

First Lieutenant Michael “Mike” John Carley, United States Marine Corps, attended elite boarding schools in Western Connecticut before matriculating at Brown University on a Naval ROTC scholarship in the fall of 1958. After graduating with a B.A. in Sociology in January 1964, Mike completed 18 months of flight training at Pensacola, Camp Lejeune, and various auxiliary bases. In June 1966, Mike deployed to Ky Ha, I Corps, South Vietnam as an H-34 helicopter pilot in the “Ugly Angels,” HMM-362. On February 27, 1967, Mike was killed in action while copiloting a transport mission. Michael is survived by his widow, Connie Worthington, and son, Michael Jr.

EARLY LIFE

Most young men were still angling for their drivers’ licenses when 16-year-old Michael John Carley helmed his first flight as a licensed pilot. Born in 1940 to an Irish family in Sharon, Connecticut, Mike’s father was a dairy farmer and the town selectman, his mother a devout Catholic. While he remained close with his parents, brother, and two sisters throughout his life, Mike spent most of his childhood at elite boarding schools in Western Connecticut, winning scholarships to attend first the Indian Mountain School, then Hotchkiss School. At Hotchkiss, Mike became close with classmates Charlie Milmine and George Gurney, whose fathers both taught at the school. During his sophomore year of high school, he earned his pilot’s license. Senior year, Mike accepted an ROTC scholarship to attend Brown University, ensuring he’d have a future up in the air. The following September, Mike, Charlie, and George together made the trip east to join the freshman class at Brown in Providence.

YEARS AT BROWN

Mike arrived on Brown’s leafy campus in the fall of 1958 with his two best friends, a full scholarship, and the affable precocity of a country boy used to fending for himself among the boarding school set. Mike became known as a nice guy with swagger—confident, bright, athletic, and charming. Socially, Mike stayed close with longtime school chums Charlie and George, a trio that became known as “The Group.” But he also made friends with his brothers in fraternity Alpha Delta Phi, and with his teammates on the hockey field. A star player, Mike looked up to his hockey coach so much that he would later remember Coach Fullerton’s rousing pep talks on a tape sent home from Vietnam, his voice warm for the memory.

While Mike easily made friends and field goals, academics were more challenging. “I don’t think Mike was ever in danger of flunking out per se,” recalls his widow Connie Worthington. “But he just wasn’t a good engineer, which was his first major.” Mike dropped engineering and tried his hand at mathematics and then applied math before eventually concentrating in Sociology. All the switching meant that Mike would need an extra semester to graduate; though taking extra time was (and still is) a fairly common practice amongst Brown’s ever-curious, omnivorous students.

Mike was preparing for his last semester at Brown when he met Connie Worthington on a hazy night in the summer of 1963. The two were guests at a party given by mutual friend Bill Twaddell on his family farm in Bristol, Rhode Island. Connie, a Providence native and self-described

“Brown brat” whose father and brother had attended the school, was about to start her sophomore year at Mount Holyoke. When Bill introduced the two, the connection “was immediate, overpowering, wonderful,” Connie remembers. Ever the charmer, Mike had had a girlfriend in high school and a couple steadies while at Brown. But things were different with Connie.

“He had asked me to marry him the night we met, when he was not in a state to ask anyone to marry,” she laughs. On their first date some days later, Mike insisted on taking Connie flying. “That was one of the things that I loved about Mike,” says Connie. “He wanted me to see what he loved right away. There wasn’t much guile in him.” The pair went up in a little two-seater, with Mike steering them over the coastal golds, greens, and blues of a late New England summer. After, they went for spaghetti in downtown Providence. “Bells and whistles went off,” says Connie. “I was just crazy about Mike from that first evening together.”

The two were in love. August blew into September and the pair remained inseparable. On weekends, Connie would stay with her parents in Providence and visit Mike. The couple would study together in the John Hay Library, attend Saturday night parties on Wriston Quad, and hold hands at Sunday football games. By January of 1964, when Mike finally completed his degree in Sociology, the two were engaged to be married.

TOWARDS VIETNAM

After graduation, Mike was required to attend Officer Candidate School in Quantico, Virginia to fulfill his NROTC contract. When he returned to Providence in the spring of 1964, “He came back this ‘rock-em-sock-em’ hunk from all of these outrageous routines that they put people through,” Connie recalls. While Mike was at Quantico earning his second lieutenant bars (and getting ripped), Connie and her parents had been planning the wedding.

The couple married on June 6, 1964 under the stained-glass windows of St. Sebastian’s Church, a catholic parish on the East Side of Providence. After the ceremony, guests gathered in the oaken-walled Brown Faculty Club for a reception hosted by Connie’s parents. In attendance were Mike’s friends from Brown, including Charlie Milmine and George Gurney of “The Group;” Mike’s mother and father, Richard “Dick” A. Carley, along with brother-in-law Joseph “Jay” M. Stevens; and Connie’s brother, William C. Worthington, Jr. In a photograph taken outside the Club, Mike slings an arm around Connie, who grins in white while her father William “Chet” Worthington stands proudly to one side. Chet didn’t know, of course, that Connie was nearly three months pregnant at the time. Hoping to minimize the scandal of a premarital pregnancy, the couple had told only their closest friends. They spent their wedding night at Connie’s parents’ cabin in the woods of Chepachet, Rhode Island.

The following morning, Mike and Connie headed into town for breakfast with Connie’s parents before driving south for flight training. Their first stop was the major naval air base in Pensacola. The couple lodged in a small, two-story apartment complex just outside the base while Mike completed basic flight training on the T-28 aircraft before opting into the helicopter track. “He was a wonderful pilot,” Connie remembers. “You know how some times you get in a car with

someone and you don't even think about how they are driving or anything; you are just comfortable? And he was the same sort of pilot from the first."

The Carleys had moved to the eastern panhandle at the beginning of Freedom Summer, the June 1964 civil rights campaign to register Black voters in staunchly-exclusionist Mississippi, whose state line was less than two hours from Pensacola by car. Connie remembers drinking juice on the shore of Bayou Grande with her landlady and neighbors, who were perturbed by the action: "They were all worried because Northerners were coming down to register Blacks to vote that summer," she says. If Mike had trained for jets rather than helicopters, the Carleys might have been sent to the naval jet base in Meridian, Mississippi that first month—mere miles from where KKK members would brutally murder three Black civil rights workers on June 21, 1964.

Even in the insular communities formed around military bases, life on the Emerald Coast was difficult for Connie and Mike. The muggy air swarmed with bugs, poverty rates soared, and the population was predominately white, Baptist, and segregationist—a far cry from the liberal, if lily-white, enclave of Brown. Connie remembered passing thumping Baptist revivalist meetings in town, and seeing child-sized KKK uniforms for sale in local shops.

"At one point, the winter of that year," Connie remembers, "We came down a hill coasting, because our gas tank was completely empty, and coasted into a Rebel (brand) gas station. They refused to serve us because we had Connecticut plates on the car. Some of our friends who were Northerners got Florida plates rather than be identified as 'Yankees' during a very tense time." As the couple moved from base to base to continue Mike's training over the next 18 months, the Carleys learned to keep their Connecticut plates out of sight and stay quiet about his Catholicism and her occasional visits to the Quaker meetinghouse in Pensacola.

"But at the same time, there were good things about life down there," Connie says. "I put the Easter ham in the oven and we went to the beach. I couldn't get over it—just lying on the beach, while the Easter ham was cooking—and there was a beautiful beach nearby, Santa Rosa Island, which got clobbered by every hurricane that came into the Gulf of Mexico. And the sand was so smooth you would just lie down and wriggle a tiny bit, and it all fit your body. It was just amazing." When someone from an airbase would fly over, the beachgoers would wave, sometimes writing "fly Navy" into the soft white sand.

In the fall of 1964, after Mike had made first lieutenant at Pensacola, the Carleys headed east to a small auxiliary base in Milton, Florida for air carrier training. They moved into a development near the base in Avalon Beach, where little square houses crouched a few miles inland from the eastern shore of Escambia Bay. On November 7, in a civilian hospital in Avalon Beach, the couple welcomed Mike Jr. Though the baby was born a little early—his fingernails not quite formed—the Carleys had to admit to conceiving before their wedding. "It was unacceptable in those days," Connie explains, "but everyone was very kind. And my mother—who really was my best friend through most of our life—got over it."

The Avalon Beach development was full of young military families like the Carleys. "The young women got together a lot," Connie remembers. "If someone's mother or grandmother came, we flocked to her house. We were desperate for older perspectives—for any diversity in our ages.

To talk to anybody who had been through what we were going through as young mothers.” Those who wanted children but hadn’t yet gotten pregnant would take turns holding the others’ babies. Sometimes, Mike and the other husbands would break the rules to fly stunts in front of the development. “It was very flat and wide open,” Connie remembers. “There were high wires, and you would hear a plane come and get out a towel and go wave at them and they would do aileron rolls. Flying under the high wire, sometimes upside down.”

From Milton, the Carleys moved to another naval auxiliary base in Pace, FL, before transferring to Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune, which sprawled over 250 square miles of land in coastal Onslow County, North Carolina. They would remain there from the spring of 1965 until Mike was called to Vietnam the following year.

At Lejeune, Mike emerged as a leader, acting as insurance officer for his squadron. Though many men on base were husbands or fathers and nearly all were scheduled for deployment within the year, few held life insurance policies. “He really got everyone insured, including the two of us, because we realized while—yes, something might happen to him—that if anything happened to me that there was no money to bury me, or provide childcare,” says Connie.

The Carleys flourished at Camp Lejeune. “In that squadron Mike really came into his own,” Connie remembers. “He’d always felt like the scholarship kid, that everybody had done him charitable favors.... The thing that we both loved about the Marine Corps was you got where you were for what you yourself did for the Corps, for the squadron—the quality of your work, the quality of your participation and leadership.” In some ways, the warm, close-knit communities formed during training reminded Connie of Brown. “There were Brown alums I have known for a long, long time and they are ever true to Brown,” she recalls. “It’s their emotional, and for some of them, physical home. And their friends—their deepest friendships were formed here. Mike got lucky because he had Brown, and he also had the Marine Corps.”

Mike received his call of duty to Vietnam in the spring of 1966. With a month off before he was scheduled to deploy, Mike, Connie, and 18-month-old Mike Jr. headed back to the Chepachet cabin where they had spent their wedding night. “It wasn’t cold, so it may have been the month of May,” Connie recalls. “It was wonderful. Green leaves to look at and things to explore, and a glistening pond.” The wooden cabin was cozy, with a large central room, kitchen, and single bedroom. For a glorious few weeks the Carleys holed up together, soaking up the sun and each other, watching little Mike Jr. toddle down the cabin’s small hallway. Charley Milmine came to visit, as did George Gurney.

Connie remembers having “lots of discussions, and ‘what if’ conversations” with Mike. An entire year had passed since the fall of Saigon, and everyone understood that Mike might not make it home. “Other families sent their men off into war zones and hadn’t expected that anything might happen to them,” Connie says. But she and Mike were pragmatic, deciding that if something happened to Mike in the service, she’d go back to school, get her degree, and rely on her parents’ help to raise Mike Jr. “It’s just the path that I had chosen by choosing Mike,” Connie says. “Not that I felt like I had any choice.” The frank talk allowed them to relax and enjoy what would be their last weeks together in Rhode Island. In June of 1966, Mike flew to Camp Pendleton to prepare for deployment to Vietnam.

AT WAR

In country, Mike was assigned to HMM-362, a helicopter squadron distinguished for being the first Marine aircraft unit to serve in Vietnam. Known as the Ugly Angels, Mike's squad flew Sikorsky H-34Ds, heavy, bottle-nosed birds designed to accommodate transport of troops and equipment in all weather conditions. When outfitted with machine guns and rocket pods, the 34s could also provide assault support, though they were most famous for their medevac missions. Mike joined the Ugly Angels at Ky Ha, a small base near Chu Lai in Quang Tin Province within the I Corps Tactical Zone, a swath of American-occupied land in the northernmost region of South Vietnam.

Mike sent regular letters and audio recordings home, cooing to his son and telling Connie and their family about his missions and life in the camps. He spoke about the beauty of the country, the wonder of seeing Da Nang's Monkey Mountain, and the "important work" that CARE, an antipoverty NGO, was doing for Vietnamese children in his area. In his very first month, Mike flew wing to the helicopter carrying John Wayne when the movie star made one of his well-publicized tours of support. (Wayne would later star in the 1968 pro-Vietnam film *The Green Berets*.) At each base, Wayne would share a beer with the soldiers. "Mike said, 'You know, we went to twenty-four places, and you would never have known that John Wayne had drunk twenty four beers,'" Connie recalls.

That month also brought Mike's first experience with casualty. "A friend of his from training was killed by friendly fire, and he was so angry, so angry," says Connie. Mike said that it "shouldn't have happened." On another tape, Mike recounted how he was asked to fly an AVRN officer's pregnant daughter who had gone into labor to the hospital. They battled increasingly bad weather to arrive in Da Nang, only to have a doctor diagnose her contractions as false labor. The woman demanded to return immediately to base camp, so Mike had pilot their plane through a dense tropical storm.

At Ky Ha, Mike was known for spit-shining his flight boots and keeping a meticulous bunk. (His ironic nom de guerre: "Pig Pen.") But he and the squad knew how to let loose, too. "The officers at Ky Ha got together and they built an O [Officers'] Club," in a ramshackle tent on base, Connie recounts. "Somebody wrote to Budweiser, and Budweiser sent them case upon case of beer." He was well liked by the Ugliers, and even connected with other Brown alumni who were in country. In a letter to Connie's father, then the editor of *Brown Alumni Monthly*, Mike enclosed a photograph of him and five other uniformed Brunonians grinning as they posed before a plane. The photo would run in the February 1967 issue of *BAM*, captioned "Brown Club of Ky Ha."

During survival training in the Philippines, Mike and his squadron were filmed by a news team from the Huntley-Brinkley Report, NBC's flagship evening news program. Connie and her brother "turned on the television and there was a silhouette that I'm sure was Michael's," she says. "They didn't show anyone's faces, but there was a silhouette that I'm sure was his, during some jungle survival training." The Vietnam War was the first conflict to be broadcast into American living rooms. Connie was in awe: "It wasn't live yet, but to have the coverage of war change so that I might see him on TV," she says, was almost beyond belief.

Connie would get to see Mike one last time, for a Hawaiian R&R at the end of January 1967. (They had been scheduled to meet that March, but another soldier dropped out at the last minute.) With Mike Jr. safely in her parents' care, Connie packed a bag and boarded a plane for Honolulu. "I was really worried about the R&R," she admits, "Because I had been on a college campus that was mobilizing against the war, and he had been in a war zone. And I was afraid that we might have grown apart somehow." Although Connie would only join the antiwar movement until after Mike's death, protests had already begun on Brown's campus. She was relieved, though, to find that nothing had changed between her and Mike: "The minute we got together, it was still the same old, same old. I mean, it was just wonderful that we'd had such totally different experiences, which we talked about, but it was just great."

Between dips in the Pacific, the couple lounged on the sand and even toured Oahu by helicopter, where they were passengers together for the first time. "We blew a lot of money, we ate a lot of wonderful meals, took a lot of long walks," Connie recalls. "We rented a car one day and drove around, so we ended up in pineapple fields, and so on." For Mike and Connie, the five days of R&R were idyllic.

"And then he left at the crack of dawn, and I saw him off and came back," Connie says. Rather than wait alone in their hotel room, she decided to go to the airport early. The cabbie recognized her as a soldier's wife and insisted on making a stop on the way to HNL. "He took me up on this sort of crest of a hill...and here are all these little shacks, and all of these women are making leis out of gorgeous orchids. And they covered me in leis," she remembers. "It was so special. I mean—because this is the last time I saw Mike." It was almost, she thought, as if they knew.

After Mike returned to Ky Ha, "We were back to the norm," says Connie. She and Mike Jr. continued living with her parents on the East Side of Providence, where she had reenrolled at Pembroke to work towards her degree. The Worthingtons helped care for Mike Jr. while Connie spent nights at the library. "There probably was time for letters to come and tapes to come, but I don't remember anything out of the ordinary," she says. "I was almost sure when he went to Vietnam first that he wasn't going to come back," Connie remembers. But something about seeing Mike again allowed her to relax. "I was convinced he was coming back after the R&R...I was absolutely sure everything was going to be fine."

Less than three weeks later, in the afternoon of February 27, 1967, Captain Jim Hippert led a team of Angels on a mission to transport troops and supplies some 55 miles south to Duc Pho, in Quang Ngai Province. Hippert flew lead in the H-34 with Mike as copilot and Bill Willey as crew chief, while HAC Ron Fix and copilot Bob "Deak" Warner flew wing. The Angels rose up into a thick grey rain, keeping west of Nui Dang as they flew south along Route 1, the country's only north-south highway. Bleak weather forced the team to fly low, hovering just above the treetops. As they curbed left to make an eastward descend into Nui Dang, Mike's helicopter was hit hard with small arms and .50 cal gunfire. Enemy rounds pierced the front windscreen, hitting Mike in the face and Hippert in the leg. By the time Hippert wrestled the bullet-riddled bird onto the muddy ground, Mike was dead. According to an account by Bill Willey on Pop A Smoke, an online forum for the USMC Combat Helicopter association, none of the other crewmen or the six Marine infantrymen lodged in the cargo bay was injured.

Wingman Ron Fix had been watching from his plane as Mike was shot and Hippert made his emergency landing. Fix flew the several remaining minutes to Duc Pho, where he offloaded his grunts and asked officers to organize a reaction force to recover Mike's body. Then he flew back, extracting Hippert, Willey, and the remaining crew. An hour later, a reconnaissance team recovered Mike's body from where it hung in the straps. Later that day, Deak flew the body back to Ky Ha, where the Angels held a small memorial.

When a black car pulled up to the door of her parents' home, Connie was watching Mike Jr. color at the kitchen counter. A priest got out, then a uniformed Marine. "The doorbell rang and you knew as they got out of the car what had happened," Connie says. The priest was from St. Sebastian's, and the Marine was Second Lieutenant John Marshall, the casualty officer assigned to the Carleys.

The men didn't know much, only that Mike had been killed in action. "I just was stunned. Just stunned," Connie says. "I didn't fall apart. I just remember sitting there, looking at my shoes and at their feet. And then, after a little bit, I thought, 'Where is Little Michael?' He came out from the kitchen, took off one red sneaker and threw it at John Marshall, took off the other red sneaker and threw it at the priest and laughed. And life went on."

IN MEMORY

The funeral was held in Mike's hometown of Sharon, Connecticut. Then there was a packed memorial service in Brown's Manning Chapel, attended by Mike and Connie's friends from Providence. Charlie Milmine and George Gurney came, along with Connie's Rhode Island family. "My brother and sister-in-law came to my parents' house almost immediately," she says. "I remember the pain in their faces, so well." She remembers that the service was lovely, even though she felt numb. "We could get through it," Connie says. "I am very emotional and I have a very short fuse when I am angry, but I don't grieve in the same way.... It took me years to learn how to grieve."

Mike's death marked a turning point in Connie's political and personal life. Brutal footage of the war kept streaming into American living rooms, and the antiwar movement gathered strength as the conflict intensified. Connie joined the antiwar protests on Brown's campus, and in the fall of 1968 and again in December of 1969, Connie published articles in support of the protest movement in the magazine of the Providence Junior League. "It became a different war after his death," she reflects.

Connie also faced economic adversity as a single mother. "When I was first widowed I had no economic status whatsoever. I didn't have a credit rating. Nothing," she explains. "As I started my second year here at Brown, after the summer, I rented an apartment and what I went through to get a telephone was just amazing. 'You mean you are a student? With a baby? And you are not working, and you want a phone?' I said, 'Yes I do. I can pay my bills.'" Managers would demand that she disclose the amount of her benefits, and when she went to purchase her first

house in 1970, Connie brought her lawyer to ensure that the bank couldn't demand that someone cosign her mortgage.

In February of 1990, Connie and 26-year-old Mike Jr. travelled to Southern California to meet three Angels who had been at Ky Ha with Mike Sr. Bill Willey, the crew chief on Mike's helicopter that day, had written to fellow Ugly Rusty Sachs, a former captain, asking if he knew how to get in touch with Connie. After 25 years, Bill still felt guilty that Mike's body had been left in the wrecked helicopter while he and the others were extracted to Duc Pho. He wanted to reach out to Connie to make sure that she was all right.

They arranged a reunion: Connie, Mike Jr., Rusty Sachs, Bill Willey, and Deak Warner, the wingman of the downed H-34. When Connie and Mike Jr. arrived to meet the Uglys for brunch, they found three somber men in dark glasses. "They had been drinking hard the whole night before," Connie says. "So we had brunch and then we went back to Bill Willey's apartment and just talked.... Deak had brought the tape he made for his wife Marcia when Mike was killed. And it is graphic and it is angry, and it is grieving." Connie and Mike Jr. had never heard the details of Mike Sr's death before. "I knew Mike was shot. I didn't know Mike was shot in the face. So they all had to look at this friend without a face." Later, Bill Willey shared his guilt about leaving Mike in the wrecked H-34, and his feeling that he was somehow responsible for Mike's death. The meeting brought a sense of resolution for Rusty, Bill, and Deak as much as for Connie and Mike Jr. "It was amazing," Connie says. At the same time, "I don't think anything really closes. I mean, I forget the dates, I forget the names, but I—as I said, it's a part of who I am."

While Connie has since remarried, she and Mike Jr. have remained close with the Carleys. "I wanted him to know his father's friends, his father's family. So we were very loyal," she says. "I still love them dearly." Though he never enlisted, Mike Jr., who lives with Asperger's, has travelled with American Veterans (AMVETS) and Veterans for Peace to complete postwar service projects in Iraq, Cuba, and Bosnia. Now in his 50s, Mike Jr. has kept in touch with the Carleys and some of his father's Marine Corps friends, even attending Ugly Angels reunions.

Like so many who lose their partners to violence, much of Connie's life has been defined by Mike's death. "That's the event that changed everything, and still dominates it," she says. "It won't disappear. Yes, time has healed the wounds, but I don't want the world to go to war." Connie and her husband, a Brown professor, continue to make their home in Rhode Island. "I couldn't ask for a better partner in life. But I will always be a Vietnam widow. It always defines me."