

Tribute to Sergeant Mitchell Stout

Speech by Judge Donald Wittenberger to the East Tennessee Veterans Memorial Association's Second Annual Medal of Honor Evening at The Foundry, Knoxville World's Fair Park, on May 7, 2012.

I had the opportunity yesterday to visit Knoxville's veterans' memorial. Your city has built a beautiful and moving tribute to your veterans and you should be very proud of it. Its upkeep depends on donations from people like you, and by attending this event, you are supporting that effort. Thank you for coming this evening.

I'd like to thank the organizers of this event for inviting me, and I especially want to thank Colonel Joe Alexander and his gracious wife Rikki for being my hosts during my stay here. This is my first visit to Tennessee, and I'm enjoying your Tennessee hospitality very much. For me personally, being here is both a great privilege and a great duty.

I'm a Vietnam Veteran, and I say that with great pride. I served with the legendary 1st of the 44th, the most decorated artillery battalion of the Vietnam War. When Sergeant Mitchell Stout volunteered for a second tour of duty in Vietnam, he was assigned to our battalion, and was killed in action while serving with us.

That night, I was at battalion headquarters a few miles away. After getting off guard duty around midnight, I went to the radio shack, and was there when the first distress call came from the bridge. I could clearly hear shooting and explosions in the background. This was a violent battle. I listened for about an hour, then went outside where our sergeants were organizing a rescue force. Headquarters Battery had about one hundred enlisted men at that time. The sergeants asked for fifty volunteers and got a hundred. As it happened, the rescue force never left the Dong Ha base, because the survivors made it on their own to a nearby artillery firebase called Camp Carroll.

The following morning, the four men whose lives Sergeant Stout saved came to battalion headquarters to provide their witness statements for the Medal of Honor recommendation, and afterward I heard them tell their story. Years later, based on the letters I wrote home that day, I wrote an account of the battle that was posted on the internet by a retired Army sergeant in upstate New York named Dan Fisher, who had been a friend of Sergeant Stout in the Ninth Infantry Division. At the time, I had no idea this article would get the attention it has; and it was beyond my wildest imagining that someday I would be here in Knoxville standing before this crowd giving this speech.

I want to emphasize two things about this battle. First, Sergeant Stout was not the only hero. For example, when the survivors reached Camp Carroll, the truck driver slumped over the wheel unconscious, and only then was it discovered he'd been shot; somehow, he kept going until he got the other wounded men to safety. Second, in addition to Sergeant Stout, our nation lost two other magnificent young men in this battle. Specialist Fourth Class Terry Moser was killed while trying to man the guns, for which

he was posthumously awarded the Silver Star medal, and Lieutenant Gary Scull was captured; as of today, he is one of roughly fifty Americans known to have been captured alive in South Vietnam who are still missing and unaccounted for.

For every casualty of war, there is a family at home who have suffered a very personal loss. In Lieutenant Scull's case, his mother (who has since passed away) and his sister lived with the agony of not knowing what happened to their son and brother. For bearing this burden for so many years, they too are American heroes and have earned our respect.

For those of us who came of age in the 1960s, Vietnam was the event that defined our generation. The war was a tragedy for our nation. If you want to blame someone, I think you should blame Josef Stalin. His reign of terror, his bloody dictatorship, and his gulags and slave labor camps made the whole world afraid. Vietnam was part of America's strategy to contain the communist nightmare and keep it from engulfing all of humanity. Our leaders thought they had no choice.

I hope someday there will be no more wars, ever again, and I believe such a world is possible; but we're not there yet. Today we have another generation of Americans coming home from Iraq and Afghanistan, and it's our obligation and duty to welcome them home and give them the acknowledgement and respect they deserve.

We have gathered here this evening to pay special tribute to East Tennessee's Medal of Honor hero of the Vietnam War, Sergeant Mitchell Stout. Honoring the men and women who bear the hardships and sacrifices of military service doesn't glorify war. No one in their right mind likes or wants war. War is awful. One of the tragedies of war is that you tend to lose your best people -- the bravest, the strongest, and those with leadership qualities -- because they accept the greatest responsibilities and expose themselves to the greatest dangers. Sergeant Mitchell Stout was among our best and bravest, and we honor him for having these qualities.

I think we're all awed a little bit by the Medal of Honor. It's the highest recognition our nation bestows, and it has a certain cachet because it is rarely awarded and only for extraordinarily heroic deeds. It's not something anyone tries to earn; no one joins the military service or goes to war with the intention of becoming a Medal of Honor recipient. Medal of Honor recipients are people who found themselves in extraordinary circumstances and rose to the occasion.

But Mitchell Stout is much more important to your community than the medal, and that's what I want to talk about, so let's now look beyond the Medal of Honor at what his life and sacrifice should mean to us.

Mitchell Stout served his first Vietnam tour as an infantryman with the Ninth Infantry Division. The motto of the infantry is, "Follow me!" At the Army Infantry School at Fort Benning there is a statue of an infantryman waving his men forward. The statue is called "Follow Me." Having served as an infantryman, Mitchell Stout was schooled in this style of leadership.

When the enemy grenade was thrown into Sergeant Stout's bunker, he didn't have time to think. A grenade fuse burns for four or five seconds, and there was just barely time to grab it and run outside, where it exploded and killed him. Doing this saved the lives of the four men in the bunker with him. He can't tell us what he thought about in those last few seconds, but I think I know. I'm pretty sure two things were in his mind. First, "I've got to get this grenade out of here," and second, "this is my responsibility." As a United States Army Sergeant, he was concerned about taking care of his men. And as a former infantryman, he lived by the credo of "follow me."

Although Sergeant Stout had only an instant to make that decision, it was a lifetime in the making. What he brought with him into the Army, and to that bunker in Vietnam, was the character and values he acquired from his parents, his teachers, and influences in the community while growing up. For him to do what he did, those people had to have done some important things very right. You should be very proud of your community for producing such a man.

Our nation honored Sergeant Stout's heroism and sacrifice by awarding him the Medal of Honor. The state of Tennessee honored him by naming a highway bridge for him. The City of Knoxville inscribed his name on its Veterans Memorial. The Army named the largest building at Fort Bliss for him. These honors are appropriate and deserved, but can't begin to compensate him for the life he didn't get to live. We owe him more. It's not enough for you to think of him as just a name inscribed on memorials. He was a real person and deserves to be remembered that way. That's why I came from Seattle to share this experience with you. I'm trying to connect you with him by describing the battle, and we're now going to show you some pictures of where it occurred. I've been there and seen it with my own eyes, so this is very close to me.

[slide show]

I want to read a poem to you. It's inscribed on the memorial across the street from here, so you've probably seen it. It was written on January 1, 1970, at Dak To, Vietnam, by Captain Michael Davis O'Donnell, a helicopter pilot who was killed on March 24, 1970 – just 12 days after Mitchell Stout's death – while rescuing a Special Forces team. It's called, "Remember Them."

“If you are able, save them a place inside of you, and save one backward glance when you are leaving for the places they can no longer go.

Be not ashamed to say you loved them, though you may or may not have always. Take what they have left and what they have taught you with their dying and keep it with your own.

And in that time when men decide and feel safe to call the war insane, take one moment to embrace those gentle heroes you left behind.”

Now I want you to pause and reflect on the last forty-two years of your life, if you're old enough to remember that far back. Think about the places you've been and the things you've done during that time. That's what he lost. We can't give those lost years back to Mitchell. We all came here tonight to give him our respect for giving away those forty-two years so his fellow soldiers could live.

Mitchell Stout lived only twenty years and sixteen days, yet his was an enormous life. It is what he can teach us about character and courage, and the inspiration we can draw from his example, that is his greatest gift to all of us.

There are two kinds of people in the world, givers and takers. Mitchell Stout obviously was a giver. By honoring him, we try to give back to him. But I want to ask you to do something a little different. I want you to be takers, to take something from him. I want you to take his gift and use it to become a better person and help make this a better world. By enlarging yourself in this way, you also enlarge him.

Sooner or later, we all face difficulties in our lives. At those times, we need all of our resources. Mitchell Stout has been a part of who and what I am for a long time now, and his example is one of the things I look to for extra strength when I need it.

I want you to shut your eyes and imagine you see a path in front of you. You know that's the way you should go, but it's hard to do. Now imagine you see a form materialize on the path ahead of you and take the shape of a person. He turns his head, casts a backward glance in your direction, and seems to recognize you. You get a feeling he knows you, and you know him. Then he smiles, waves you forward, and says, "Follow me!" At this moment, you reach deep down inside yourself, and pull up the reserves of strength and courage that you've stored away there. Now open your eyes, see clearly the path in front of you, and go.

I promise you that, if you take what these gentle heroes left behind and make it your own, and put it in your heart and keep it there always, no matter where you go or what do, you will never be alone.

My friends, thank you for granting me the extraordinary privilege of listening to me this evening.

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