

One Soldier's Story is about my childhood neighbor, Rickey Caruolo, who was one of the first to die in the Vietnam War. This is a memorial to one soldier who stands in for all the great guys like him who were killed in Vietnam. It is a snapshot too of a more innocent time in America and a way of life that was lost in the cynicism that followed the Vietnam War. Those who visit the Vietnam Veterans Memorial go because they had a Rick, Joe, or Steve whom they loved and lost. They go because the most precious thing they own is a letter like the one Wayne Burwell wrote to the Caruolo family after their son died in his arms. Not all monuments are made of stone.

One Soldier's Story



On summer nights, my next-door neighbor Rickey Caruolo would play the guitar on his front steps. He always drew a crowd—women mesmerized by his movie-star good looks, his football buddies, old-timers, and lots of children. Fifty-two children lived on Lennon Street, and the undisputed god of that street was Rickey.

Lennon was a street of families, each contributing four, five, six boomers to the tumble, the backbone of the American dream, fifties style. Everyone had two parents then. We saw endless days of four-square, Red Rover, and hide-and-go-seek. We swam in the summer, burned leaves in the fall, starred in Mr. Nickerson's Halloween movies, sang carols in the long night before the annual Christmas party at the Dionnes' house—all of us, every season, every year. Even the dogs played together.

We moved in a bubble of innocence in Providence, in Little Rhody, the smallest state, isolated by size and inclination. It would be easy to dismiss our harmony as typical of any neighborhood with shared small-town values. But it was more than that. There was infinite grace. Almost four decades later, when I added up the number of children on Lennon and arrived at the staggering total of fifty-two, I called Mrs. Dionne, one of our many mothers, just to make sure. “You’ve got the number exactly right,” she said. “We raised the best kids on the planet on Lennon Street.” Each head was counted, we counted.

Rickey held court on his front steps. When he wasn’t playing guitar, he played hi-lo-jack, his favorite card game. Or he’d unfold the newspaper and read *Peanuts* to us little ones, explaining the comic strip frame by frame. “Do you get it now?” he’d ask. He would tell us what happened on *The Jack Paar Show* because he was the only one old enough to stay up that late. He’d break up the occasional fight, and afterward you’d see him, arm around the beaten kid, coaching and consoling. He was our paperboy. He knew everyone.

There’s a reason why the American flag is always flying at my home. It’s flying for Rickey, for giving up his life for everything that flag represents. For me, he was the definition and sum of all our losses in Vietnam.

—Michael Dionne, 2003

His peers called him Elvis, because he was cool, cooler than the King, cooler even than James Dean. He was magnetic, smooth, and, by temperament and opportunity, a ladies’ man.

He left behind many stories.

“Have Curt tell you the one about the broken-down ’34 sedan.” Rickey and fifteen guys with names like Big Daddy Lynch chipped in to buy the car and then scribbled their names along with their financial stake on the backseat.

“Get Michael to tell you about the night Rickey showed up at his house, pleading—everything was urgent with Rickey—with his mother to let him take Michael downtown to Loew’s Theater to watch a Floyd Patterson heavyweight fight. How Rickey narrated the fuzzy black and white newsreel, blow-by-blow, to his ten-year-old buddy.”

“Do you remember him swinging the jump rope for us? The way he made up funny songs as we jumped?”

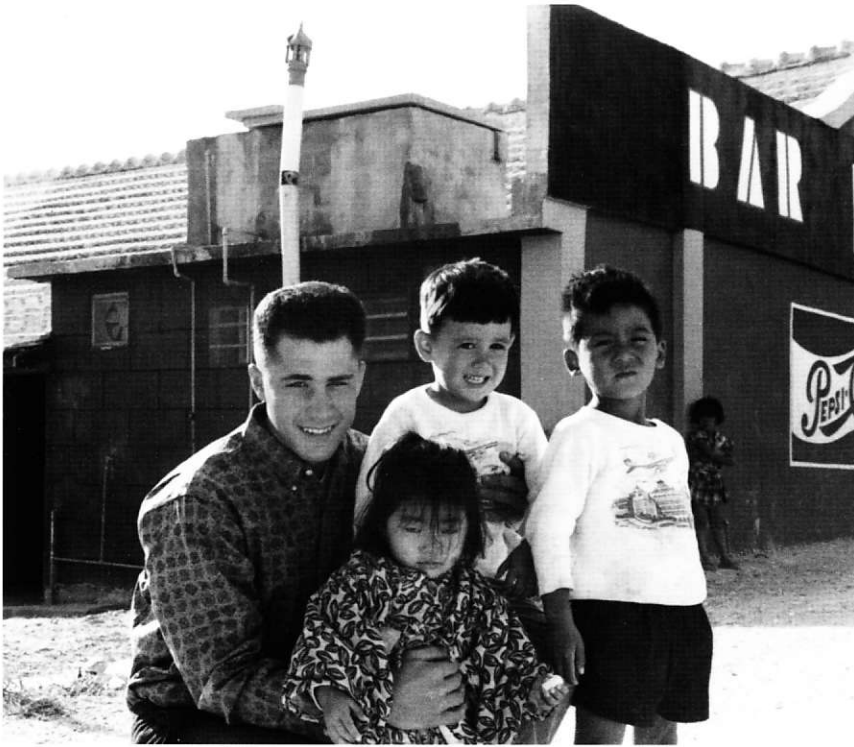
“How about the time he bought the candy-apple-red Chubby Checker twisting shoes, the ones with the plastic insets in the soles so he could really put the twist into overdrive?”

“Ask your dad about that 1956 Chevy of his, the one that would never start.” Used to charming everyone and everything, Rickey would talk aloud to the car, hands flying. “Aw, why are you doing this to me now? Don’t you know where I have to be?” He’d kick the car, stomp off, and return a few moments later. “Okay, I am going to give you one more chance.” No start, another kick, and he’d be back, swearing to the car that this was absolutely its last chance. He was generous with second chances, whether for cars or people.

Rickey’s first tour with the Marines, in 1963–64, took him to the Pacific, where he trained in Okinawa and the Philippines. He was in Tokyo when President Kennedy was shot. In 1965, he received orders to Vietnam.

Rickey died on March 23, 1966, near Quang Ngai in central Vietnam, two weeks short of his return to the United States and three short of his twenty-second birthday. Wayne Burwell, a close friend of his since boot camp, later wrote to his family and described his last hours.

On the day he died, their company had been chasing Vietcong for two days; many were killed. It was their final day out. Eight companies were poised to sweep a village that morning. Rickey, with ten other men, crept ahead, seeing no action until they were thirty feet from the village. Heavily armed Vietcong suddenly opened fire. Rickey’s group rushed a trench ten feet away, losing two men as



Rickey with children in Okinawa, Japan, where he first trained with the Marines.

they did so. Rickey, the team leader, covered until everyone was in the trench and could cover him. Once there, they realized that three Marines, one wounded, were caught between them and the village. Rickey and another soldier left the trench and crawled out to the wounded man.

As he dragged him back, Rickey was hit. When Burwell crawled out to help, Rickey insisted that he first get the other soldier to safety. Only then did he allow Burwell to pull him back. They were still cut off, there was nothing to do. As they waited, Rickey told Burwell he knew he was dying and asked him to write to his family. He told his family he loved them, how much he missed his little sister Joy, and gave his savings to his godson Jim to spend on college or just on fun.

Finally, at nightfall, Burwell and Lenny Byrd, another friend, dragged Rickey on their stomachs four hundred yards before the Vietcong cut them off again. Rickey begged Burwell to abandon him, but he wouldn't. Burwell held him in his arms until he died.

A priest and a Marine officer came to Lennon Street. Marine Lance Cpl. Richard Anthony Caruolo, Kilo Company, 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, had been killed in action. He was one of the first of the 224 Rhode Islanders who fell in Vietnam. A stream of people, days long, quietly slipped in and out of the Caruolos' house. For the first time, there were reporters on the street. The realization came for many that there was another world out there, a dangerous world not like Lennon Street.

Rickey loved his Marine dress blues. He wore them in his casket, which had been filled with hydrogen and sealed in Plexiglas to survive the long trip back from South Vietnam. A floral wreath placed on top read "Good night, sweet prince." After the funeral at St. Augustine's, his cortège moved slowly down Lennon Street. His beloved dog, Rex, howled as his master's body was borne by.

Outside the cemetery chapel, Rickey was saluted with rifle shots, the loud blasts reverberating inside. Each time, his mother pressed her hand to her heart, a heart that would break and stop a year later almost to the day.

After Rickey's death, the street's shouts turned to whispers, Rex grew white around the snout, and so many Rhode Island soldiers died in Vietnam that it was hard to find military pallbearers. Rickey was posthumously awarded the Silver Star for heroism in combat, and eventually took his place on the Wall on Panel 6E, Line 41. Almost forty years later, the memories of a guy who loved life, loved people, loved his country, are evergreen. We count him among us.