one month before the war's end.

But even Clemente's death near the end of the war and so many thousands of miles from home wasn't the only tragedy that befell the Perez family that month. Just one week later, on May 20, Clemente's father, Jesse, died back in Arkansas on Long Prairie. In fact, because of the barriers involved in long distance communication 71 years ago, the family may not have learned that Clemente had died until they had buried his father.

A year after his death, Clemente's body was brought home to Roane Township and buried near his father in the Walnut Hill Cemetery. Forty years later, his mother was buried beside them.

## **ALFRED Calvin SAUNDERS**

Alfred was born on January 16, 1922 in Louisiana, possibly at Doyline, near Haughton, to Marion Saunders, a native of New Jersey, and Viver Horton, a native of Texas. By 1930 the family had moved to

Long Prairie in Roane Township where they were next neighbors of Brackman and Hines families. In 1935 they were living at Belcher, LA, and by 1940 they were in the Pleasant Valley area of Long Prairie again where they were neighbors of Endsleys and Hortons.

Like several other young men from Roane Township, Alfred participated in the final months of the war in Europe as the allies pushed Hitler's forces back into Germany. Alfred was a part of that effort as a sergeant in the 324<sup>th</sup> Regiment of the 44<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division of the 7th Army.

The winter of 1944/45 in Europe was particularly cruel. Some said that it was the worst ever in Germany. Most of the troops didn't enjoy much protection from the cold. Troops "--- began to find ingenious ways of camouflaging, and reinforcing, and protecting their fox-holes against the elements, as well as against the enemy. They used sticks, wooden boards, tree boughs, bits of tin, burlap, cardboard, and almost anything (they managed to scrounge from the fleeing Germans) to build a roof or wall to help keep some precious heat in the damp and muddy foxholes that were their homes."

Alfred died on Sunday, November 14, 1944, only a short while after his participation began in the invasion of Germany. After the war, a survivor of the 324<sup>th</sup> described the day Alfred died. "Sunday, November 14, 1944 - The snow was still falling. The ground was white, with the exception of black spots. Sunday like any other day held no rest for the men in the foxholes, deep in slush and mud. Our feet were cold and wet, but that didn't seem to bother us that day. We were all thinking about tomorrow, because tomorrow was the day that was to start the drive, a drive that was to take us through the Vosges Mountains, across the snow-covered Alsace plains, and up to the edge of the Rhine River, and Strasbourg." But for Alfred, there was no tomorrow.

Eventually, his remains were returned to the U. S. and buried in the Summer Grove Cemetery in Caddo Parish, LA. Later still, his parents would be buried beside him.

## **OWEN BENJAMIN ENYART**

Owen was born January 28, 1918, at Lewisville, Arkansas to John Morris and Alma Leona Hurd Enyart. His parents had moved to Lafayette County from Cass County, Indiana in 1904. Sometime after 1910 they moved from Lewisville to Canfield, where John was its postmaster in 1917. He also operated a cotton gin at Canfield for several years before moving to Long Prairie in 1925. There he operated a gin at Hackney on the site later owned by the Barker, Adams, Middlebrooks (BAM) cotton gin and store. John died from an accident at the gin on January 11, 1945, a few months before the war ended that had killed his son.

Owen joined the Navy in 1937, several years before the U. S. declared war on Japan. By November 1942, he was an experienced sailor serving in the Pacific aboard the light cruiser Juneau in the famous Guadalcanal Campaign. His little ship had been participating valiantly in the campaign since August, but is still remembered mostly because of five of Owen's shipmates. The five Sullivan brothers aboard the same vessel with Owen all died with him when it was struck twice on November 13, 1942 by torpedoes from a Japanese submarine. The torpedo likely hit the thinly armored cruiser at or near the ammunition magazines and the ship exploded and quickly sank. Afterward, it was determined that several of the crew probably survived the initial explosion, but a communication mix up resulted in a failure to attempt rescue of survivors.

The loss of the five siblings resulted in a policy change by the U. S. military to prevent loss of multiple siblings serving together in the same unit. A movie, "The Fighting Sullivans" and a Navy destroyer were named for them.

Older residents of Roane Township remember Owen's brother, Homer Enyart, who was well-known as the owner and operator of the township's only ice plant at the northwest corner of Pilot at Third Street. After her husband's death, Owen's mother lived on Woodruff near Fifth Street in Bradley.

The American Legion in Roane Township was given the name Enyart-Bird to honor the sacrifices of Owen Enyart and Harland Bird.

## **WILLIAM LAFAYETTE "BILL" STARLING**

Bill was born to James Martin "Pat" and Lula French Starling on June 4, 1913 on the family farm between Walnut Hill and Gin City. At age 31 he was one of the oldest of the men to lose their lives in World War II from Roane Township.

Although they were separated by a few years in age, Bill and his neighbor, Harland Bird, shared several things in common. First, they grew up as next farm neighbors. When Bill and Harland were very young, Harland's home toward the south was separated from his only by a pasture and a watermelon patch. Later, their homes were even nearer to each other when the Birds moved to Highway 160 to the adjoining farm east of the Starlings.

There were also family connections. After the death of Bill's grandmother, his grandfather, John French, married Harland's aunt, Minnie Bird. And Bill's uncle, John Starling, was married to Ada McCalman, the sister of Harland's mother, Gertrude McCalman Bird. Also, Bill had nine siblings. Harland had nine siblings.

Bill was a member of Co F, 23<sup>rd</sup> Inf, 2<sup>nd</sup> Division when the German break-through on December 16 found all three battalions of the 23d Infantry fighting savagely in the line. The failure of the enemy to accomplish a penetration in the division sector, despite repeated tank and strong infantry attacks upset the entire German plan of action to reach and cut off the vital supply nets at Liege. The Regiment stopped attack after bloody attack. That action was summed up by General Courtney Hodges, Commanding General of the 1st Army, who declared, "What the 2nd Division has done in the last four days will live forever in the history of the United States Army."

During the period of January 13 to 23, while attached to the First Division, the Regiment fought under the most severe climatic conditions. It spearheaded a drive that broke the determined enemy resistance in the vital Onderval-Iveldingen Pass to clear the way for armored thrusts into St. Vith, Belgium. Sleet, rain and bitter cold froze the men's clothing to their bodies as they, struggled through waist-deep snow over rough terrain. The enemy forces, principally the 8th Regiment, 3rd Panzer Division, were decimated. So heavy were enemy losses in men and material that the 8th Regiment ceased to exist as a fighting force. Soon after, the 23d Infantry Regiment was again on the offensive in the Siegfried Line, pushing through the Schleiden Forest to reach the vitally important Roer River dams. Bill died at Cologne, Koln, Nordrhein-Westfalen, Germany on February 6, 1945.

After the war, Bill's mother was a neighbor of Owen Enyart's mother on Woodruff Street near Fifth at Bradley. His wife, Miriam, lived for a while with Bill's cousin, Sue Starling Hammond, on Pullman Street.

## **RICHARD HARLAND BIRD**

Harland was born to John Richard and Gertrude McCalman Bird on July 14, 1921, exactly one week after our nation celebrated its 145<sup>th</sup> birthday. His birth occurred at what his Bird relatives now call the "old place", south of Hwy 160 between Walnut Hill and Gin City, and now owned by Harland's nephew, Richard Bird and his wife, Jan.

The Birds arrived in Roane Township shortly after 1900. Harland's great, great, great, grandfather, Richard Bird had served in the American Revolution in North Carolina. His grandfather, Lewis Garner Bird, had served with the Confederacy in the Civil War, and was also the great grandfather of Clyde McCalman.

As a young man, Harland followed two of his older brothers, Homer and Harvey and his brother-in-law, Percy Lemay to work on the Mississippi River at Vicksburg. Later he went to Clovis, New Mexico where he worked as a truck driver for his brother, Hudson, before volunteering to serve in the Army Air Corps.

He became the turret gunner on a B-26 bomber with the 456<sup>th</sup> Army Air Force unit. On October 24, 1943, during his tenth bombing mission, he was mortally wounded by fire from a German fighter plane while leaving the airdrome at Montdidier, France. He actually survived until landing at the bomber's base near London. His final words were to his pilot, Harvey Jacobs,--"Jake, tell my Mom - - ."

He was temporarily buried in England, but permanently buried later in the Walnut Hill Cemetery near his parents and other family members.

## **CLYDE VERNON McCALMAN**

Clyde was born June 13, 1923, two miles south of Walnut Hill on the old Shreveport Road. He was the only one of the men of this article who didn't live on the Canal to Mars Hill route, though his grandparents, several aunts and uncles and lots of cousins did. And in the year after his death, his parents moved to that route, on the Poston Bayou hill overlooking Long Prairie.

Clyde was a double cousin of Harland Bird. Their mutual grandparents, Byron and Susan McCalman were farmers south of Gin City before purchasing the final general store at the crossroads in Walnut Hill. All of Clyde's life until he finished high school was lived at the farm home south of Walnut Hill. (An article about it, "Mamie's House" was distributed a few weeks ago about the old house.)

The death of Clyde's cousin and close friend Harland in the war weighed heavily on him. As a college student preparing for the Christian ministry he was exempt from the military draft, but not from what he considered to be fairness, honor and respect for his cousin/friend's sacrifice. Within a few months, on March 17, 1944, he volunteered for service in the U. S. Army. On the same date one year later, he was killed in action.

During "Operation Lumberjack", on March 7, 1945, troops of the U.S. Army's 9<sup>th</sup> Armored Division were surprised to find the Ludendorff Railroad Bridge still standing when they reached it on their march into Germany. The unexpected availability of the first major crossing of the Rhine, Germany's last major

natural barrier and line of defense, prompted General Eisenhower to alter his plans and possibly shorten the war in Europe.

Clyde was a prolific letter writer, and his letters were generally upbeat and positive during the year of his service. But toward the end of the war in the winter of 1944/45, the letters were interspersed with more somber expressions. One letter included a simple statement of how many dozens of days it had been since he had worn clean clothing.

Many books and articles in newspapers and magazines on the battle for the bridge have been published. *The Bridge at Remagen* may be the most familiar. And in 1968, a movie was made with the same name. Clyde may have been involved with that battle when he was killed on March 17, 1945. He was buried at the Henri-Chapelle Cemetery in Belgium until his remains were returned home and buried in the Walnut Hill Cemetery.

## **WALTER REGGIE SNEAD**

Reggie Snead was born November 1, 1909 to George Penny and Clara Adams Snead at Pine Bluff, Arkansas where Penny was a motorman for the city's railway system. But by 1920, the family had moved to Clara's home at Bradley. Reggie grew up while his mother operated her father's Adams Hotel, and Penny was a real estate agent. The little hotel stood (and still stands) at Bradley on the south side of Main (Fourth) Street near the beginning of Crabtree Lane. Until recent years the old hotel building served as a Senior Citizens Center.

Reggie's sister, Nanette married John Coker. John worked for several years at Cochran Hardware before they opened their own store at the corner of Fourth and Pullman Streets. It was eventually owned and operated by "Bubba" and Mollye McCalman.

The Depression years were difficult for Reggie's mother, Clara. She worked hard managing the little hotel and doing much of the work herself while also raising her two children. (A third child had died as a two year old.) But the hardships of the Depression didn't compare with what would happen to her family during an eighteen month period during World War II. During that period she lost her husband Penny, and Reggie died near the close of the war.

Reggie was one of the oldest of the Roane Township men to die in the war. His cemetery marker identifies that he was a member of the 363<sup>rd</sup> Infantry group. Army units were transferred, reassigned and not easy to trace during the last year of the war. We don't know the details surrounding his death. The 363<sup>rd</sup> was heavily involved in the "liberation" of Italy in the late summer and fall of 1944, but we don't know whether Reggie was with that group at that time. What does appear certain, however, is that he was with that regiment when he was killed. The date of his death on February 19, 1945 is a highly probable indication that he was involved with the final pursuit of the Nazi army as it was pushed back into Germany in the close of the war.

Besides the unusually cold weather and other afflictions of those final months of the war in Europe, British, American and Russian officers competed with each other to reach Berlin first, sometimes demanding more of their troops than they were capable of enduring.

Back at Bradley, Reggie's mother Clara remained at work, offering twenty-five cent hot lunches from the old hotel's kitchen to school children whose families could afford them.

Reggie's remains were buried near his parents in the Walnut Hill Cemetery.

## **CHARLES DETMER BLANKENSHIP**

Charlie was born July 15, 1922 in Texas, the youngest of ten children of William Jordan and Rosa Edda Franks, Blankenship. His Blankenship ancestors emigrated from England to Virginia in the mid-1600s and lived for a few generations in or near Richmond. Charlie's father was born at Clinton, Missouri, and his mother at Camden, Arkansas. Before Charlie was born, the family had lived in Oklahoma, Bowie County, Texas, and at Bradley. Lucille Reynolds Smith recalls that the family lived across the street from her near the corner of Pullman and Second Streets.

Charlie's father died early in the Great Depression when Charles was barely ten years old. Life was a struggle for most folks during the Depression, but it was especially difficult for widows with children. And when Charlie was nineteen years old, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and the nation was at war in Europe and the Pacific.

Once the allied forces had established a significant foothold in Normandy, the race to Berlin was on for many thousands of young Americans. And Charlie was one of them. The 313<sup>th</sup> Infantry Regiment of the 79<sup>th</sup> Army Division of which he was a part spent the fall and winter in that race.

On the day he lost his life, December 15, 1944, two other events gained attention of the news media. Glenn Miller, the biggest star on the American pop-music scene in the years immediately preceding World War II, lost his life aboard a single-engine aircraft at an airfield outside of London on December 15, 1944—an aircraft that would go missing over the English Channel in route to France for a congratulatory performance for American troops that had recently helped to liberate Paris. And on the following day, the Battle of the Bulge would begin as German forces attempted to break into the region of Ardennes.

Although we don't know specific details that surrounded Charlie's death, one only has to read accounts offered by participants and survivors of the 1944 and 1945 allied offensive to get a feeling of what the environment was like leading up to his death.

Charlie was buried in the Walnut Hill Cemetery along with his parents and other family members.

## **J. BAILEY HARRISON**

Bailey Harrison was one of eight children born to Percy David and Beden Lovie Burdue Harrison on April 10, 1920, probably at Mars Hill (between Canfield and Lewisville). His father lived at Mars Hill in 1900, and was employed with the saw mill at Arkana in 1930. By 1940, the family had returned to Mars Hill. Bailey was nicknamed "Cowboy".

The largest airborne operation in history was called "Market Garden", and was a strategic attempt in late September 1944 to divide German occupation forces in Holland and provide a corridor by which the allied liberators could advance rapidly to the heart of Germany and win the war before Christmas. It began with promise on September 17, but soon bogged down for several reasons. Bailey Harrison was a member of the 502<sup>nd</sup> Parachute unit that spearheaded the assault. He died on September 22, the fifth

day of the attack. His body was buried later in Wilson Cemetery at Lewisville, and his parents were eventually buried near him.

## **BENJAMIN FRANKLIN CORNETT**

Frank was born June 20, 1921, the fifth of eight children of Benjamin Franklin, Sr. and Della Elizabeth Goff Cornett at Clarksville, Texas. Besides Clarksville, the family lived in Texarkana, Caney, Oklahoma, and Roane Township (between Canfield and Mars Hill).

Many Americans suffered hardships and privations during the Great Depression of the 1930s, but only a tiny percentage suffered the human punishment and tragedies comparable to those suffered by Franklin Cornett and his companions in the "Bataan Death March" and aboard the Japanese "hell ship" Arisan Maru.

The atrocities committed by the Japanese relative to the Bataan Death March are well documented. Testimony presented by the survivors of the march reported that - -

"Japanese butchery, disease, exposure to the blazing sun, lack of food, and lack of water took the lives of approximately 5,200 Americans along the way. Many prisoners were bayoneted, shot, beheaded or just left to die on the side of the road."

One survivor testified that "A Japanese soldier took my canteen, gave the water to a horse, and threw the canteen away. The stronger were not permitted to help the weaker. We then would hear shots behind us. Many of us went crazy and several died."

Officers found to be responsible for as many as 43 different counts of "crimes against humanity" received punishment varying from execution to several years of prison.

But even survival of the death march didn't end Franklin Cornett's sacrifice for his country. He was placed with other prisoners on a Japanese ship, the Arisan Maru, to be taken to Japan to be used as slave labor in the war effort. But on October 24, 1944, the ship was torpedoed by an American submarine that was unaware of the 1800 prisoners aboard. Franklin was among the 1795 prisoners who died that day.

His body was not retrieved, but a memorial to him was placed near the graves of his family in the Shiloh Cemetery west of Texarkana. The cemetery is on the north side of Highway 82 between Texarkana and Garland City.

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Life is fragile, especially in war. In a moment, life is full of experience, memories, plans, hunger, pleasure, hope. And in the same moment, nothing remains except memory.

We who appreciate the ones who sacrificed for us can restore none of those possessions or give them anything.

**But we can remember them.**