

JOURNAL STATE REPORTER

NDQSA archive
first published
15 June 1979

DEED OF HONOR

*Sergeant Mitchell Stout becomes hero;
parents remember Mitch, the son*

by Rosemary Bates

Faye Stout Thomas was cleaning the back room of her small trailer home and straightening her two daughter's clothes, attempting to regain the order the room had lost during the week. It was Saturday, April 14, 1970 -- three days after she had celebrated her 39th birthday. Mrs. Thomas recalled the postcard she' recently received from her son, Mitchell, who was serving a tour of duty in Vietnam. He said he would send her his address soon.

Returning to her work, Mrs. Thomas was interrupted by 11-year-old daughter Susan who said there was an Army car in the driveway, "They didn't have to tell me what it was," Mrs. Thomas said.

When he heard the phone ring, Jack Stout quit packing his clothes for a move to a new home and walked to the top of the stairs in his mother's house. Divorced from his wife Faye for several years, Stout had recently moved from Sanford, North Carolina, to Knoxville. It was April 14, 1970. His son Mitchell had just written, saying had been given the job of squad leader in a Duster unit stationed near the Demilitarized Zone in Vietnam. He asked his father to send him a package of vacuum packed country ham.

Standing at the bottom of the stairs, Stout's mother looked up and said there was a man from the Army on the phone. "Lord, Mom -- It's Mitchell," Jack Stout said.

The Army message that Saturday was brief. Sergeant Mitchell W. Stout, 20-years-old and five weeks into his second tour of duty in Vietnam, had grabbed an enemy grenade that had fallen into his bunker. To protect the men in his squad, Sergeant Stout used his six-foot, one-inch body as a shield from the explosion of the grenade. Born Feb. 24, 1950, Sergeant Stout died March 12, 1970.

Four years later, in July of 1974, Sergeant Stout's mother and father were asked to fly to Washington, D.C., for an awards ceremony. Sergeant Stout was given the Medal of Honor -- the highest award for bravery that can be given to any individual in the United States.

Sergeant Mitchell W. Stout became a hero. But Mrs. Thomas chooses to remember Mitchell Stout, the son. "I don't think of Mitch the hero. I think of him as Mitch," she said, lighting a cigarette. I wonder so many times how mothers who lost sons get over it."

Carefully turning the pages of a gold-colored Mitchell Stout Scrapbook, Mrs. Thomas points to yellowed newspaper articles, telegrams, baby pictures and letters. At 17 years of age, blue-eyed, blond-haired Mitchell Stout dropped out of Lenoir City High School and went to live with his father in Siler, North Carolina. In August, 1967, he enlisted in the U.S. Army. After serving a one-year tour of duty in Vietnam, he was honorably discharged.

"I listened to the radio and news constantly," Mrs. Thomas said, pulling a strand of dark-brown, short-shagged hair from her face. "When he came back from Vietnam, I

didn't even know he was near. One day he came up and opened the trailer door."

Mrs. Thomas, an employee of Park West Hospital, and her son spent the next few weeks catching up on the past year's news and talking from late at night into the early morning hours. "But after his first tour of duty, he wasn't satisfied with Army life in the States. He said they were sending little boys into Vietnam without very much training," she said. "He felt there was something he could do to help some of them, so he reenlisted."

The first four years after Sergeant Stout's death, his mother was bitter and angry with anything that pertained to the Army. "I'm sure I felt like every other mother. It hurts so much when you have a child who dies," Mrs. Thomas said, a distant smile in her eyes. "You have so much love left."

But the bitterness and anger vanished when Mrs. Thomas was flown to Washington to receive her son's medal. "I found Mitch wasn't just a serial number," she said, pride and wonder seeping into her low, calm voice. Those big Army men with so many medals, they'd tell you how great it was to meet you."

After receiving the medal and seeing that escort officers "seemed to know Mitchell as a personal somebody," Mrs. Thomas determined to remember the happiness surrounding her son. "I felt it odd that there's nobody who will talk to me about Mitch." she said, leaning her slender body toward the coffee table to drop cigarette ashes into the astray. "If I find somebody to talk to, it makes me remember the good things."

While Mrs. Thomas has "accepted the fact that the Army was what Mitchell cared enough to give his life for," she admits, "Christmas is a very bad time." But she still celebrates the holiday and even decorated a Christmas tree at Sergeant Stout's grave. "In the Untied States, it was March 11 when he died. It was my birthday," Mrs. Thomas said. "I don't celebrate birthdays anymore."

Even though Mitchell Stout lived with his mother most of his life, he visited his father for lengthy stays and was living with his father when he joined the Army. "He came to me in February 1967, in Siler City, North Carolina," Jack Stout said. In Siler City, Mitchell Stout worked for Siler City Mills Inc., and when his father moved to Sanford, Sergeant Stout was employed by Wilson Feed Company. "We had an agreement when he'd come to stay with me," Jack Stout, a meat and poultry inspector for the U.S. Department of Agriculture, said. "He would have to have some responsibility."

Stout's bespectacled, intense face changes from a strict disciplinarian look to one of boyhood glee. "We were close. We fished, hunted, camped on the lake bank or river bank when I wasn't working and he wasn't in school," Jack Stout said, remembrance flashing in his eyes. "The day he talked about joining the Army, we had taken our guns and gone hunting."

Stout, body straight, shoulders back, shuffled through stacks of mementos and records concerning his son. He finally pulled a white envelope, bordered with blue and red trim, from a folder. It was the first letter he'd received from Sergeant Stout while he was in Vietnam.

"I haven't been in but one fire fight so far and it wasn't bad," Mitchell Stout wrote. "But it still scared the . . . out of me. There was three of them and 10 of us. We had one man wounded. We killed all of them."

Although Stout can recall certain times he spent with his son, he admits, "You let things like that fade away. You don't think it's important." One memory Stout revives is the time when Mitchell, between tours of duty, visited Stout at his home in Sanford. "I had a loaded gun in the gun cabinet. Mitchell got the gun out of the cabinet, aimed it at

a string attached to the attic and fired it. Of course he didn't know it was loaded. It went through five walls and into a closet and shot a hole in a hat. I've often thought about it, but he wasn't anymore scared when he picked that grenade up than he was that night. He was just a typical American boy."

Stout, like Mrs. Thomas, is not sad about his son's death. "I have no bitterness, no anger," he said. "I don't have any hang-ups about death. I understand the you might die and the old most die."

Discussing the ceremony in Washington, Stout said he was proud his son had achieved "the greatest, highest honor a man can receive. My only regret is that somebody else had to accept a medal for what Mitchell had done."

Other awards and decorations Sergeant 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.

But Mrs. Thomas said, "The medals don't help the hurt or fill the gap. I find myself thinking he'd be 29. Would he be married, have kids? It never dies. It's always there.

Rosemary Bates' article, first published Friday, June 15, 1979, is reproduced courtesy of the *Knoxville Journal*, Knoxville, Tennessee.