

A Family's Grief

Crossie McDowell had a funny feeling. “I felt like people were staring at me. Even when I went to the restroom, it seemed some of my parents’ friends were trailing after me, keeping a watch on me.” Crossie was the daughter of Colonel Sam McDowell, who had recently retired from the Army as the professor of military science at Clemson. Crossie had been looking forward to her weekend trip to Charlotte. It would be a nice break from her studies at Limestone College where she was a sophomore. Crossie’s escort for the weekend was Frank Cox, the son of Clemson’s dean of students, Walter and his wife Mary.

Frank had picked Crossie up on the afternoon of Friday, February 16 and driven her to the Queen City where the pair planned to take in the annual North-South basketball double-header pitting Clemson and the University of South Carolina against their ACC rivals North Carolina and North Carolina State. It was at the Charlotte Coliseum that Crossie became aware of the stares. She wasn’t a victim of paranoia; people really were watching her, and not for a good reason.



Sambo McDowell

Crossie was the middle child and only daughter of Samuel Tilden McDowell and his wife, Katharine. Her older brother, Samuel Tilden McDowell, Jr.—affectionately known as “Sambo”—had been born in 1943, shortly before his father shipped overseas. The elder McDowell would be gone three years and would return as a decorated lieutenant colonel. Crossie was born four years after Sambo. A second brother, Turney, came along a year-and-a-half later.

Lieutenant Colonel McDowell, a member of Clemson’s Class of 1931, remained on active duty following the end of World War II. By the time Sambo reached high school, Colonel McDowell was in charge of the weapons section at the Infantry School at Fort Benning, Georgia. Crossie recalled that her father often watched out for Clemson cadets assigned to Fort Benning, for summer training. “I remember they would come over to the house for dinner.” Katharine was diagnosed with Hodgkins Disease, a cancer that attacks the body’s white blood cells. Katharine passed away at Fort Benning in 1959.

The grieving Colonel McDowell, like most men of his generation, displayed little emotion. “Our mother’s death was hard on all of us, of course, but I think hardest on Sambo,” Crossie recalled. “When my father was off in the war, it had just been the two of them and mother was always devoted to Sambo.” Sambo’s grief was manifested in what his friend Walter Todd, Jr. described as “almost mythical” exploits. For instance, there was the time Sambo “borrowed” a horse, fed it Exlax and locked the poor animal in the Columbus High School gymnasium for the weekend. “He was a little bit of a daredevil and he always had a pretty girlfriend,” Crossie remembered.

Colonel McDowell married Army nurse Joella Wallace even as Sambo continued to grieve. At the same time, he was looking ahead to college. “Dad told Sambo that he could go anywhere he wanted to, but that he’d only pay for Clemson,” remembered Crossie. In 1961, the whole family packed up and moved to Clemson, where

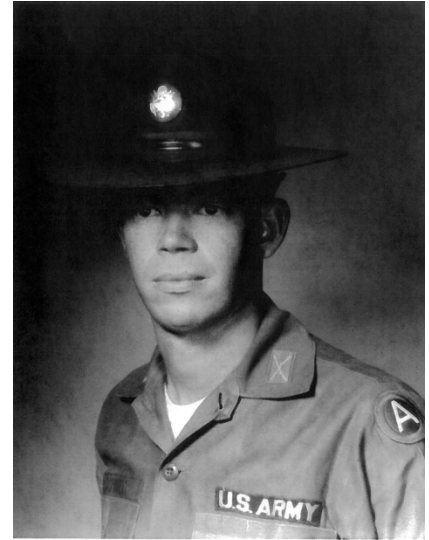


Col. Samuel T. McDowell, Sr.

Colonel McDowell was assigned as the professor of military science, the top-ranking officer in the ROTC department. At the time, basic ROTC was still required of all male students for their first two years. As a result, Sambo became one of his father's cadets.

The younger McDowell completed two years at Clemson before leaving school and attaining a job with Citizens & Southern Bank in Columbia as a teller. "Willis Cantey was the head of the bank and an Army comrade of Dad's from World War II," Crossie remembered. Sambo was working for the Veteran Administration in Washington when he was called to active duty in 1966.

Having grown up on Army bases and having lived with a career soldier, it should come as no surprise that Sambo excelled in basic training, finishing first in his class at Fort Jackson. From basic, Sambo attended Officer Candidate School, earning his commission as a second lieutenant in 1967. After attending Jungle Warfare School in Panama, Sambo was assigned to B Company, 1/14th Infantry Regiment, then part of the 4th Infantry Division in Vietnam. "I remember right before he left to go to Vietnam, Sambo drove to Limestone and took me out to dinner," Crossie said. Once he reached Vietnam, he sent letters home on a regular basis.



Then came 1968. On January 31st, some seventy thousand North Vietnamese and Viet Cong troops surprised American and allied forces with one of the war's largest offensives, attacking cities and towns throughout South Vietnam. After initial setbacks, American forces, including Sambo McDowell's 14th Infantry Regiment, quickly regained the initiative.

Sambo's B Company experienced a bloody beginning to February. On the sixth, six men from the company were killed in action. Three days later, Sambo's platoon was leading the company on a search and destroy mission southeast of Da Nang. Probing through dense jungle growth, the platoon suddenly came under fire from two battalions of North Vietnamese regulars concealed in bunkers. While maneuvering to the right to outflank his attackers, Sambo discovered a trench leading toward the enemy. His point man was killed by sniper fire and the young officer, who had himself been wounded in the initial moments of the ambush, moved forward to assess the situation and take a position from which he could repel any attack from the other end of the trench. Sambo called his radio operator forward to report and call for supporting fires. By now, the entire platoon was taking sniper fire, saved only by Sambo's effective use of the cover and concealment provided by the trench. At this point, the enemy resorted to indirect fire, dropping mortar rounds into the trench. One exploded very close to Sambo. It was February 9. Nine B Company soldiers, including Sambo, died in the firefight.

At the Charlotte Coliseum a week later, Crossie, though aware of the stakes, was unaware of her brother's fate. Dr. Bob Burley, one of Clemson's medical doctors, had followed the Tigers to Charlotte for the weekend series. Earlier, he had received a call from Colonel McDowell reporting that Sambo was missing in action and presumed dead. Burley sought out Frank Cox, pulling him out onto the coliseum concourse and reporting the news.

Frank decided to wait to tell Crossie until they had left the game and returned to the home of friends where they would be spending the night. Upon hearing the news, Crossie telephoned her father back in Clemson. She and Frank drove back on Saturday morning. "My father tried to be so strong. He never talked about it, but he woke up every morning with tears in his eyes."

It took ten days for Sambo's body to be returned to the United States. Captain Charlie Ferguson, who had been a member of her father's ROTC cadre at Clemson, flew to Dover Air Force Base in Delaware and

accompanied the body back to Clemson. Sambo was buried in the Fort Benning National Cemetery next to his mother.

Second Lieutenant Samuel Tilden McDowell, Jr. was awarded the Silver Star for “personal courage, professional integrity and devotion to duty.” He was also awarded the Purple Heart, the National Order of Vietnam and the Vietnamese Gallantry Cross.

