

Shoot-out at the BIG T

Retired Det. Cleave Bethea Hopes for a Medal Day Re-examination



Cleave Bethea during his Army days.

Thirty-seven years and counting, time has not healed all the wounds of retired Det. Cleave

Bethea. Bethea has been living with physical and psychological pain since the night of January 22, 1973 when, at age 31, he was blasted by the automatics of two of the FBI's most wanted felons at the Big T Lounge

at 1596 Broadway near Hopkinson Street in the Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn.

When Bethea thinks about that night, he has to repeat the mantra "Sti Yu" – stay strong – words taught to him by his Native American mother, a member of the Arrohatuck and Appamattuck clans of the Powhatan tribe. Cleave and his wife, Earline, also of Powhatan descent, live on family land in South Carolina where most of the time it's warm and the weather won't aggravate the conditions created by the barrage of gunfire that struck him at close range in the left shoulder and the left leg. To this day, he suffers problems caused by a serious staph infection contracted during his three month stay in Hempstead General, which followed his seven-hour emergency surgery in Wyckoff Hospital. The shooting required him to spend seven months in a body cast, and he had to learn how to walk all over again. He was final-

ly released to his family and a team of private duty nurses, returning home to a room specially equipped with a hospital bed. Because of his extensive injuries, he was forced to retire in 1977 from the profession he loved.

Almost four decades later, because of the staph infection, Cleave's knee and his thigh, which still has metal in it, will swell if he stands for too long a period of time. In December 2009, he had major heart surgery, traceable, no doubt, to the violent episode that occurred in the Big T almost two generations ago.

During the past few years, Bethea has been publicly asking the question that has haunted him since the shoot-out: why were he and his partner, Det. Phil Hogan, now deceased, denied the Medal of Honor promised them at hospital bedside by then-Commissioner Patrick Murphy. Hogan died in 1993 at age 64. He was hit that night in the Big T in the shoulder and retired in January of 1976 because of his injuries.

How the life-altering incident at the Big T unfolded for Bethea was directly tied to the qualities that made him an outstanding athlete – the 6-foot-two-inch, 220-pounder was an all-star quarterback from Flushing High. He went on to join the United States Army serving in military intelligence. Both his football and military training instilled in him a respect for teamwork and an obligation to duty that dictated never turning away from an assignment, no matter how dangerous.

"There is no question that Phil and Cleave should have been awarded the Medal of Honor. They volunteered to be in that bar, they didn't hesitate at all. There were NYPD Officers who were supposed to show up that night who didn't. Brooklyn did not get as much attention as Manhattan, and when it came to the BLA, the Department failed to see the big picture."

— Det. Neil O'Donnell

Bethea joined the NYPD in June 1963 and in three years was promoted to Detective. Among his posts, he served in the 26 Precinct, Manhattan Narcotics 6 District and the Major Crime Investigation Unit and was attached to the 73 Squad, on loan to the "experimental" 13th Detective District Robbery Squad when the shoot-out at the Big T Lounge occurred.

The incident was connected to the loose federation of "revolutionary" groups that sprung up across America from the late 1960s through the early 1980s. Violent, youth-oriented, self-proclaimed anarchists adopted a number of causes as excuse to unleash a continuous barrage of irrational violence against government and corporate representatives and property, and especially law enforcement agencies. Among the many perpetrators were splinter factions of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) and the Weather Underground, chiefly opposing the war in Viet Nam, the FALN (Fuerzas Armadas de Liberacion Nacional), a Puerto Rican nationalist group, the May 19th Communist Organization, and the Black Liberation Army, an off-shoot of the Black Panther Party, which proclaimed itself "anti-capitalist, anti-imperialist, and anti-racist," advocating overthrow of all existing systems of order, and particularly targeting police as an object of their wrath. It was irrelevant to the BLA whether an Officer was, himself, white or black: if he wore blue, he had a target on his back.

Both local law enforcement across the country and the federal agencies were on the trail of a number of fugitives, including a perp named Woody Green. Green was wanted in connection with the ambush of NYPD Officers Gregory Foster and Rocco Laurie, both shot dead on January 27, 1972 as they walked their foot post in Manhattan's East Village.

The weekend before the Big T Lounge incident, Woody Green had a running gun battle with police through two precincts, and after exchanging rounds, Green escaped into a subway tunnel in Brooklyn. He was a high roller on the FBI's "Most Wanted" list.

Bethea's own run-in with the Black Liberation Army began on September 27, 1972 when a branch of Manufacturers Hanover Bank was robbed in The Bronx. Security cameras showed the known subjects to be John Rivers, Joanne Chesimard, Freddy Hilton, Woody Green, Yvonne White, and Twyman Meyers. On October 3rd, 1972, FBI Agents arrived at the 13 District Robbery Squad and presented photos of the perps. Bethea and colleagues knew that Rivers occasionally visited a bar one block from the 73rd Precinct stationhouse. They learned from local confidential informants that Rivers was staying at a safe house in the area. It was put under observation, and on October 18th, the Detectives and the G-Men arrested Rivers, who was carrying two fully-loaded handguns.

Fast forward to the night of January 22, 1973, when Bethea was working night duty with the 13th Detective District Robbery Squad. He was assisting a Detective with a supermarket stick-up when he was summoned to his Commander's office and asked if he had ever been to a bar called The Big T Lounge. He hadn't, nor did he know anyone who lived in the area of the Lounge. Would he volunteer, he was asked, to go into the bar and see if Woody Green was there?

Bethea knew that many cops believed in never volunteering, but he wasn't raised to deflect a challenge. A number of Detectives were asked to participate in the assignment, and many declined.

"Det. Philip Hogan also volunteered because he was concerned about me going in alone," says Cleave. He was working the Operations Desk that night because he had just returned from sick leave."

But January 22, 1973 had already proved to be no ordinary day for the New York City Police Department. That afternoon, the legendary 47-hour siege at John and Al's Sporting Goods store in Brooklyn had ended after lengthy negotiation with four radical Black Muslim gunmen. Nine remaining hostages who were left unguarded for a moment escaped around 1:00 p.m., after which the killers, who swore they would go down in a hail of

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bullets, finally surrendered around 4:48 p.m. For nearly two days, what started as a robbery for guns in which ESU P.O. Stephen Gilroy was murdered and Patrolmen Frank Carpentier and Jose Adorno were wounded, became a tense stand-off with 700 police and 10,000 beleaguered neighborhood spectators. The store was only about one mile away from the Big T.

It was on the heels of this tense and unpredictable situation that Bethea, Hogan, and several others agreed to be part of a stake out of The Big T that evening. Bethea was to enter the bar and casually look around. If he spotted Green, he would eyeball a colleague — the cue to alert the backup team. Bethea planned to exit and take up support position outside the Lounge.

On the way to the bar, Bethea says, he had an ominous feeling. The team parked several blocks away and walked to the location. The bar was hopping as it was also the night of the big George Foreman vs. Joe Frazier boxing match in Kingston, Jamaica.

Hogan recognized Green standing at the front corner of the bar. Green was engaged in conversation with an unknown female, later identified as his wife. Bethea confirmed Green's presence and the two waited for Det. Maurice Prescott to arrive. Shortly after he did, Bethea gave him the signal, and Prescott left the bar as planned. But before Bethea or Hogan could do the same, in stepped a short man in a maxi-coat and turned up collar. He walked straight to Green who handed him something. The short man went into the rest room.

Hogan thought the short man might be Anthony White, one of eight fugitives who broke out of the Tombs in Manhattan two months prior by climbing down a string of knotted bedsheets — something right out of a movie. White was the only one who escaped recapture. He had been awaiting trial for the shooting and wounding of 28 Precinct Sgt. Doc Stewart and his driver. During that battle, White's cohort had been killed. White had also been wanted for wounding two Housing Detectives outside a Brooklyn tavern.

White's presence threw the plan into disarray. He and Green were known for boasting they'd never be taken alive. Instead of facing one federal fugitive, there were now two whose rap sheets were embellished with wanton violence and bloodshed.

Hogan and Bethea quickly had to formulate a new plan. They did not want a repeat of the day's hostage situation. They feared a gun battle would jeopardize bar patrons and innocent bystanders. If the perps only stayed in their cur-

rent positions where their movement was restricted they could be nabbed quickly with the least amount of possible bloodshed.

The problem was that Hogan and Bethea were not dealing with ordinary criminals. Green and White belonged to the BLA, thus they believed they were at war with the United States government and its people. In reality, they were simply part of a rag-tag group of armed thugs who stole and killed without remorse. The BLA was considered a domestic terrorist organization with a history of ambushing and wantonly murdering police and robbing armored cars and banks. White and Green were two of many who imagined themselves revolutionary leaders in their mission to start a racial uprising. They had sophisticated weaponry and ammunition, and a network of sympathizers who set up safe houses across the U.S. For a decade they wreaked havoc in many cities, including New York: among BLA crimes was the murder of Patrolmen Joseph Piagentini and Waverly Jones, ambushed on May 21, 1971, as they walked back to their patrol car after handling a routine call in Harlem; the theft of \$1.6 million from a Brinks armored car at the Nanuet Mall, where Nyack Police Officers Edward O'Grady and Waverly Brown, and Brinks guard Peter Paige were killed; a shoot-out in the confines of the 20th Precinct on the Upper West Side of Manhattan when Panther H. Rap Brown robbed a bar; the murder of Foster and Laurie across from Tompkins Square Park; and the shooting of Officers Thomas Curry and Nicholas Binetti outside the home of District Attorney Frank S. Hogan on Riverside Drive in 1971. They were seriously wounded by machine-gun fire launched from a passing car.

The Detectives decided to move.

"I just prayed to God," said Bethea, "and believed that in some way He would protect us." After making small-talk about the boxing match for ten minutes, Bethea casually walked up to the front of the bar near the entrance and slowly went to the juke box where Woody Green was making selections. Bethea identified himself as an Officer and informed Green he was under arrest. Hogan was covering White. Green was commanded to put his hands on his head and back out of the bar; instead he looked down and reached into his maxi-coat. Bethea took a step back and brought his gun up in front of him, but Green tried to smack it. He had an automatic under his coat. Hogan, who was left-handed, tried to grab Green's right hand, but White drew his gun and started firing. The bullet hit Bethea's right shoulder. Green drew the automatic from his waist band and took a step back. Bethea got off four shots, striking



The family during the 1970s, surrounding dad, clockwise from top left, Cleave, Jr., wife Earline, son Stacey, and daughter Kelly.

Green in the torso. Hogan exchanged shots with Anthony White.

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Hogan had run outside into the street calling for back-up. He didn't know if Bethea was dead or alive. The six plainclothed Detectives (Jack Flynn, Neil O'Donnell, William Foley, Gerard Marini, Hubert Clark and their Sergeant, Andre Alonge) who were outside rushed to the windows to draw the perps' fire and shots rang out from all directions. Bethea remembers crawling toward the front of the door where he stretched out his hands to his close friend Det. Hubie Clark, who crawled inside the bar and yanked Bethea to safety. He placed the wounded Detective inside a radio car and colleagues rushed Bethea to Wyckoff Heights Hospital. Hogan, age 34, had a gunshot wound to his shoulder and was rushed to Brooklyn Jewish Hospital.

When the ordeal was over, Green, 25, had three bullets lodged in his head and was pronounced dead at the hospital.

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White, also 25, was already dead on the barroom floor. No bystanders or backup were injured or hurt in the operation. None of the backup team had any notion that White was planning on showing up, either. Both White and Green were identified by another bar owner in Ft. Greene as being part of a gang that held up their tavern and kidnapped the bartender for ransom the month before.

Bethea, Hogan, and the rest of the team had taken down two very heavy hitters in the BLA. The era was so bloody that it was reported in the Sunday New York Daily News of June 10, 1973 that since January of 1970, in just three-and-a-half years, 23 NYPD officers had been killed in the line of duty and another 880 were wounded, many critically. The public was so incensed, a Committee to Restore Respect, Honor and Dignity to Policemen was formed by the Brooklyn Conservative Party and it called for an annual Memorial Day to honor law enforcement Officers who made the ultimate sacrifice.

"The bosses came to my bedside," said Bethea. "They said Phil and I had done a beautiful job and they were putting us in for the Medal of Honor. Unfortunately, that never happened. I have been hoping that will change before I'm called to my maker," he says. Bethea believes that had the operation at the Big T Lounge and the wounds he suffered occurred today it would

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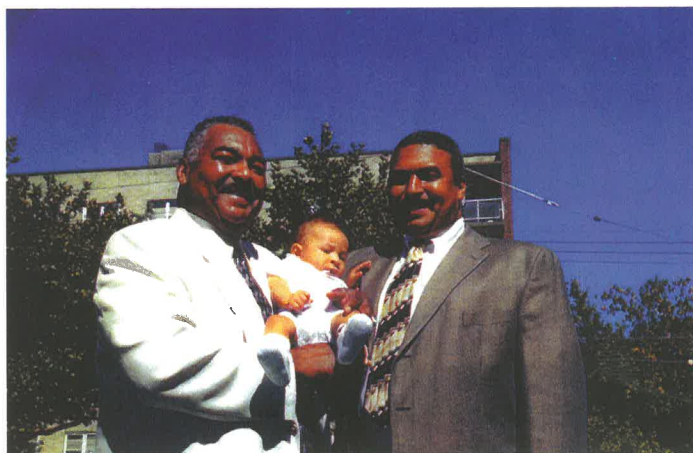
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warrant the Department's top award, as originally promised. One of the factors that may have contributed to the perceived slight was that the New York Police Commissioner'ship changed hands on May 14, 1973 from Patrick V. Murphy to the new appointee, 34-year-old Donald Cawley, the youngest PC in Department history. But now-retired Det. Jerry Marini, a fellow veteran of that terrible night, feels the slight to the team was not contingent upon the change of command: it was quite immediate and stinging.

"Cleave, Phil and I were in the office typing up DD5s when the tip came in about Woody Green planning to meet his wife at the Big T. We had no idea how many other perps might be at that bar. The three of us volunteered for the assignment. And it turned out to be a very heavy night, and the result speaks for itself," he says. "There is no question that Cleave and Phil should have gotten the Medal of Honor, and the rest of us involved in the shoot-out should have gotten Combat Crosses. I can only speak for myself, but that was a night I will never forget. And the Department simply wanted it to go away, despite the fact that we had taken out two of the FBI's most wanted who had a string of homicides and robberies from coast to coast. Most of us had no medal ceremony or grade promotion, even though the Chief of Detectives promised me second grade on the spot. The next day it was rescinded, the comment from the PC being, 'We don't give battlefield commissions.' I was sent a Medal of Merit in the U.S. mail to my home. They broke up the whole Robbery Squad and transferred everyone out. I even refused to sign the write up of the incident, because I didn't agree with the paperwork." The only men honored at the 1974 NYPD Medal Day Ceremony were Bethea, Hogan, and Prescott, who received Combat Crosses.

Over the years, Jerry Marini survived prostate cancer and throat cancer contracted, he believes, as a result of his being mobilized as a retiree for 9/11 work. "I am very proud of my time spent on the job," he adds, "but back in the early 70s in Brooklyn, a cop couldn't even walk down the street safely. He didn't know whether or not he'd get ambushed and gunned down, it was that dangerous. And the Department treated this amazing event as if it had never happened. They just quickly wanted to put a lid on it and make it go away."

The day after the shooting, while Hogan and Bethea were hospitalized, 10,000 officers from across the country gathered outside Brooklyn's Cecilia's Roman Catholic Church to pay their last respects to 29-year-old P.O. Gilroy.



With son Cleave, Jr., right, and Cleave III, now age nine and aspiring to be the next FBI Director.

In May 1973, Green's infamous co-hort, Joanne Chesimard (Assata Shakur), took part in a hold up of a bank in The Bronx and during her getaway, she opened fire on three New Jersey State Troopers, killing, in execution style, Trooper Werner Foerster. Chesimard was convicted and incarcerated and in 1979, she escaped from prison. She eluded capture, and in 1986 fled to Cuba, where it's suspected she still resides.

As late as 1981, Officers were still being targeted and killed by the BLA and there were stories about possible retaliation against those who had taken out their leaders. Bethea believes the BLA had a \$25,000 bounty on his and Hogan's heads. While they were recuperating in the hospital, the newspapers reported that the Department had indeed stepped up security patrols around the Officers for fear of retaliation against them.

He recalls, "Years later I bumped into Patrolman Curry at the Police Surgeon's office. He and his partner were machine gunned on Riverside Drive and were left permanently disabled. Curry was hit in the face, right shoulder, and stomach. We recognized each other since we had both worked together in the 26 Precinct. One of his arms and his side was paralyzed and I was hobbling on a cane. We hugged each other and cried. We thanked God we were both alive. I told him, and he told me, to stay strong. As we parted, he whispered in my ear, 'thank you for Brooklyn.' Just for a moment my leg stopped hurting and he looked a little taller." The two parted and never saw each other again. Curry died at age 74 in May of 2007.

Ironically, Dhoruba al-Mujahid bin Wahad, the Black Panther convicted of shooting Curry and Binetti, had his con-

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viction and 25-to-life sentence overturned in 1990 when a Supreme Court justice found that prosecutors had not given his lawyers evidence that could have helped in his defense. The City paid bin Wahad almost one-half million dollars in 2000 to settle his civil claim of wrongful conviction, but maintained he had committed the crime.

And in June of this year, Shu'aib Raheem, now age 60 and one of the four killers of ESU P.O. Stephen Gilroy, walked out of prison a free man, much to the protestations of New York's police unions, police supporters, and of course Officer Gilroy's widow. Unbeknownst to most, in 1998, the New York State Parole Board had already released another of Officer Gilroy's murderers, Abdulah Almussudug. He died a free man in 2003.

While cop killers are being paroled, many of the veteran Officers of the unpredictable, terrifying days of domestic terror are gone, thinning the ranks of those who can speak directly to that trying time for our nation's police. But Bethea is a survivor.

And his path has not always been easy. He spent years hooked on pain-killers that were needed to relieve the symptoms of his injuries, but with the help of his family, he was able to overcome that addiction.

And despite Bethea's up-front brush with death, his son, Cleave, Junior, followed in his father's footsteps and joined the Department in 1983, earning his gold shield in 1997. He retired in 2003, having spent much of his time in the

Management and Information Systems Division, as did his wife, Regina Lassiter, also a retired Officer. Bethea's son Stacey, for over 20 years has been a flight attendant and instructor for a major airline, and daughter Kelly is a social service supervisor working with troubled youngsters in Albany, New York.

On November 9, 2010, Cleave and Earline, an avid gardener who worked both inside and outside their home during their entire marriage, will celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. "She is a marvel," says Cleave, noting that Earline stuck by him and kept the family together as they worked through Cleave's depression, anxiety, loneliness, surgeries, hospital stays and doctor's appointments. "She never wavered and she held us all together."

"My partner and I never received any grade, any promotions, and never got that Medal of Honor," he adds. "The DEA's president at the time, Steve Crowley, and the late John Furey said the union would put up the money for the award and they fought like hell for me, God bless their souls, but their idea was rejected by the Department."

While it still remains Cleave's dream to receive that Medal, he holds no hard feeling towards the job. "I grew up in Harlem as a child and spent a lot of time enjoying the activities organized by the Police Athletic League. For as long as I can remember, I was truly inspired to become a member of the NYPD. If I had to do it all over again, yes, I would, I would still join the Force. We must do it to keep our families and our neighborhoods safe and secure."