Our History is a regular column submitted by Kate Rauhauser-Smith, visitor services manager at the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History, examining the region's history and some related displays at the museum.

"It is with deep personal concern that I officially inform you that your son, Captain James H. Jones, has been missing in South Viet Nam since 17 Jun 1967."

The letter every military family dreads was delivered by an officer to Buster and Myrtle Jones on Monday, June 19, 1967. Their son, an Air Force dentist, was one of 56 people aboard a turboprop C130 transport aircraft attempting a takeoff from the An Khê Army Airfield. It crashed at the end of the runway.

"Rescue personnel are on the scene and are checking names of survivors against the passenger manifest. Pending further information your son will be listed officially as missing …," Major General G.B. Greene.

On Wednesday June 21 their worst fears were realized when they were told their son was among the 34 dead. He was the first Surry County fatality of the Vietnam War.

Born in Surry County, Dr. Jones was an honor graduate from each JJ Jones High School, A&T College, and Howard University. A member of the ROTC, he was commissioned an officer upon enlistment in 1964. At the time of the crash he was just a month shy of his 28th birthday. He left his wife, Gloria Jean Reynolds from Westfield, and their 4-year-old daughter, Icca Vonja, as well as his parents, a brother (Dallas), and several grandparents.

His father created a carefully maintained notebook of clippings, official paperwork, and his letters home. Letters filled with the mundane things that make life normal and connect families. "Jean (who lived near the New Jersey base from which he was deployed) said she was having a little trouble getting the car started."

He worked with other military dentists and doctors, providing care to service members and South Vietnamese civilians. “How are you all doing? As for myself I am fine. It’s kind of hard to keep up with the days because we work from 7:30-4:30 seven days a week.”

He signed each letter the same way, “Love James.”

This region has a long tradition of military service from the earliest settlements here and it is as strong today as ever with local residents in all branches of the military.

We thank those people willing to stand guard at the door, today and in the past, protecting the interests of America and her allies but Memorial Day is not their day.

Memorial Day is, and has always been, specifically to remember the sacrifice made by those who have died in military service and to contemplate the cost of our freedoms.

The history of Memorial Day is tangled with ceremonies beginning across the country just after the American Civil War. Generally organized by women’s organizations they were solemn occasions with processions of veterans and community members to a cemetery or church where religious services were held and speeches given before wreaths and flowers were laid on graves.

The holiday, which might be held any time in May or early June, was as often called Decoration Day. Elkin tended to hold their observances the first or second weekend in May while Mount Airy’s was generally held in the first week of June.

WWI cost more than 100,000 American military lives. It was only natural for a new generation to became part of the already-established ceremonies. It was an official state holiday in every state by 1890. It wouldn’t be a national holiday until 1968 when it was declared to be the last Monday in May.

And so, tomorrow all Americans will pause in our busy lives as one nation to remember all those who have fallen in service to this country's military, as is fitting and appropriate. We will remember, for at least a moment, that brave men and women have purchased our freedoms at great personal sacrifice.

The staff and volunteers of the Mount Airy Museum of Regional History offer our undying gratitude to them all.