

Daily Journal

"Be just and fear not."

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RILEY MANNING: Remember those who stood up to protect what's right

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MANNING

f x in e p u b

My late grandfather, Riley Clifton Thompson Jr., passed away in 2014. I think about him – and miss him – daily. In the 25 years I had with him, I never heard him raise his voice. Born and raised in Aberdeen, he worked as a parts manager for the Ford dealership in Aberdeen for 37 years.

He used to bring me the coolest things from the dealership – a Mustang fender emblem, an incredibly strong horseshoe magnet. I remember climbing up onto his lap behind the parts counter, putting a penny in the gumball machine.

He gave me a lot of things. Though I wouldn't return to them for a long time, Papaw first put a pair of boxing gloves on my hands. He made us a punching bag from a big old rucksack filled with cotton and hung it from a tree in the back yard. If my house burned down today and I could only escape with one item, I'd grab his old baseball glove from Sears, no question.



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Growing up, he seemed unflappable. Whenever my parents would (rightfully) fret over some aspect of my or my brother's growing up, he never doubted that we would figure it out, that we would turn out all right. Everyone I know absolutely adored him.

Papaw served in the U.S. Army National Guard for 20 years before retiring as an E6. He deployed only once, to Oxford, during the Ole Miss riot of 1962, when James Meredith stepped on campus to register for classes as the university's first African-American student.

Born in Kosciusko, Meredith served in the Air Force from 1951 to 1960, then attended Jackson State for two years, where he earned high marks. He applied to Ole Miss and got in, but the registrar revoked his admission upon learning that Meredith was black. Denying his admission on this basis violated the constitution, as per the Brown v. Board of Education decision seven years prior. Then-governor Ross Barnett came to campus to personally block Meredith from registering.

Under orders from President John F. Kennedy, 500 U.S. Marshals assembled on campus, along with the 70th Army Engineer Combat Battalion from Kentucky to protect Meredith on his third attempt to register on Sept. 30th.

Thousands of protestors made their way to the university to wreak havoc. U.S. Marshals ran out of teargas as rioters searched for Meredith. During the night, Kennedy called in reinforcements from the Mississippi National Guard and the U.S. Border Patrol, among others.

After 15 hours of rioting, one journalist and one local man were killed in the chaos, though hundreds were injured. Meredith attended his first class on Oct. 1, under the protection of hundreds of troops.

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Plenty of podcasts and documentaries recount this incident, and I always catch myself looking for Papaw's face among the photos and old footage. I love being a Southerner, and I'm proud to have such a connection to a moment so pivotal in our nation's history. Our nation was growing up, deciding who it would be, and it still is. The dynamics of those events still populate our ideological landscape – you might say they haunt us.

Things heal in a slow creep, like a wound closing up. The old Ford Dealership in Aberdeen folded years ago. I couldn't believe it. In 2007, a tree fell through Gran and Papaw's house on Long Street, where they'd lived for 48 years. It still startles me when I drive by that empty lot. Cleaning up the wreckage, we found his heavy footlocker from the National Guard, his drooping boots still inside.

On Memorial Day, spare a thought for all the good men and women who stepped up to protect what's right.

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