

Date: May 22, 2004 excerpted from The Clarion-Ledger

At 83, he refuses to fade

By Orley Hood Marianne Todd/Special to The Clarion-Ledger

Former U.S. Rep G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery has returned to his hometown of Meridian after serving the country for nearly four decades, earning the Bronze Star for Valor and crafting legislation to extend benefits to thousands of volunteer soldiers. "I still remember the refrain of one of the most popular barracks ballads of that day, which proclaimed most proudly that old soldiers never die, they just fade away."

— Gen. Douglas McArthur

MERIDIAN — The Allies were busy that year, 1945, chasing Germans across Europe. Sonny Montgomery, a young soldier then, a liaison officer, found himself taking a message from one column to another.

"I didn't know much about where we were," he says. What was on the other side of the hill?

In the years since, he figured he might have been the point man for the entire Allied operation in Europe. He'd gone a hill too far.

"The whole American force (Montgomery) was in a Jeep with a driver, carrying a .45 pistol I didn't know how to use.

"All of a sudden Germans came out of the woods and down to the road. I didn't know if I was going to surrender to them or they were going to surrender to me.

"There were about 20 of them," Montgomery says. "They didn't panic, and I didn't panic. They were tired. They wanted to give up."

So he pointed down the road in the direction of his command and told them to keep walking. "I didn't even take their arms," he says.

That young soldier, now 83, who retired in 1996 after representing Mississippi in Congress for 30 years and for several years after that worked as a consultant in Washington, has now come home for good, to the duplex in his hometown of Meridian that he's used for years on weekends away from Washington.

But he's one old soldier who has no intention of fading away.

"If the country needed its 83-year-olds to go back in the service, I'd sign up tomorrow."

His new best friend

It's January 1967 and the freshman congressmen have been herded into a room at the Capitol to take their oaths of office. Montgomery turns to the guy next to him, whom he doesn't know.

"Do you know if there's a workout facility here?"

"There is," comes the answer.

"After we're done here, will you show me where it is."

"Sure."

The first thing Sonny Montgomery did as a sworn-in congressman was to play racquetball in the House gym with fellow rookie George H.W. Bush.

The Mississippi State graduate, the son of a Meridian businessman who died young from tuberculosis, and the Yale graduate, a future American president and the son of a former U.S. senator, began a relationship that continues to this day.

"He's the best friend I ever had in Congress," Montgomery says.

"Sonny Montgomery remains one of my closest personal friends," Bush writes in the foreword to Montgomery's autobiography. "Sonny is a Democrat. I'm a Republican. But party never divided us."

That sometimes got Montgomery in hot water with his more liberal Democratic brethren. First District U.S. Rep. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., who has known and admired Montgomery for more than 20 years, relates a long-ago tale of partisan politics:

"Joe Moakley, the ranking Democrat on the Rules Committee, and some fellow members went to the (House) speaker's office to ask that Sonny be removed as chairman of the Armed Services Committee."

Sonny, they said, had been voting with the Republicans way too often.

Says Wicker, "Tip O'Neill said, 'Don't give Sonny a hard time. He's a good man and he's only representing his constituency. And besides, if your ugly old cousin comes to Washington and needs a date, Sonny will go out with her.'"

"He dated everyone from Ann Landers to Elizabeth Dole," Wicker says, laughing.

Another tale holds that Montgomery didn't have the slightest idea who Cher, the singer-actress, was. An aide described her as tall, slim, dark-haired and very pretty.

"Well," Montgomery replied, "you've narrowed it down to about 100 women I know."

So why did he never get married?

"I was always gone," he says. Off to World War II. Then Korea. Then 10 years in the state Senate and 30 years in the U.S. House.

"Every time I got back home, somebody would have stolen my girl from me."

He leans back in his chair in his office at the Mississippi State University branch in Meridian and smiles broadly.

True story? Maybe. Good story? Absolutely.

It's a gift

"Sonny's great knack is personality," says Bill Crawford, former state College Board member, founder of the Montgomery Institute in Meridian and now deputy director for community assistance at the Mississippi Development Authority.

Three times Crawford — and many others — worked with Montgomery to fight off initiatives to close certain military installations in Mississippi.

Crawford and his allies fought battles with base closure committee members with reams of documents, facts and figures.

"Sonny would just get all of them to like him," Crawford says.

"In '91 and '93, he knew most of the committee going in. In '95, there were a lot of new people. At first, they pushed him away, but by the end, they loved him."

And the bases stayed open.

"I liked politics and I liked people," Montgomery says. "I knew if I got home from World War II that I'd go into politics."

His role model? John Stennis of Kemper County.

"I looked up to Sen. Stennis. He lived only 18 miles from me. He was honest and dignified.

"I learned a lot from J.P. Coleman, too." Coleman, a Mississippi governor and judge, lived in Ackerman, "right up the road from me."

He got back from the war, got on with Al Rosenbaum's insurance company in Meridian and later started his own business.

After a tour of duty in Korea, he came home aiming to jump into politics. He put in a decade in the state Senate, then was elected to the House in the fall of 1966.

A congressman can't know everything, can't read every bill, Montgomery says. It's too much. To succeed, you have to specialize and depend on trusted colleagues to guide you through votes in other areas.

"I felt like I knew what I could do," he says. "I concentrated on the military and veterans affairs."

"He never lost a floor fight of any legislation they had in Congress," Crawford says.

"He has a record in Congress the average Mississippian doesn't know about," says Bob Bailey, a former banker and now chief operating officer and assistant to the chancellor of the Reformed Theological Seminary system.

"I can't remember when I didn't know Jesus and Sonny Montgomery," Bailey says, laughing.

"When I came home from Vietnam and went off active duty, I joined the National Guard. Sonny was battalion commander for the 150th Transportation Battalion in Meridian. He had a slot for a supply officer."

Bailey then worked on Montgomery's initial campaign for Congress in 1966.

Today, Bailey is director of the G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery Foundation. "I'd do anything for him."

"He's one of the most delightful human beings I've ever met," says former Mississippi Gov. William Winter.

"We were in college at the same time. I was at Ole Miss and Sonny was president of the student body at Mississippi State. And I knew him when he was in the Senate from Lauderdale County.

"Not many folks can say this about anyone, but I don't know a human being who doesn't have a genuine affection for him."

One of Montgomery's many legacies, Wicker says, is the Thursday morning prayer breakfast in the House.

"There was no stronger supporter, no more faithful attendee. He was the patron saint and leader of the prayer breakfast."

The room in the House used for the prayer breakfast is now named for Montgomery.

"He just has this ability to get people to work with him," says Kyle Steward, a longtime Montgomery aide who now works in Wicker's Tupelo office.

How effective is the Montgomery charm offensive? Bob Bailey quotes his wife: "He'll come up to me and hug me and tell me I look good, and I believe him."

'He's doing fine'

He always spent the Christmas break with his family — the troops, Steward says.

"During the Vietnam War, he'd carry these notecards around with him. He'd have every Mississippian fill out a card. He would take those cards and call their wife or parents."

When he got back to Washington, he'd ring a few every night.

"Mrs. Smith, this is Sonny Montgomery in Washington. How are you? I had the good fortune to run into your son Charlie in Saigon last week. I want you to know that he's just fine, doing great. He wanted me to send his love."

"I've always enjoyed being connected to the American military," says Montgomery, who won a Bronze Star during World War II and retired from the Mississippi National Guard as a brigadier general. "I concentrated my service on the military, especially the Guard and reserves. I got 'em a lot of equipment."

Early in his military career he was in an armored battalion. They went down to Camp Shelby near Hattiesburg for two weeks in the summer to train. But there wasn't much to train on.

"We were supposed to have 17 tanks, but we only had one," Montgomery says.

He changed that. "I'm proud to say that you can't tell the difference between the Guard and active duty forces now."

"He's done so much to help veterans, more than anyone," says Maj. Gen. Harold Cross, Mississippi's adjutant general. "That's the reason he's such an icon to military people. His name is on every bill.

"The old GI bill ran out and he got it revamped at a time when it wasn't popular. He helped veterans get mortgages and low-interest loans." Thus, the G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery GI Bill.

On Monday at 4 p.m. at Mississippi Air National Guard headquarters, a C-17 Globemaster III transport plane will be named for Montgomery in a public ceremony. "The Spirit of G.V. 'Sonny' Montgomery" will be the third aircraft in U.S. military history to be named for an individual. One was named for Bob Hope, the other for a Medal of Honor winner.

"We're going to take that name all over the world on that airplane," Cross says. A visitor asks what it's like to motor down Woodrow Wilson Drive in Jackson and see his name on the G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery Veterans Affairs Medical Center.

"It's a great feeling for me," he says. "Maybe I have helped my people."

When he visits, he says, he "sees people being taken care of," people who served their country, people who deserve our prayers and our care, old soldiers, not yet fading away.

© 2004, The Clarion-Ledger"