

The stories of a boxer and a soldier

By Bob Heleringer

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Newspaper clipping with portions of Sgt. Stout's story
transcribed below for readability.

Scan of header with Sergeant Stout's mother receiving his posthumous Medal of Honor from then Vice President Gerald Ford on 17 July 1974.

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In November 2014, our daughter, Ann, and her family moved to Orlando, Fla., after her husband accepted an attractive job offer he couldn't turn down. So began, for Cindy and I, regular journeys to and from central Florida to visit them and their three children.

About four hours into the 14-hour trek down I-75, on a mile-long bridge spanning the wide, wide Tennessee River, just south of Knoxville, there is a small sign on the side of the highway that says:

**Sgt. Mitchell W. Stout Bridge
Medal of Honor**

Mitchell William Stout was born on Feb. 24, 1950, in Knoxville, but grew up in nearby Lenoir City. He was the second child, and only son, born to Jack and Faye Stout. When



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Gerald Ford, then vice president of the United States, presents Mitchell W. Stout's Medal of Honor to his mother, Faye Stout Thomas, on July 17, 1974.

Scan of picture with Sergeant Stout's mother Faye Stout Thomas receiving his posthumous Medal of Honor from then Vice President Gerald Ford on 17 July 1974.



Picture will save from document as a 1235x1115, 220dpi, 196kb jpg

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Mitchell William Stout was born on Feb. 24, 1950, in Knoxville, but grew up in nearby Lenoir City. He was the second child, and only son, born to Jack and Faye Stout. When Mitchell was 4, his parents divorced and his father moved to North Carolina. Mitchell and his older sister, Melody, were inseparable. They lived in humble circumstances with a single room case at their mother, Susan, would join them in 1958 after their mother re-married. They enjoyed life immensely — mostly outdoors, fishing, hunting, camping and playing cowboys and Indians together in the hills, creeks, and woods surrounding their rural home.

With his friendly smile, blond hair and blue eyes, Mitchell was a precocious child. Early on, he displayed a mature character; he was elected president of his sixth grade class. After three years at Lenoir City High School, Mitchell dropped out and enlisted in the Army. It was April 1967.

At that same time, 25-year-old Muhammad Ali, born and raised in Louisville as Cassius Clay, an Olympic gold medalist and the reigning heavyweight boxing champion of the world, refused induction into the service. America had been at war, albeit an undeclared war, since 1958 in South Vietnam, fighting the insurgent Viet Cong and the regular army of North Vietnam (NVA) which was seeking to unite, by force, the communist northern half of that country with the free and democratic southern half. A convert to Islam, Ali had taken a Muslim name and claimed "conscientious objector" status, an exemption denied by various draft boards, appeals panels and courts. After being tried and convicted for refusing induction, Ali was sentenced to jail and fined. As he began a lengthy appeals process, his championship title was revoked and he couldn't get a license anywhere to box.

After basic training, Stout served a year in Germany and then requested duty in Vietnam. He served "in country" from 1968 to 1969, was wounded by shrapnel from a mortar round and was awarded the Purple Heart and Bronze Star. The plucky 19-year-old was also promoted to sergeant. Rotated back home, he surprised his family bursting through the front door of his mother's house and, amid the tears and the clamor, shouted, "If there's not a cold beer in this house, I'm gone!"

From 1969 to 1970, the Vietnam War was at its apex, it consumed the attention and focus of every American from the halls of the national government to Faye Thomas' living room (Thomas was her re-married name). Faye's son defended the war, saying it was a "worthwhile" cause. More important to him, though, he worried about the men he had left behind in the jungles and rice paddies of Southeast Asia. Like all sergeants in all of history's armies, this combat veteran didn't care much for officers. He said the men in his squad deserved better leadership than that usually provided by "green," untested lieutenants. In a rare reflective moment, he told Melody "if it ever comes to a choice of my life or my men, there won't be any question. It will be my life." Despite his mother's protests, Mitchell volunteered for a second tour in Vietnam.

On March 12, 1970, less than three weeks after his 20th birthday, Stout was at a remote outpost at the Khe Gio Bridge on Highway 9 just south of the (so-called) demilitarized zone in Quang Tri province. He and his squad, along with South Vietnamese regulars (ARVN) were guarding a key position that was fortified to prevent the influx of North Vietnamese troops to the south. The bridge was tactical high ground coveted by both sides. Under cover of darkness, 400 NVA troops infiltrated the camp perimeter. While the allied soldiers were pinned down by heavy mortar and rocket fire, enemy infantry surged forward to kill Americans and ARVN troops in their defensive positions. In a bunker with four of his men, as Stout directed their fire, a hand grenade suddenly landed at their feet. In a



Gerald Ford, then vice president of the United States, presents Mitchell W. Stout's Medal of Honor to his mother, Faye Stout Thomas, on July 17, 1974.

split second, Stout scooped up the grenade and, clutching it to his body, leaped out of the bunker. The ensuing explosion killed him instantly, but his men were saved from a similar fate. With the different time zones, it was still March 11 back in Lenoir City — Faye Thomas' 40th birthday. (She never celebrated her birthday again and passed away in 2009.)

On July 17, 1974, Mitchell William Stout, Sergeant, U.S. Army, Battery C, 1st Battalion, 48th Artillery, was awarded the Medal of Honor for his "great courage ... conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity in action, at the cost of his own life, in keeping with the highest traditions of the military service."

By that time, in 1974, Ali's conviction had been overturned, unanimously, by no less than the U.S. Supreme Court. In a series of epic fights throughout that decade, he regained his title and successfully defended it twice before retiring. He was married four times and had nine children. A 2001 movie about his life, "Ali," grossed \$87.7 million dollars. In the fighter's hometown, right there on the Ohio River, a 6-story, 96,000-square-foot museum bearing his name opened its doors. The building cost \$80 million and is run by a staff of 38. Admission is \$9, \$5 if you're a member of the military.

After his retirement from the ring, in 1984, Ali came down with Parkinson's Disease. Although the illness eventually took his speech, he nonetheless became a passionate, if silent, advocate for a variety of humanitarian and philanthropic causes. In 2005, he received a second gold medal, the Presidential Medal of Freedom, the highest award any U.S. citizen can receive. When "the Greatest" died two weeks ago, tributes for the champion poured in from around the world — he was called a "hero," an "inspiration," a "king" and even a "prophet." At his memorial service, attended by 15,000 people, Ali was eulogized by heads of state, a former U.S. president and show business celebrities as dozens of famous sports figures looked on.

Melody Woods, Stout's still-grieving sister, doesn't have a museum to honor her cherished brother; she keeps all the mementos, citations, letters from him (which she will not share) and the folded, yellowing newspaper clippings in a cardboard shoe box, which she reverently uncovers and displays, one precious item at a time, for a visitor sitting at her kitchen table. Childless, Melody worries about what will happen to that box when she is gone.

She brightens again whenever she drives over to her brother's nearby gravesite, nestled among the same quiet hills and valleys they both played in as children. She and her sister take some measure of pride in the bridge over the Tennessee River, a memorial banner at Mitchell's high school, a gymnasium named for him at Ft. Bliss, Texas, a "Stout Hall" at our own Ft. Knox, his name etched among the 58,271 others on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial wall in Washington, D.C. (panel 13W, Row 12A), and his Medal of Honor exhibited in a display case at the Loudon County courthouse.

All, with the time to prepare something during a life that reached 74 years, said he'd like to be remembered "as a black man who won the heavyweight title and who was humorous and who treated everyone right. As a man who never looked down on those who looked up to him and who helped as many people as he could... in their fight for freedom, justice and equality."

Stout, 20 years old when he died for his country, never got a chance to write his own epitaph. Then again, maybe he did. As he was jumping out of that bunker clutching a grenade pressed to his stomach, perhaps he said again — if only to himself:

"If it ever comes to a choice of my life or my men, there won't be any question. It will be my life."

Bob Heleringer is a Louisville attorney and, from 1980 to 2002, served in Kentucky's House from the 13th District. He can be reached at hb@bellsouth.net.

Selected text about Sgt. Mitchell Stout transcribed for readability.

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