Military series: Remembering Richard Carson

By Carolyn Cloyd

"Slip off that pack. Set it down by the crooked trail. Drop that steel pot alongside. Shed those magazine-laden bandoliers away from your sweat-soaked shirt. Lay that silent weapon down and step out of the heat. Feel the soothing cool breeze right down to your soul ... and rest forever in the shade of our love, brother." – Posted in memory of Richard Carson by Veterans, 1st BN, 46th INF, 198/196 BDES, Americal (VVMF Wall of Faces)

Talk to anyone who knew Richard Carson and they will tell you that he was a nice young man. It is not that they don't know what else to say, they have plenty of things to tell, it's just that being a good guy was such an integral component of Richard's personality, an ingrained part of his character.

Richard Carson was an all-American, small-town boy who loved the outdoors, he loved fishing and hunting and sports and music. He loved his family and his friends, and he loved a girl named Joyce.

"He was a nice kid, very well mannered," said his younger brother Bob Carson. "He knew what was right and what was wrong, and he would stand up for what was right."

Richard Ray Carson was a Christmas baby. He was born to Bobbie R. Carson and Louise Carson (née Price) on Dec. 25, 1950. His mother was born in 1921 to Raymond and Fannie Price and raised in Oconee in Shelby County. His father was born in 1927 to James and Ailcie Carson and raised in Prairieton Township in Christian County (near Moweaqua).

Around 1940, Louise began teaching elementary school in Moweaqua. In June 1945, at the tail end of WWII, Bobbie was drafted into the U.S. Army Air Corps. Following his discharge in Dec. 1946, he returned home and began work in the grocery business in Moweaqua. He and Louise were soon married and started a family. They had four boys, Michael, Richard, Robert (Bob), and Martin.

About 1957, the family moved to Arcola, where Bobbie Carson began working at Bi-Rite grocery store (he purchased the store in 1967). Louise began teaching elementary school in Tuscola and the Carson boys began attending school in Arcola.

Richard was a quiet boy and a good student; good grades came easily to him. At Arcola High School he played on the football team and served on the student council. Richard was a hard worker, he and his brother Bob worked in their father's grocery store, and he had a wide circle of friends.

Sgt. Richard Ray Carson, Vietnam, ca. 1970.

"He was one of those kids who used to show up at our house and play pool in the family room," said Doris Chaney, whose son, Mike, was Richard's classmate. "I would just put food out for them, and he was like all the rest of our boys. He was just really kind, and very polite, and very smart. His brothers were all very smart.

"He was just a good kid, he wasn't one who ever got in trouble, he was very respected by his teachers, and he didn't complain about anybody, he was just a sweet kid."

At the time the Carsons lived in the first house just south of the railroad tracks on the east side of North Locust Street in Arcola, just south of the Arco-Acres subdivision where the Chaneys lived. "And so he was close to the Acres, so he was down here playing with the Acres kids, he grew up with the Acres kids," Chaney added.

Like all kids, his brother Bob said Richard could have an ornery streak and may have occasionally done something just as a way of testing things, but never anything mean or terrible. He said Richard would always look out for his younger brother and give him brotherly advice, and always tried to steer him in the right direction.

Bob said his brother was very loyal and had a great love for his family and tried to take care of everything he could for them. And he recalled how he and Richard and their brothers would help their mother, whom they affectionately called "Big Lou," grade papers.

When Richard was 16-years old mutual friends introduced him to a young girl from Tuscola named Joyce Grimm (now Joyce Amacher).

"I met him in high school," said Joyce Carson Amacher. "I went to Tuscola, he went to Arcola, we met when we were 16, and that's all she wrote.

"He was a really swell person. He was my first love, there was nothing I didn't love about him, so there is going to be bias there. He was like a big old teddy bear."

Richard graduated Arcola High School with the Class of 1968 and began working at DeKalb Agricultural Association in Tuscola, which was managed by Joyce's father, Delbert Grimm, and where he met and became good friends with Bill Englehardt.

"We would kid one another about sports, the Arcola-Tuscola rivalry, all that stuff," said Englehardt. "We had those kinds of things between us.

"We worked together, and we rassled around together, and we laughed. God, he'd laugh. I mean, he was as easy goin' a guy, just a good-time Charlie, you know."

Bill remembers that his friend Dick, as many of Richard's friends called him, loved to smoke a pipe with Rum and Maple tobacco and that they would sometimes tease Richard about dating the boss's daughter, but it was all in fun.

"I worked side by side with him when it was hot, we sweated together, and then I worked with him in the freezing cold, those warehouses were so cold. But I remember that laugh.

"It happened a long time ago, but yet at the same time, you reflect and sometimes it's just clear as day. You can think of someone or hear 'em talking or laughing or something else. And that's the way I remember him. When we would work, and we worked like dogs sometimes down there at the [DeKalb] seed corn, but he didn't [complain], he didn't moan, he laughed. He was a really good kid."

On August 28, 1969, Joyce Grimm and Richard Carson were married in Tuscola and set up house in a small upstairs apartment in Tuscola. Joyce laughingly remembers the apartment being so small that if you had the kitchen table folded out, you couldn't open the front door.

It would have been the ideal life for the young couple, but there was a war raging in Vietnam, with far-reaching consequences, which soon cast a pall.

The first Vietnam War Selective Service Lottery, broadcast live on Dec. 1, 1969, determined who would and would not be drafted. Based on his birthdate, Richard's "number" was 84.

"We got married in August," said Amacher. "I can remember, oh, God, it was such a horrid time, we knew he was going to be, you know, his number was very, very low, so we knew he was going to be called and we would get that letter. And it was like, every night he'd come in from work to see if the letter was there to say he was to [report for induction]. And then he got the letter."

Richard was inducted into the U.S. Army on April 16, 1970, and received basic training at Fort Polk, La. He celebrated his first wedding anniversary while in training.

Joyce and a friend, whose husband was training with Richard, drove to Louisiana to surprise their husbands one weekend. And when he graduated from basic training Joyce, his mother and his brothers were there to see him.

Richard had a short leave, spent at home, and then on Sept. 21, 1970, he deployed to Vietnam.

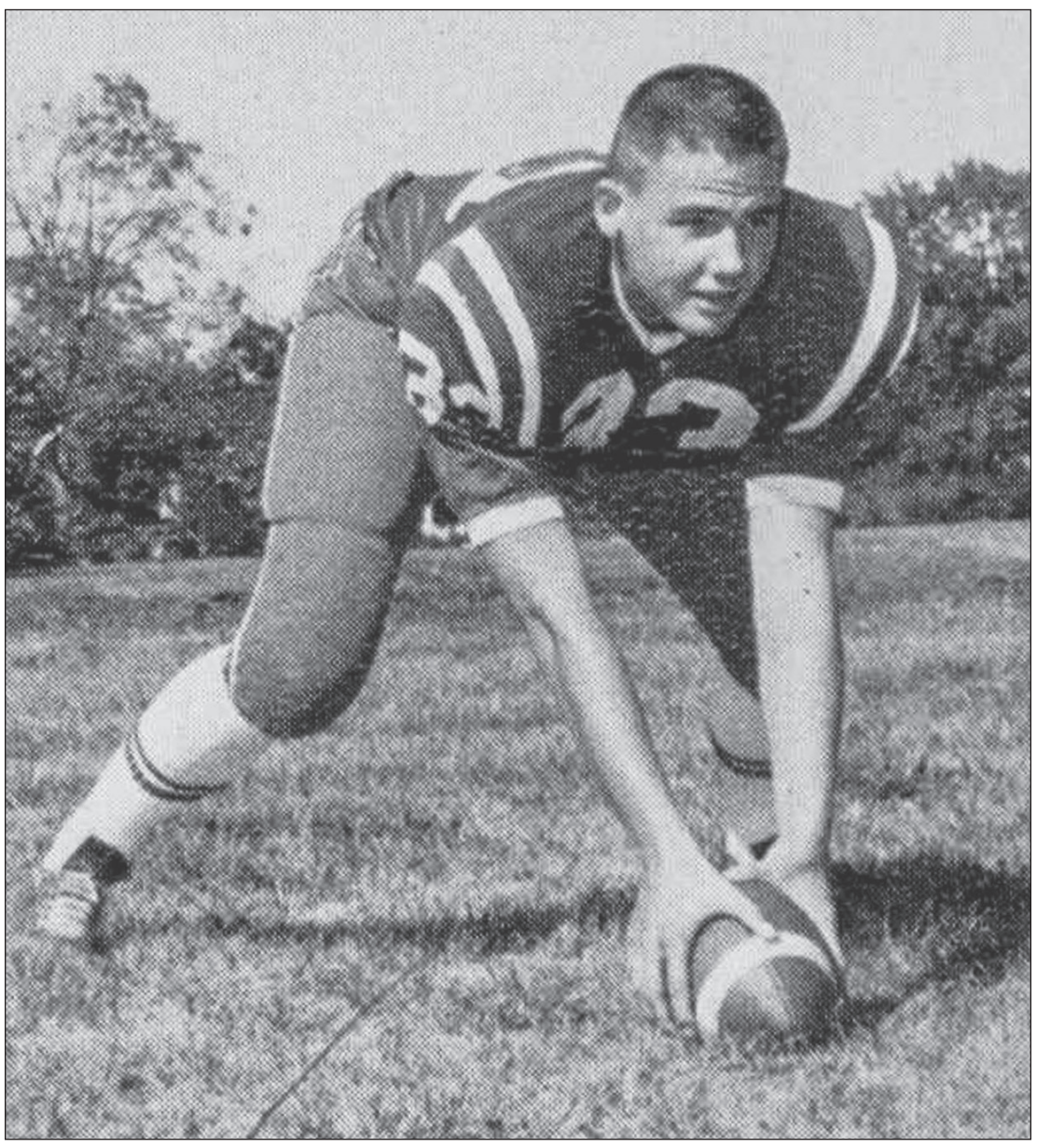
"We didn't have much time together," said Amacher. "We didn't even have a year together."

Richard was assigned to 2nd Platoon, Company C, 1st Battalion, 46th Infantry, 23rd Infantry Division, Americal Division, USARV.

Richard, who was serving as an infantry team leader, tried to shield his wife from the reality of his life in Vietnam, and in his letters home he never told her he was in combat duty because he did not want her to be upset. But he shared that reality in his letters home to his mother.

"I can't explain to you how unreal it was to me, because I just didn't get it," said Amacher.

In late March 1971, Carson was part of a contingent of 231 soldiers manning Fire Support Base Mary Ann in Quảng Tín Province, South Vietnam, the forward most position in the 23rd Division. In the early hours of March 28, FSB Mary Ann was overrun by an estimated 50 members of Viet Cong 409th Sapper Battalion. Sappers (engineers) cut through wire surrounding the base, achieving complete surprise. The attack was disastrous for the Americans who suffered 30 killed, including SPC4, Richard Carson, and 82 wounded.



Richard Carson, Arcola High School football, 1967.

Richard Carson, Arcola High School senior photo, 1968.

Joyce Grimm, 1968 Tuscola High School senior photo. Grimm and Carson were married in 1969.

Carson was posthumously promoted to sergeant.

The day the news broke, Bill Englehardt was working, delivering corn for the seed corn plant, and heard a news report about the attack of Firebase Mary Ann, and when he got back to the plant they did not tell him right away. He said they were all devastated.

Richard Carson's remains were returned home on April 6, 1971, and his funeral was held on April 7. His widow, Joyce, was so angry about his death, and the fact she felt there was "no purpose to it," that she did not want his funeral to include any tribute to his service in the military, she even refused a military marker for his grave. He was buried in the Tuscola Township Cemetery.

Joyce vividly remembers the horror of the funeral and how at the time she wasn't sure she'd live through it, and how hard the loss was for Richard's mother.

Some three decades later, with the rawness of the loss tempered with time, and at the urging of her brothers, Doug and Jim Grimm, Joyce agreed to have a military marker added to the grave to give Richard the recognition for his service that he deserved. Due to changes in laws pertaining to the placement of military markers, it took years to accomplish, but with the help of the cemetery caretaker and members of the Tuscola VFW, the Grimm brothers purchased a plaque and had it installed to honor Richard Carson's service and sacrifice.

Louise and Bobbie Carson were divorced in the late 1960s and when Louise Carson passed away in 2003, she was buried in William Price Cemetery in Oconee. Richard Carson was later reinterred, at the behest of his brother Bob, and with the approval of his widow, near his mother.

Richard Carson's zest for life and his innate goodness continue to resonate, despite his short time on Earth, and the 52 years that have passed since his death.

His brother Bob said they think about him and talk about him a lot, "We always wonder where he would have ended up in life."

Bill Englehardt also remembers his friend, saying that he thinks about him often, and when he is out and around Tuscola there are still so many vivid reminders of his friend, and it is emotional.

"Just thinking it, just thinking about him again, and thinking about his life and what he missed," said Englehardt. "He would have loved kids, I can just see him out in the yard, he would throw a football with a kid, or go fishing, just have such a good time.

"He was just an outgoing guy, not a care in the world, didn't have a pot to go in, but he was going to make do. Down the road he would have been fine because he had a great personality, he got along well with people. He had a lot of friends, he really did."

Richard Carson was one of five young men with ties to Arcola who died while serving in Vietnam. There were also at least five additional Douglas County men who died there as well: William Gough, James Pennington, and Glenn Wesch of Atwood; Richard Russell of Arthur; and James Michael of Newman. Most veterans say that the ones who never made it home are the true heroes and so by honoring these young men who died in Vietnam we hope to also honor the 471 other Douglas County men also served during the Vietnam era.

The bronze plaque honoring Richard Carson's service and sacrifice. The plaque was purchased by Joyce Grimm Carson's family.

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