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## A Hero in our Midst

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Mitchell Stout (Photo credit: Randy Smith.)

***West Knox County, TN hosts silent reminder of American hero***

Mitch was barely 20 years old when he died. Although in chronological years he was scarcely more than a boy, Sgt. Mitchell Stout accomplished more in his short life than many men twice his age.

But this hero would have been all but forgotten had it not been for the curiosity of a stranger and the determination of a friend.

Just five weeks into his second tour of duty, Sgt. Mitchell Stout was killed in action March 12, 1970 while his Duster unit guarded the *Khe Gio* Bridge in Vietnam. Stout was in a bunker with members of this searchlight crew when the position came under heavy enemy mortar fire and ground attack.

When the intensity of the mortar attack subsided, an enemy grenade was thrown into the bunker. Stout picked up the grenade, cradled it against him and started out. As he reached the door, the grenade exploded. By holding it close to his body and shielding its blast, he protected the four soldiers with him in the bunker from further injury or death.

Undeniably Stout was too young to die.

Undeniably he died a hero.

The event may have passed quietly into history with no more fanfare, but for a jogger who stumbled across Stout's grave in 1993.

"I saw the word Vietnam on the upright stone," said retired Master Sgt, Richard O'Brien. "When I looked down I saw Medal of Honor on the flat stone beneath it. I wanted to find out who this man was, so I started to ask around."

O'Brien searched but found very little information on Stout. No one seemed to know anything about him. He finally found a slim folder at the East Tennessee Historical Society. Armed with this small bit of information, he went to the Town of Farragut and suggested a walkway at Turkey Creek be named in his honor.

Things moved slowly and O'Brien was frustrated at the lack of interest.

He finally looked to then editor, Michael Holtz, of the Press Enterprise for assistance. After two stories appeared in December 1993 and January 1994, people started to take interest in the little known hero laid to rest in the Virtue Cumberland Presbyterian Church cemetery.

Once such person was James R. 'Buddy' White, a friend of Stout.

White, a local businessman had received a copy of *The Wall: A Day at the Vietnam Veteran's Memorial* by Peter Moyer as a Christmas gift from his daughter. This book and Holtz's articles gave him the idea to build a memorial to Mitchell Stout in conjunction with a tribute to Tennessee's other fallen veterans.

"For whatever reason, there are people who would like to visit [the Vietnam Wall] in D.C., but are unable to" White wrote in one of many letters about his vision for a memorial, "but if a memorial was in their state, they could. There is not a state that went untouched by Vietnam."

A nearly three-inch thick black notebook holds correspondence, blueprints, fundraising ideas, and plans for the memorial. It all came to fruition on March 12, 1995. On the 25th anniversary of Stout's death and after nearly a year of planning, a ceremony was held to dedicate the Mitchell W. Stout memorial. More than 300 people attended the event. Military dignitaries, Stout's fellow soldiers and many others were present at White's invitation. The ceremony was further enhanced as

helicopters flew overhead in a missing man formation.

The memorial grounds are laid out like the medal-of-honor – a star within a circle. At the point of each star is a large marble marker commemorating a different event, person or military honor. Along with the Sgt. Mitchell Stout stone, others include a Knox/Loudon Vietnam Wall listing 117 names of soldiers killed in action, a stone honoring all veterans buried at the Virtue cemetery, a veteran's memorial honoring all veterans in all branches of the service and a Tennessee medal-of-honor stone honoring 34 recipients from the Civil War to present. There are also two other stones outside the formation honoring two Civil War Medal of Honor recipients, Captain Frederick Swift and Sgt. Joseph Brandle.

White didn't miss a thing.

"I figured if nobody else was going to do it," White said, "I'd do it myself."

It's hard to believe that at the time of his death, with barely two short decades of life under his belt, Stout was a seasoned soldier starting a second tour of duty in Vietnam.

Born in Knoxville, TN on Feb. 24, 1950, Stout grew up in Loudon County with his mother. At the age of 17, the blue-eyed, blond-haired Stout dropped out of Lenoir City High School and went to live with his father in Siler City, N.C.

In Siler City, Stout worked for Siler City Mills Inc., and when his father moved to Sanford, he went to work for the Wilson Feed Company.

Like many a typical southern boy, Stout liked to fish, hunt and camp in the woods and on the waterways of Tennessee and North Carolina. He was 6-foot-1 with an easy grin and liked to eat country ham.

In August 1967, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and was initially stationed in Germany. After serving a one-year tour of duty in Vietnam, he was honorably discharged.

Stout returned to the United States only to grow restless in civilian life. He felt he could be of greater use back in Vietnam and was deeply concerned about young soldiers and their lack of proper training.

He told his friends and family he knew he could help somebody if he returned. In January 1970, Stout re-enlisted and was assigned to Battery C, 1st Battalion, 44th Artillery as squad leader in charge of the *Khe Gio* Bridge.

According to retired Seattle Attorney, Don Wittenberger, who was at battalion headquarters about 20 miles away on the night of March 12, 1970, "The attack on *Khe Gio* Bridge was well planned, and the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) had positioned numerous mortar tubes in the surrounding hills. The survivors told me the mortar fire was so heavy, it was impossible to go outside."

"Mitch and four other guys were sheltering in the bunker when the enemy grenade was throw in," Wittenberger said, "This is where the 'maybe I can help somebody' came into play. He was the sergeant, the squad leader, the senior man. So, he took it upon himself the responsibility of picking up the grenade and taking it outside. You need to understand he had no time to think about it, only react, and that he knew doing it meant he was going to die. Not in some abstract way in the distant future, but right then, right there."

Of the 14 Americans who fought this battle, two were killed, five wounded and one captured. At that time this action, Stout was only five weeks into his second tour in the Republic of South Vietnam. Also killed was SP4 Terry Lee Moser, of Barto, Pa. 2nd Lt. Gary B. Scull, of Harlan, Iowa was listed as missing in action.

"Rumors started circulating at 1/44 headquarters before the sun had set on the day of the battle that Sgt. Stout would be recommended for the Medal of Honor," Wittenberger said. "Lt. Col. Myers signed the paperwork and Jack Stout and Faye Thomas went to Blair House in Washington, D.C. on July 17, 1974 during the last days of the Nixon Administration to accept their son's medal from Vice President Gerald R. Ford. Jack Stout donated it in 1991 to the National Medal of Honor Museum in Hixson, Tenn., where it is on permanent display."

"Of the 245 Medals of Honor awarded during the Vietnam War, almost two-thirds of them were given posthumously," Wittenberger said, "often the soldier got killed doing what earned him the medal."

"During that time, the Medal of Honor was awarded to a number of soldiers who were killed by using their bodies to shield others from enemy grenades, as Sgt. Stout did," said Wittenberger, "What distinguishes Sgt. Stout is that he is the only Army Air Defense Artilleryman in American history to receive the Medal of Honor."

Other awards and decorations Sgt. Stout received are the Bronze Star with one Oak Leaf Cluster; Army Commendation Medal with one Oak Leaf Cluster; National Defense Service Medal; Vietnamese Campaign Medal and Combat Infantryman Badge.

The Mitchell W. Stout memorial is located at the Virtue Cumberland Presbyterian Church cemetery. Visitors can find the memorial by taking Kingston Pike to Virtue Road (on the west side of Farragut) and turning onto Evans Road. The area lies adjacent to the cemetery and is a fitting tribute to the men of honor represented there.

Although thirty-five years have passed since Stout's death and it has been ten years since the memorial was dedicated, its significance is just as great today. American soldiers in Iraq, Afghanistan and many other countries around the world are continuing to put their lives on the line. Like Stout, they understand the risks involved.

(I wrote this story for a print publication several years ago, but I feel it deserves a lasting place on the internet.)





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