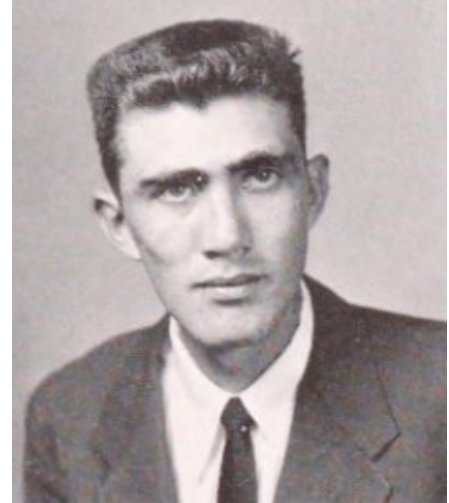


## “Monkey”

The portrait of William Gettis Coats which appears in the 1957 edition of *Taps* presents the visage of a serious, intense young man. Yet, the young man in question was known by the nickname “Monkey,” which his many acquaintances recall suited his personality to a “T.” “A real comedian,” loved by all, Monkey Coats was tall with an intimidating expression—until he smiled, which he did often.



Oron Trotter was a freshman, a ‘Rat,’ living across the hall from sophomore Coats during the 1954-55 school year. That “was the last year that Clemson was an all-male, military school,” Trotter recalled. “Most sophomores, having just completed a year of ‘Rat’ service, were anxious to get their revenge with the freshman class, but Monkey was different. I would describe him as kind, friendly, and fair to all of us ‘Rats’ and I never heard the beckoning call of ‘Freshman, New Boy’ come from him.”

Coats was a member of the class of 1957. He was a vocational agricultural education major from Chappelles who intended to teach after completing his Army commitment. He was a member of Alpha Tau Alpha, the agricultural education honorary fraternity and served as its president his senior year. He also served on the Council of Club Presidents. In Army ROTC, he distinguished himself and was appointed a cadet captain and adjutant of the 1<sup>st</sup> Battalion.

After graduation, Coats reported for active duty. In 1958, he and his wife, the former Elizabeth Lynn Walker, were stationed at Fort Hood, Texas. Trotter, Coats’s former hall mate, remembers moving into a rented apartment in nearby Killeen. “We had not completely unpacked our car when we heard a loud knock at the door... there stood Monkey. He had seen my South Carolina tag and was anxious to greet his new neighbor.” Trotter and his wife, Ruth, lived next door to Monkey and Lynn until Coats was discharged from the Army.

Two years later, Trotter had completed his Army commitment and was working for a company in Spartanburg when he encountered his friend and former neighbor. Coats “told me that he had made the decision to return to active duty. He had tried teaching school, farming, and working at a retail store, but was happiest when serving in the Army... the Army was where he wanted to make his career.”

Once he returned to active duty, Coats was assigned to Fort Polk, Louisiana where he served as a company commander in an infantry basic training brigade. Orion Perrell was a new second lieutenant on the post. Perrell remembered meeting a “well-seasoned” first lieutenant “about 6” taller than me.” He “snarled down at me as he introduced himself in a somewhat unfriendly tone. Then his face immediately broke into a friendly smile.” Perrell would go on to develop a close friendship with Monkey, whom he described as a “happy-go-lucky, jolly, jokester.” Even after his discharge from active duty in mid-1964, Perrell kept in touch with his friend.

Jim Drake was a classmate of Coats's at the Infantry Officer Advanced Course at Fort Benning, Georgia in 1965. "Monkey was the funniest fella I ever met," Drake recalled. "He was very smart and exceptionally bright. Monkey treated people very well and everyone loved him." It is a sentiment seconded by another classmate, Al Coates. Because seats were assigned alphabetically, Coates remembered that Monkey "and I spent almost every day together for about nine months. He was a very good and kind person. ... One of the things I do remember is that as a black officer, Monk treated me with 'total' color blindness and during the 60's, that was a big deal. That is what I loved about him, a white southern officer who got it... He was a really great guy."

Henry Lamar Hunt was assigned to a basic training brigade at Fort Benning. He lived across the street from Coats who "took me (brand new 1LT) under his wing and helped me to make a quick adjustment to the Army." After completing the Infantry Advanced Course, Coats remained at Fort Benning as a company commander. Hunt recalls that Coats established a "sort of sanctuary" in his company "orderly room where soldiers could visit in quietness and pray or contemplate. There wasn't a selfish bone in Monkey's body, [he was] always looking out for the other person." Hunt was so inspired by Coats that he wrote a song, the Ballad of Monkey Jones, based on "a fictionalized account of our relationship."

In 1966, Coats received orders for a tour in Vietnam to begin early in 1967. Mike, the middle of the Coats's three sons, remembers his father as a Sunday School teacher who "was full of joy, loved life, and greeted everyone with a smile." Mike recalled times with his father as happy days, from special holidays to trips to the country store to buy "an 'Orange Crush' and a pack of 'Nabs'."

In January 1967, Ruth Perrell, who with her husband Orion had become friends with the Coats at Fort Polk, gave birth to the couple's first son. "As we were in the hospital room preparing to move our precious child home... my great and devoted friend, Monkey Coats, appeared in the doorway completely unexpected," Perrell remembered. Coats had taken the time to come congratulate his friends and meet their newborn before he deployed to Vietnam.

Mike Coats remembered driving to the airport to see his father off to war. "He hugged us all and told us how much he loved us and told my older brother that he was 'the man of the house' now." Once Captain Coats boarded the plane, Mike "watched his smiling face as he waved goodbye while the plane taxied down the runway."





Coats arrived in Vietnam on February 14, 1967 and was assigned to the headquarters of the 1<sup>st</sup> Brigade of the 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division. The division's headquarters were near the so-called "Iron Triangle," a Viet Cong stronghold in South Vietnam's Binh Duong Province. Frequent aerial reconnaissance of the area helped guide the division's counterinsurgency operations.

On June 1, Coats took off as an observer in an OH-23G Raven helicopter. The OH-23 was a

three-person aircraft used for scouting. During the flight, the helicopter's main rotor assembly failed, causing the aircraft to crash in Gia Dinh province. Coats was killed.

Promoted posthumously, Major Coats was awarded the Bronze Star for his ability to quickly "grasp the implications of new problems with which he was faced as a result of the ever-changing situations inherent in counterinsurgency operations." He was also awarded the National Defense Service Medal, Vietnam Service Medal, Republic of Vietnam Gallantry Cross Unit Citation with Palm, and Republic of Vietnam Campaign Medal.

Monkey Coats's body was recovered from the crash site and escorted back to the United States by his Fort Benning classmate, Jim Drake. "It was the most solemn and honored duty I ever had in my career in the Army," Drake would later write. Major William Gettis Coats was survived by his wife Lynn and their sons William, Michael, and Jonathan. He is buried at the Liberty Springs Presbyterian Church in Cross Hill.

