U.S. Army Spc4 John Edwin Mitchell, Special Service (Green Beret)

By Carolyn Cloyd

John Mitchell always wanted to be a pilot just like his father. One cherished family photo, taken on the porch of his grandmother's house in Arcola, reveals an unhappy young John dressed and ready to "pilot" his bicycle with his leather gloves and goggles pushed back on his head, upset because his mother refused to let him wear the goggles in the photograph. Flying was a lifelong dream, deferred by responsibilities, but once he finished a second tour in Vietnam in early January 1967, John Mitchell planned to make it a reality.

John Edwin Mitchell's family ties to Arcola and Douglas County go back several generations. John was born to John Samuel and Nellie Louis Mitchell (née Black) on Mar. 31, 1935, in his maternal grandmother's home in Arcola. The house was then listed with a Pine Street address, but is now 229 E. Madison Street.

John Samuel Mitchell was born in Wetumka, Okla. in 1908, and Nellie was born near Arcola in 1916. An article in the Arcola Record-Herald reported that John Samuel Mitchell and Nellie Black were married at 8 p.m. on Saturday, Oct. 3, 1929 in Charleston. Nellie Black was a junior at Arcola High School and John Samuel Mitchell had been a resident of Kemp for about a year and was employed by the Farm Bureau in Tuscola.

Nellie Black Mitchell was the daughter of LeRoy "Roy" Black and Kathryn Burt Black of Arcola.

Roy Black was born in Wayne County in 1886, and moved with his parents and siblings to Arcola when he was about 7 years old. In late November 1925, he became desperately ill and was taken to the hospital in Mattoon where doctors wanted to perform surgery, but he refused. He passed away on Dec. 21, 1925 at the age of 39, leaving his wife and four children. At the time of his death he was an alderman for the City of Arcola and he had been employed as an express agent for the Illinois Central Railroad for several years.

Kathryn Burt Black was born in Arcola in 1886 to James and Mary Powlen Burt. James was born in Paris but moved to the Oakland area about the age of 12, where he lived the rest of his life. Mary Burt was born in Louisiana in 1857 and moved to Arcola with her parents when she was about 2 years old.

Spc4 John Edwin Mitchell, Special Forces Group (Airborne). ***Photo courtesy of the Mitchell family.***

Kathryn Burt married LeRoy "Roy" Black in Douglas County on Oct. 16, 1906. When Kathryn's husband died in 1925, leaving her to support four children, she took on the job as express agent, a position she held for 19 years. Kathryn lived and raised her four children in Arcola at the house at 229 E. Madison Street.

Shortly after their marriage, John Samuel and Nellie Black moved to Arcola, where they lived off and on for a decade, they also lived in Pesotum where John was the proprietor of an automotive garage. They had four children, Billy, John Edwin, Beverly and Joyce. (Billy was delivered by Arcola's Dr. Omar Barnes and John and Joyce were delivered by Arcola's Dr. E.S. Allen.) By 1940, the family seemed to have settled in Pesotum.

John Samuel was an avid flyer and around 1944 he purchased a 40-hp Porterfield airplane. According to his daughter, Joyce Zehnder, her father was a fun-loving guy. He would take the boys up in the plane and he would fly over their house which was located right off the highway and just over the railroad tracks in Pesotum and tip the wings as if he was saying hello. Around 6:30 p.m. on the evening of Aug. 12, 1945, just after flying over his house and tipping his wings to his children playing in the yard, John Samuel's plane crashed into a cornfield east of Rt. 45 on the south edge of Pesotum. John received multiple injuries and was rushed to a hospital in Champaign where he passed away. He was just 37-years-old.

Nellie remarried about a year later to a farmer from Newman, but the marriage did not last. She moved the family back to Pesotum where she purchased a grocery store. Billy and John Mitchell attended Wentworth Military Academy & College in Lexington, Missouri. Around 1950, the family moved to Houston and eventually Las Vegas.

John Edwin Mitchell attended high school in Las Vegas where he met his future wife, Melvadina Sweeney. They married shortly before John was to graduate high school. They had three children, two girls and a boy. John became the transportation manager for Titanium Metals in Henderson, Nev. But the marriage did not last and the couple eventually divorced.

John's oldest child, a daughter named Debbie Hill, recalls what a vibrant man her father was saying that he could draw and loved to played chess and vividly remembers her father teaching her to play chess when she was just 5 years old. Her father could also play the guitar and was a good singer, and she remembers her parents gathering with friends to play and sing. Hill said her father, who had pinto horses when he was young, loved to ride and had "all the confidence of someone in a saddle." It is a passion she now shares.

In 1962, John Mitchell joined the U.S. Army and at the age of 27 reported to Fort Bragg, N.C. for Special Forces training, Airborne training at Columbus, Ga., and more intensive training at Fort Knox, Ky. He was a specialist in radio and photography.

Pointing out that while becoming a Green Beret is quite an accomplishment for anyone, Hill explained why it was a little bit more so for her father. "My dad was in his late 20s when he joined," said Hill. "In Dad's case he was competing against younger men just out of high school. He was a father with three children, but he made the cut and was one of the 3-out-of-100 that qualified to become a Green Beret. He was so proud."

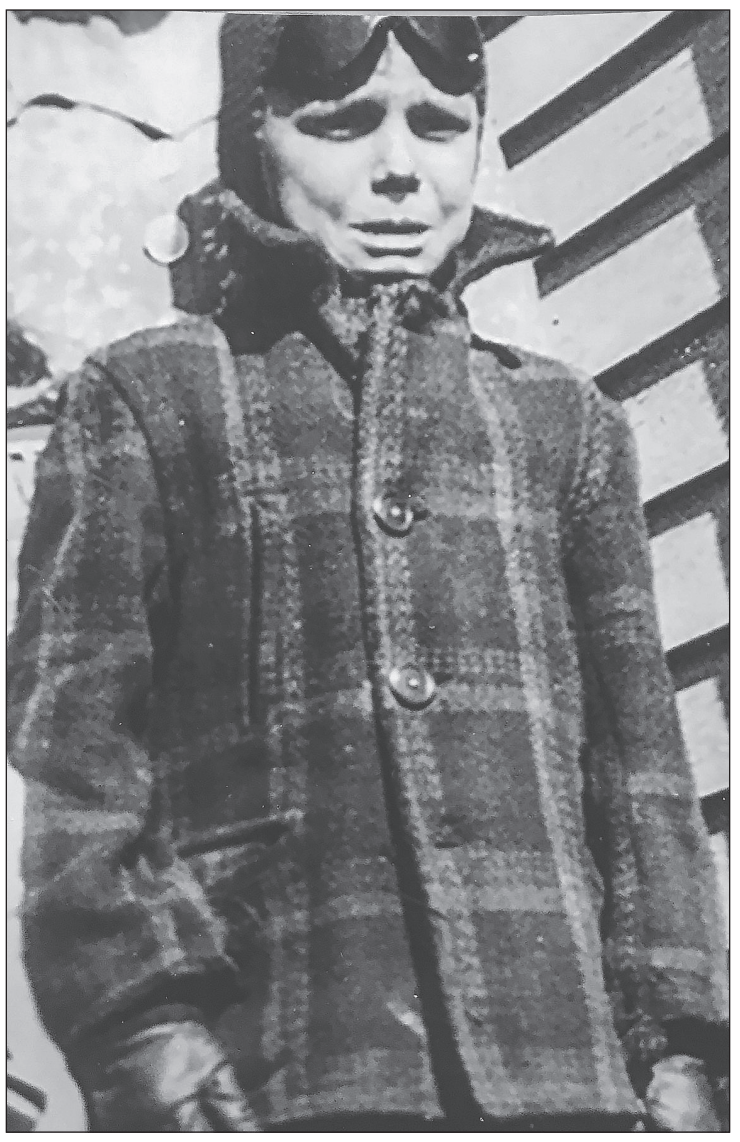
But determination and excellence just seemed to be part and parcel of the man he was. His sister Joyce Mitchell Zehnder remembers how he would go full-tilt at anything he put his mind to, how he would get out books and "study anything, anything he wanted to learn, he'd know all about it."

That thought is echoed by his daughter. "My dad was very intelligent and I don't just say that because he was my dad," said Hill. "If he was going to do something, and I mean no matter what it was, he set out to be the best at it. He researched the things that interested him."

The separations were hard on his family, his daughter said he was away a lot after he joined the Army but when he had leave he spent it with them, always calling them "his babies," and he would always come to tell them good-bye right before he left when his leave was over, no matter what time it was.

John Mitchell was assigned to the 5th Special Services Group (Airborne) and served two tours of duty in Vietnam. On his first tour in 1965, John was injured when he was shot down while parachuting from a crippled helicopter near the Cambodian border and both of his legs were broken.

John was home on a two-month leave to allow him to fully recuperate just prior to leaving on his second tour of duty to Vietnam which began on Jan. 30, 1966.



"Pilot" John Mitchell on his grandmother's porch located at what is now 229 E. Madison Street in Arcola, ca. 1944. ***Photo courtesy of the Mitchell family.***

In early November, Spc4 John Mitchell found himself in the Central Highlands of Vietnam, serving as a radio telephone operator with Task Force Prong, under the command of Lt. Col. Eleazar Parmly IV. Task Force Prong consisted of three companies of Montagnard (indigenous people of the Central Highlands) supported by U.S. Special Forces advisors. According to Lt. Col. Parmly, they were on a mission to protect the left flank of the 4th United States Infantry Division that was making a massive attack, in an action called Operation Paul Revere IV.

The Task Force had been operating for three days on the Ho Chi Minh Trail, in a place called the Plei Trap Valley. On Nov. 10, 1966, Task Force Prong was attacked by the NVA (North Vietnamese Army) Sixth Battalion.

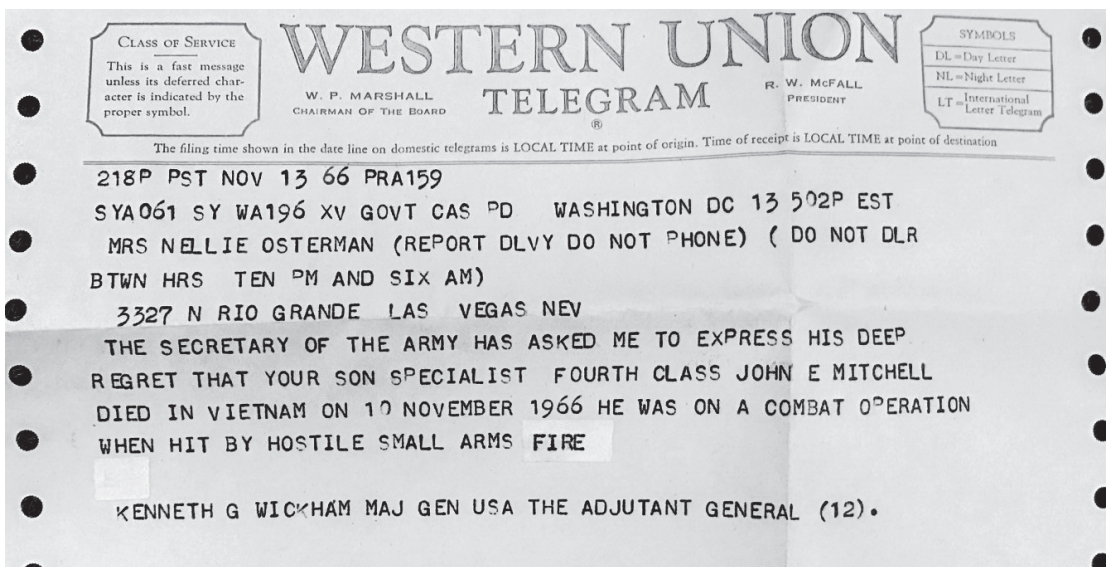
In a vignette about the Plei Trap Valley ambush in the book West to Cambodia, the author, S.L.A. Marshall, reveals that shortly before the ambush, Parmly's group halted near a stream and Parmly sat talking to John Mitchell, who had been designated acting sergeant, while Mitchell showed him a snapshot of his children. Parmly questioned why Mitchell had come on the operation, when he did not have to, and Mitchell said that he'd been doing too much "sitting on my can in bunkers" and that he wanted to take part in at least one mission before he went home.

Shortly after starting off again, the Task Force was ambushed, resulting in several casualties, including Spc4 Mitchell who was shot through the left shoulder. Parmly called in more ground troops and called in a favor from an old West Point classmate for air support. As the fighting continued, Mitchell was hit in the chest by a grenade fragment, but he continued to carry on.

Parmly made the decision to make a move and sent a platoon led by Sgt. Carlos Caro ahead to try to secure a stream crossing, and because he trusted Spc4 Mitchell's judgment more than any of his other radio telephone operators he asked him if he would go and signal him when they got there. Marshall said Mitchell simply nodded, and noted that he was too weak to carry the radio and so someone was sent to carry it for him. Just 40-meters down the trail the platoon encountered automatic gunfire. John Mitchell was hit in the chest.

When the platoon retreated back to Parmly, Mitchell was not with them. Sgt. Caro formed a squad to retrieve him, and for four minutes, while under machine gun fire, Caro attempted mouth-to-mouth resuscitation on Mitchell, but it was too late.

Included in Marshall's book is a photo of John Marshall taken during the skirmish with a caption that notes that one hour after the photo was taken Mitchell was killed in action.



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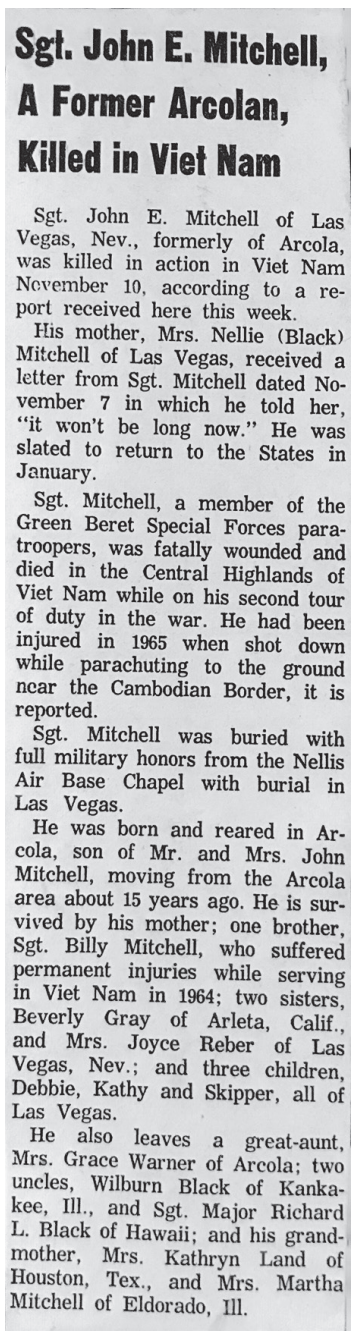
Telegram received by John Mitchell's mother, Nellie Osterman, announcing the death of her son, Spc4 John Mitchell, on Nov. 10, 1966. ***Courtesy of the Mitchell family.***



Sgt. John E. Mitchell, A Former Arcolan, Killed in Viet Nam

Sgt. John E. Mitchell of Las Vegas, Nev., formerly of Arcola, was killed in action in Viet Nam November 10, according to a report received here this week.

His mother, Mrs. Nellie (Black) Mitchell of Las Vegas, received a letter from Sgt. Mitchell dated November 7 in which he told her, "it won't be long now." He was slated to return to the States in January.

Sgt. Mitchell, a member of the Green Beret Special Forces paratroopers, was fatally wounded and died in the Central Highlands of Viet Nam while on his second tour of duty in the war. He had been injured in 1965 when shot down while parachuting to the ground near the Cambodian Border, it is reported.

Sgt. Mitchell was buried with full military honors from the Nellis Air Base Chapel with burial in Las Vegas.

He was born and reared in Arcola, son of Mr. and Mrs. John Mitchell, moving from the Arcola area about 15 years ago. He is survived by his mother; one brother, Sgt. Billy Mitchell, who suffered permanent injuries while serving in Viet Nam in 1964; two sisters, Beverly Gray of Arleta, Calif., and Mrs. Joyce Reber of Las Vegas, Nev.; and three children, Debbie, Kathy and Skipper, all of Las Vegas.

He also leaves a great-aunt, Mrs. Grace Warner of Arcola; two uncles, Wilburn Black of Kankakee, Ill., and Sgt. Major Richard L. Black of Hawaii; and his grandmother, Mrs. Kathryn Land of Houston, Tex., and Mrs. Martha Mitchell of Eldorado, Ill.

Article from the Arcola Record-Herald announcing the death of John Mitchell, date unknown.

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