



# The Tipton County Veterans Council and the Tipton County Museum, Veterans Memorial and Nature Center Veteran of the Month for March, 2018

## Houston Gordon

Houston Gordon graduated from Covington's Byars-Hall High School in 1964 and with high honors from the University of Tennessee Martin (UTM) in 1968. While at UTM, he completed two years of training with the United States Army Reserve Officer Training Corps (ROTC). On May 28, 1968, while a student at the University of Tennessee College of Law, he enlisted in the Army Reserve. During the summer of 1969, he completed his Army Reserve Officer Training at Fort Bragg, North Carolina and was commissioned as a Second Lieutenant in the Military Police Corps. With only one year left in law school, he requested and was granted a delay to complete his studies. In the interim, he applied for a branch transfer to the Judge Advocate General's (JAG) Corps, volunteering to serve a minimum of 4 years. His request was granted, conditional on successful completion of law school and passing of the Tennessee bar examination. 1970 was a busy year. He was promoted to First Lieutenant in March, graduated from law school in May, took the bar exam in July, and was informed that he had passed in August. He was sworn in as a lawyer by the Tennessee Supreme Court in September of 1970 then immediately reported to active duty.

After additional training at Fort Lee, Virginia, he was sworn in as a Captain in the JAG Corps on September 18, 1970. After eight weeks as a member of the JAG School's 58th Basic Class studying military law on the campus of the University of Virginia, he was assigned to the Defense Appellate Division, United States Army Judiciary, Falls Church, Virginia (a Washington, D.C. suburb) in January of 1971.

For the next four years he represented soldiers convicted of crimes by courts-martial before the Army Court of Military Review and the Court of Military Appeals, the latter commonly referred to as the "Supreme Court of the Military." Gordon's sworn duty was to represent individual Army personnel convicted of violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice. His job was to try to overturn their convictions and/or obtain relief from their sentences. Most of their crimes and offenses had occurred in Vietnam and ranged from absence without leave, desertion, and drug offenses to thefts, assaults, rape, and murder.

Gordon's representation of individual soldiers and arguments before the Court of Military Appeals resulted in dramatic changes in and refinement of military law. As stated by his superiors in the narrative supporting his recommendation for the Army's Meritorious Service Medal:

"Early recognition of his talents as an appellate attorney led to his assignment as counsel for Lieutenant William L. Calley, Jr. in the appeal of his conviction for premeditated murder in connection with the My Lai incident in 1968."

Calley was the only soldier convicted as a result of the so-called "My Lai Massacre" that occurred on March 16, 1968 in Quang Ngai Province, Republic of South Vietnam, although more than 200 American enlisted personnel and commissioned officers participated in the assault on My Lai 4, My Khe, and the village of Song My. It was the *Calley* case that thrust Captain Gordon into the national spotlight.

After leaving the military service, Gordon returned home to Tennessee and continued his representation of Calley as a civilian in the *habeas corpus* and clemency proceedings in the federal civilian courts. For several years Gordon worked diligently to free Calley, even seeking review by the United States Supreme Court, which rejected Calley's request for a hearing, *Calley v. Hoffman*, 425 U.S. 911, 96 S. Ct. 1505, 47 L. Ed. 760 (Mem.) (1976)). At the same time, Gordon continued efforts to obtain a commutation of Lieutenant Calley's sentence. The sentence was finally ended with the granting of parole. Calley served approximately 3 years and 7 months, all but four months of which was served in his quarters at Fort Benning.

While in the Army, Gordon earned a master of law degree in taxation (L.L.M.) from the George Washington University National Law Center ('73). Licensed to practice law in both Tennessee and the District of Columbia, Gordon has practiced as a trial lawyer for more than 47 years. He has been recognized by his peers as one of the Best Lawyers in America each year since 1984 and as one of the top 100 trial lawyers in America by the National Trial Lawyers Association.

Gordon was Tennessee's Democratic nominee for the United States Senate in 1996 and served as Chair of the Tennessee Democratic Party (1997 – 1999). Gordon and his wife Debbie have three grown sons and nine grandchildren. He is the author of a novel, *The Plains of Abraham*, and has just finished a long awaited historical narrative about the Vietnam War and the My Lai incident, tentatively entitled, *DECEPTION, ARROGANCE, AND BLIND OBEDIENCE: My Lai and the End of American Innocence*, with an anticipated publication date in early 2019. He was nominated for Veteran of the Month by fellow Vietnam Veteran Leslie Billings.